

# YOU WERE BORN FOR A REASON

*The Real Purpose of Life*

**A shortened version**

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# *Introduction*

Today in countries around the world, people enjoy wealth and comfort unheard of in centuries past. Medical and scientific advances mean that we live longer and have greater ability to change and control our environment to suit our needs. But have these advances brought greater happiness? Modern society is plagued with ills such as violence in its many forms, including tyranny, terrorism, murder, and suicide. Real answers to these problems continue to elude us.

Our advances may have made us richer, but they have not done anything to ensure our happiness or provide us with a sense of abiding meaningfulness. In fact, modern life often seems only to bring more acute feelings of isolation, loneliness, and emptiness.

Why is it that, although blessed with physical health and an abundant lifestyle, we cannot find heart's ease?

This question was addressed more than twenty-five hundred years ago in India by Siddhārtha Gautama (Śākyamuni), the founder of Buddhism. Born a prince, he excelled from boyhood in literary and military arts; he wedded the loveliest young woman in the kingdom; he lacked for nothing. Yet his heart was not cheered in the least. He passed the days despondently, knowing that even though good health, treasure, status, honor, family, and talent were his, he would one day lose them all: no earthly happiness could prevail over old age, sickness, and death. Realizing the nature of human existence, Siddhārtha was unable to experience true ease or satisfaction.

Finally, when he was twenty-nine years old, he crept out of the palace one night in search of true happiness. For six years he lived the life of a mountain ascetic, until his eyes were opened to the truth that all people can obtain absolute happiness, and he achieved Buddhahood.

The lessons taught by Śākyamuni Buddha are timelessly true. We all are vulnerable to the devastation of sudden illness striking oneself or a loved one. And although we may immerse ourselves in work or a hobby, the day will come when old age prevents us from enjoying such activities. When we die, moreover, we must part from those we love. What is there in life that will never betray us, that we can devote ourselves to without regret? Throughout his life, Śākyamuni continued to teach that the purpose of life is none other than to gain unassailable, eternal happiness. In Japan, the essence of this message was preached by Shinran (1173–1263), the founder of Shin Buddhism (the True Pure Land School).

Shinran laid out the purpose of life and urged its attainment with incomparable clarity: The universal purpose of life is to destroy the root of suffering and gain joy in being alive, so that you rejoice at having been born human and live on in eternal happiness. No matter how hard your life may be, keep on until you accomplish this purpose. The nine decades of his life were focused single-mindedly on this message.

Yet mankind today remains lost in the dark, ignorant of life's purpose and unsure whether life has any meaning.

War, murder, suicide, violence, abuse—could it be that all such tragedies arise out of the darkness of mind that cannot make sense of life, or find any reason to go on living? Simply lowering the legal age of criminal responsibility is not a solution, since it will not reform the hearts of these young offenders who have no awareness of their wrongdoing. These terrible blights on society will resist all countermeasures unless the dignity and purpose of life are made clear. Until that happens, any action is as futile and transitory as drawing pictures on the water.

Is there a purpose in life, or not?

What is the meaning of life?

These age-old questions cry out for clear answers. Shinran stated the purpose of life more plainly than ever before, and urged its attainment. He is indeed the light of the world that breaks through the dark delusions of the human race.

Is there a purpose in life? In this book we will address this question head-on, through the prism of Shinran's words. We begin in Part One by examining the human condition, along with the comments of leading writers, thinkers, and newsmakers from East and West. In Part Two we turn to quotations from Shinran's teachings that demonstrate the unchanging, timeless purpose of life, with paraphrase and commentary as aids in understanding.

Across the centuries, the words of Shinran have helped untold millions in Japan to hear the message of life's purpose. It is our great hope and dream that this book may convey his words to millions more around the world, so that they too may enter into true and lasting happiness.



A black and white photograph of a mountain valley. In the foreground, a wide, rocky riverbed flows through the center, with small pools of water. The valley walls are steep and covered in sparse vegetation. Several patches of snow or ice are visible, particularly in the upper left and right corners, and along the valley floor. The background shows more rugged mountain peaks under a clear sky.

Part One

# The Human Condition

## CHAPTER 1

# *The Fragility of Happiness*

“Get out!”

Mother ran downstairs and hammered Father with her fists, shrieking at him to leave. The sound rings in my ears to this day. As I stood rooted to the spot, Father passed wordlessly in front of me and on out the door, never to return. I was in grade school. It was months before I learned the word “divorce” and understood the sad situation. Through tears, I grasped the hard truth that happiness can collapse and disappear in an instant, without the slightest warning.

As that boy learned to his sorrow, even the most apparently secure happiness may crumble at any time.<sup>1</sup> Life is uncertain, apt to spring a nasty surprise when we least expect it. What’s the point of it all? What is life all about, anyway? When we find ourselves shaken out of the lull of routine, standing aghast like the little boy above, questions like these demand serious answers.

Bookstores and libraries overflow with stories of people who have overcome all manner of adversity and found happiness through their tenacity and their strength of will. These books encourage us to keep going: “Happiness can be yours!” “Find your passion and follow it, whatever it might be.” All of these success stories tell us to keep moving forward, step by step. But what direction are we to take, and where are we headed? Those answers are not necessarily clear.

## EVERY ACTION HAS ITS PURPOSE

Every action has a definite purpose. Riding in a taxi, for instance, even the quietest person speaks up without hesitation to tell the driver his destination. Otherwise, the driver would have no idea which way to go. Heading off in a direction chosen at random would be a waste of time and money.

Ask someone why he is studying, and he is likely to mention a test the next day, or talk about getting his license. Ask someone where she is off to, and she may say she is going shopping, or out for a breath of fresh air. All our actions have a purpose.

What if someone asked you the point of living? What would you answer?

Certainly, life is far from easy. The modern workplace, for instance, brings its own difficulties and stresses. In her book *White-Collar Sweatshop*, Jill Andresky Fraser writes of new difficulties that have faced American workers during the last two decades, in which layoffs have become commonplace despite ongoing economic prosperity. She points out that young workers of today have little job security or guarantee of career advancement; that in midlife they are torn by the conflicting demands of work, children, and aging parents; and that in later life, despite expectations that they will be rewarded for all their years of hard work, men and women are often let go, with bleak prospects for their remaining years.<sup>2</sup>

Why must we endure these hardships to go on living? Others may advise us to “hang in there,” “fight the good fight,” and “never say die,” but if they cannot offer us any clear and compelling reason to live, these words fall flat. However well-intentioned, such platitudes can feel like the crack of a whip as we run in endless circles.

## WHEN LIFE BECOMES PREDICTABLE

In Aesop’s fable of the ant and the grasshopper, the ant toiled all summer and then was able to kick up its heels and enjoy life in the winter. Most of us do not enjoy that luxury. Instead, we slave away in all seasons, year in and year out. On the way to work, day after day we may pass the



same people in the same places, until their faces become vaguely familiar. They, like us, are committed to an unvarying routine.

Without lasting joy or fulfillment in living, the days merge into one indistinguishable blur of eating, sleeping, and getting up. Living such a life is like running a footrace with no goal: without the thrill of anticipation or the joy of crossing the finish line, why strain to keep up the pace? In life, too, only those with a clear sense of direction and purpose can stay the course with vigor.

#### KNOWING LIFE'S PURPOSE MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

Knowing life's purpose would invest everything one did with meaning. Whether reading a book, performing a task, or caring for one's health, one would feel deep commitment and satisfaction. Even if one were suffering from a dreadful disease, enmeshed in a family quarrel, or stung by a humiliating defeat, the power to live—the determination to overcome any obstacle in order to fulfill life's great purpose—would always come flooding back. In his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) effectively underscored the importance of meaning in life when he wrote that man desires suffering and “even seeks it out, provided that he has been shown a *meaning* for it, a *reason* for suffering.”<sup>3</sup>

The road stretching ahead may be long, but face the right direction and any forward motion will bring one that much closer to the goal, with no waste of energy. Whatever it costs in time or strength or money to realize the purpose of life will certainly be rewarded in full. No experience is ever thrown away or lost. Even those engulfed in wave after wave of sorrow are sure to find their reward, once they know the ultimate purpose of living.

Some declare life to be wonderful and fulfilling, while others decry it as empty and meaningless. What makes the difference? Simply knowing life's true purpose.

#### THE “HEAVINESS” OF HUMAN LIFE

In cases of shipwrecks or other disasters, entire rescue squads are often mobilized to save a single life. That is because each life has inestimable

value; in the words of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), “Life is heavier than the heaviness of all things.”<sup>4</sup> If the innate goodness of life were not a given, then the practice of medicine would collapse, along with politics, economics, science, the arts, ethics, and law—all of which are nothing more or less than different approaches to the goal of living a longer and happier life.

Each field has its own way of enhancing the quality of life. It is the role of politics and economics to explore ways for people to live at ease, unconcerned by threats of layoffs or expensive nursing care. Breakthroughs in science and technology, meanwhile, have made life easier than ever before: Doing the laundry used to be backbreaking labor that entailed bending over a washtub, scrubbing wet clothes on a washboard, and wringing them tightly, but today all it takes is the push of a button. Finding ways to resolve interpersonal conflict and allow neighbors to live peaceably together is the sphere of ethics and law. And because the prospect of work, work, work without relief is unbearable, sports and the arts exist to invigorate us. Each of these fields of endeavor is concerned with how to surmount the hardships of life and find pleasure in living. Even altruistic contributions to the greater happiness of humanity comprise a *way of living* rather than an ultimate *purpose of life*.

#### THE STRUGGLE TO OVERCOME ILLNESS

In the front lines of medicine, hard-fought battles are taking place to extend human life. For organ transplants from brain-dead patients, teams of physicians work together with split-second timing, removing the organs and packing them in ice so they can be airlifted by helicopter or plane. The heart must be transplanted within four hours, so there is literally not a second to spare. The total cost of a transplant, from determination of brain death through postsurgical monitoring, runs to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

But if that same life is doomed to disappear without trace in the end, why go to such extreme measures to preserve it? One heart transplant patient, asked by a newspaper reporter what he planned to do with his new lease on life, answered, “Drink beer and go to night baseball games.” Another man living overseas, desperately sick, raised the neces-

sary funds through the goodwill donations of strangers and traveled to the United States to await a donor—only to cause widespread outrage after his successful transplant by refusing to return to work and instead choosing to spend his days gambling. It is hard not to sympathize with one indignant supporter who snorted that he felt foolish for having donated so much money.

We are glad to see scientific advances that extend the average human lifespan. But the question then arises, “What will people do with the extra time they have been given?” Ethical debate over organ transplants revolves around secondary issues like confirming the will of the donor, ensuring fairness in access to the pool of organs, or setting and enforcing standards for determination of brain death, while the fundamental question—“Why resort to such extraordinary measures in order to keep people alive?”—goes unasked.

The goal of suffering in order to combat disease must be not merely life, but happiness. Treatment that serves simply to prolong suffering is meaningless. But what if people used their extra time on earth to fulfill the purpose of life and know the joy of living? Would not today’s life-saving medical practices then be truly wonderful?

We are continually surrounded by a chorus of voices urging us to live and persevere, yet no one stops to consider or thinks to ask why, if life is so painful, we are bound to go on living. Could anything be more mysterious?

## CHAPTER 4

# *Temporary Pleasures*

### PLEASURE GROWN OLD IS PAIN

Today, people with the determination to know and to carry out their larger task in life are a vanishing breed. Scientific civilization has destroyed more than the natural environment, it would seem, as more and more people seek salvation in pleasures of the moment. Too often, they are overwhelmed by them. One sign of this is the prevalence of the word “compulsive,” along with the suffix “-holic,” both of which have acquired great currency. They are used to refer to people with uncontrollable drives or fixations, people who cannot rest unless engaged in a particular activity.

Today, millions of Americans have fallen prey to one such debilitating disorder or another.

For example, reportedly 10 percent of Americans, or 20 million, suffer from alcoholism. And this 20 million is small compared with the 80 million made codependent by their familial association. The number of gamblers is estimated at 20 million, matching the number of alcoholics. Compulsive eaters number some 30 million, 80 million if the obese are included. Sex addiction apparently plagues 25 million Americans. The compulsive-shopping population is estimated at 15 million, or 40 million when those afflicted with overspending

are included ... The discovery of new addictions, disorders, and compulsions and their seeming ubiquity has become a staple of our daily news.<sup>15</sup>

Drug sales and gang activity have now begun to invade even the elementary schools, and use of narcotics causes addicts to commit increasingly horrific crimes. Still other people cannot bear to be alone, and rush into physical relationships with many and unspecified partners; for them, sexual intimacy is a means of staving off a deep emptiness. Such syndromes are an expression of pain so great that sufferers require diversion simply to go on living. They provide not ultimate meaning, but temporary escape.

Someone may protest, "So what? People should do whatever gives them the most pleasure at any given time. The pleasure of the moment is reason enough for being. The hell with trying to figure out what grand purpose it all adds up to. Better forget about the whole thing and just have fun."

Yet is it really possible to live for pleasure? Let us take a look at the true nature of pleasure. First, there is the pleasure of satisfying a desire. Human desires come in an endless variety of forms: the desire to eat well or dress fashionably, the yearning for a car or a lover. As a desire is satisfied, discontent and pain go away, and the agreeable sensation experienced in the process is what we find gratifying.

For example, when you are thirsty and take a drink of Coca-Cola, you immediately experience the "pause that refreshes." That initial burst of pleasure is ephemeral, however. As one sip follows another, your thirst is gradually relieved, and the sense of exhilaration declines proportionally. What you are actually enjoying is the process of your thirst lessening. In the total absence of thirst, drinking a Coca-Cola (or any other drink) would turn into a rather painful experience. It is exactly like scratching an itch—keep it up too long, and the place will stop feeling good and start to hurt instead.

Where dissatisfaction ends, pain begins. This well-known phenomenon, known to economists as the law of diminishing marginal utility, is observable in all sorts of situations. The thrill of a date, or of a new hobby, wears off inevitably with repetition. The agreeable sensation obtained

from gratification of a desire can reach intense euphoria, but it is doomed to vanish in the end. That is why it is said that the early stage of pain is pleasure, and pleasure grown old is pain.

#### MOMENTS OF ESCAPE

Many people would say they are happiest when engrossed in a hobby. Challenging a swimming record, reading an opponent's chess moves, finding secure foot-rests while rock climbing: at times like these, whether the goal is victory or survival, the mind focuses intently on the task at hand, undistracted by pent-up feelings on irrelevant matters such as the terrible thing someone said recently, the boss's outburst, or an upcoming meeting with someone you dislike. You are "in the zone," carried along in the flow of things, thinking of nothing else.

But since the pleasure of a hobby or other fulfilling activity is temporary, like the satisfaction obtained from gratifying a desire, once it is over you are confronted once again with grim reality in the form of tiresome homework, an overflowing inbox, or piled-up household chores. That may explain why a certain famous tennis player was known for his foul temper off the tennis court, and why Pablo Picasso was said to be out of humor the moment he laid down his brush, however happily he had been painting.

In *The Conquest of Happiness*, philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote, "Fads and hobbies ... are in many cases, perhaps most, not a source of fundamental happiness, but a means of escape from reality, of forgetting for the moment some pain too difficult to be faced."<sup>16</sup> The pleasure of losing oneself in a hobby is thus a way of killing time to gain a temporary diversion from pain. It is much like the drunkard who is able to forget his debts and enjoy himself only when he is in his cups.

Someone may scoff, "So what? Trying to figure out the meaning of life is depressing. Why not immerse myself in something I enjoy, have some fun? That's enough for me." Yet—to continue the analogy between hobbies and alcohol—that is like saying, "Nothing tastes as good as alcohol. Life is nothing without it. Anyone who doesn't drink is a fool."

In fact, there are people who declare, "Who needs alcohol or drugs when life itself is wonderful!" Once you have found the purpose of life,



then you no longer need to hide your pain and loneliness. Indeed, when you attain the purpose of life, each passing moment becomes more radiant than all the stars in the sky.

#### SOME SAY THE DESTINATION IS NOT IMPORTANT

A scholar absorbed in research or an athlete focused on her game takes pleasure in research or movement for its own sake. Whether his conclusions are recognized or not, whether her team wins the tournament or not, is secondary at best. In the pursuit of truth or the attempt to shatter a record, it is the *process of seeking* that brings joy and meaning to life: for many people, this is a basic, fundamental belief.

We admire people with the energy and commitment to single-mindedly devote their lives to something that they love. This is especially true in this age of postmodern disillusionment, when many people feel that their lives lead nowhere, and that they cannot break out of this cycle of helplessness.

Even if you do embark on an endeavor that you feel invests your life with meaning, can you be certain it will last? In 1992, at the Barcelona Olympic Games, fourteen-year-old swimmer Kyoko Iwasaki skyrocketed to world fame by capturing the gold medal in the breaststroke event. She expressed her rapture in these words: "This is the happiest thing in my whole life!" At just fourteen, she had experienced one of the greatest joys that life could offer. Naturally, expectations were high for her to repeat the feat at the next Olympic Games. The pressure was enormous, but she was so busy with her studies that she was unable to practice, and went into a slump. In talking about how she felt as she contemplated giving up swimming, she made this confession: "While I was worrying about whether I'd be able to go to the Games in Atlanta or not, I used to think, 'Oh, I should never have said Barcelona was the happiest thing in my life.' I didn't even want the gold medal anymore."<sup>17</sup>

What had been the "happiest thing" for Iwasaki became something she "didn't even want." She barely managed to qualify for the Atlanta Games, and placed tenth. After that she lost all interest in competition, and dropped out with no apparent regrets.

In the academic world, of all who devote themselves to research, barely a handful carve out a name in history. Yet Charles Darwin, who devoted his life to developing the theory of evolution, gained no happiness from his historic achievement. He lamented having become “a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts.”<sup>18</sup>

Even the pleasure of pursuing one’s chosen path goes stale in the end.

“I enjoy following the path I am on; it doesn’t matter where it leads.” Some people might be satisfied with this outlook. But what is missing from this view? As Durkheim points out in his work *Suicide*, without an attainable goal, the act of walking is pleasurable only so long as we remain blind to its uselessness.<sup>19</sup>

Tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, tumble one after another down time’s long stairs—and, in the words of the seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal, “The last act is tragic, however happy all the rest of the play is.”<sup>20</sup> The most beautiful life is no exception. Its ending—death—is a foregone conclusion.

After casting a dispassionate eye on where we have come from and where we are headed, how could anyone claim that a life of endless seeking, or the simple act of walking without a goal, could bring lasting pleasure?



Part Two

# The Words of Shinran

## CHAPTER 1

# *The Eternal Questions*

### DESIRE IN OUR MODERN AGE

What do people live for?

This ancient, ever-new question was debated some twenty-four hundred years ago in Greece, as recorded in Plato's *Gorgias* dialogue. Callicles proposed that the proper way for a man to live is to allow his desires to expand without limit, and to devise means to satisfy all his longings.

Today's residents of advanced industrial nations would appear to be true followers and devotees of Callicles. From the time of the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century, when products were first manufactured by machine, it is fair to say that people's efforts and ingenuity have been increasingly focused on how to get all the things they want—how to gratify their desires with maximum efficiency.

Twentieth-century humanity in particular, confident that material affluence was the key to happiness, began to glorify material prosperity. At the same time, people's desires have continually inflated. As society prospers and produces more and more goods, consumers come to want more and more, from personal computers to flat-screen TVs to new cars. American economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1908–2006), author of *The Affluent Society*, termed this the “dependence effect.”

One of the latest scientific marvels has made it possible to talk to virtually anyone, anywhere, while walking down the street. Now that even primary schoolchildren hold cell phones to their ears, it is hard to re-

member back not so long ago when few in Japan could afford even a wristwatch. Microwave cooking has vastly simplified meal preparation. Ubiquitous ATMs have made cash deposits and withdrawals possible 24/7, while thanks to Internet banking, you can check your balance and transfer funds in the convenience and privacy of your own home. A particularly wonderful recent invention is a camera tiny enough to swallow that can transmit live images of the entire digestive tract from inside the body.

The world has definitely become a more convenient place—so why do we not have a lasting sense of happiness? We may obtain things we want, one after another, yet we can never keep up with our galloping desires; instead, we feel unsatisfied and empty.

Suicides are on the increase in developed nations, along with bizarre crimes and tragic accidents. In Japan, a nine-year-old girl was kidnapped and imprisoned in a young man's room for nine years, until she was eighteen, in what is surely one of the most fiendish incidents in the annals of modern crime. When her captor tortured her with a stun gun or physical blows, ordering her to keep silent, she bit down on her arms or a blanket to keep from crying out.

The year 2000 saw a surge in juvenile crime as well. A boy murdered a housewife, and then bragged that he had done it just to find out what killing was like. Hearing this story, a seventeen-year-old annoyed that the other boy “beat me to it” promptly went out and hijacked a bus, cruelly slitting the throat of one passenger and wounding five others. He put the passengers through fifteen hours of unrelenting terror, and after he was apprehended, declared brazenly, “Who says I did anything bad?” A fifteen-year-old planning to murder the entire family of a friend stabbed three people to death with a survival knife, and gravely wounded the remaining three. Stories like these simply leave one speechless.

#### EINSTEIN'S DECLARATION

Despite material gains of recent times and the vastly changed lifestyles we enjoy today, happiness does not lie that way. Throughout the twentieth century, science made rapid strides, becoming the most powerful tool in history, and yet was used to carry out unprecedented mass mur-

ders and ultimately to threaten the destruction of the human race itself.

Albert Einstein declared that it is the role of religion to teach the ends for which science ought to be used. In *The World As I See It*, he wrote, “What is the meaning of human life ... ? To answer this question at all implies a religion.”<sup>60</sup> The twenty-first century has been labeled by some the “age of religion,” because people are in search of a true religion that can pinpoint the ultimate meaning of life.

Does human life have a purpose?

“Yes, achieve it quickly!”

This was the sole message preached by Shinran. It was he who set forth clearly the purpose of life—humanity’s cardinal concern. Anyone who learns this purpose as he laid it out will understand why the life and teachings of Shinran continue to move and inspire so many people.

Throughout Part Two of this book, we will demonstrate how the words of Shinran show what it is that we live for.



## CHAPTER 2

# *Shinran's Answer*

### THE GREAT SHIP OF AMIDA'S VOW

Why are we born, and why do we live? Why is it wrong to take one's own life, even amid great pain? What is the ultimate purpose of life?

With unswerving conviction and courage, Shinran gave an answer that is brief and brilliant: *There is a great ship that will bear us cheerfully across life's sea of ceaseless suffering, and our mission is to board this ship and live in eternal happiness.*

The introduction to *Teaching, Practice, Faith, Enlightenment*,<sup>61</sup> Shinran's most important work, begins with these lines:

Amida's inconceivable Vow is a great ship that carries us across the sea that is difficult to cross, and his unimpeded light is the sun of wisdom that destroys the mind of darkness.<sup>62</sup>

This is a great manifesto for all humanity. It means that Amida's Vow to save all beings is the sun that eradicates the darkness which is the root of human suffering, and a great ship on which all are borne cheerfully and happily across life's sea of endless waves of tribulation. To board this ship is indeed the purpose of life.

What does it actually mean to board the great ship that carries us across the sea of suffering? Answering that question is the theme of this book. In a nutshell, it is this: to have one's darkness of mind (the root of

suffering) eliminated, and know the joy of life that exults, “How glad I am to have been born human!” Shinran left many writings, but it is fair to say that everything he wrote can be summed up in these words.

#### WE WERE NOT BORN TO SUFFER

As we have seen already, Shinran compares life to a sea in which human beings suffer wave after wave of distress. He calls this the “sea that is difficult to cross” or the “sea of tribulation.”

Before he died, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616), the powerful warrior chieftain who was awarded the ancient title of *seii taishogun* (“barbarian-subduing generalissimo”), is said to have compared his life to “traveling a long road, laden with a heavy burden.” Never once, in other words, was he able to set down the burden of suffering. Even an unparalleled optimist like Goethe lamented in 1824, “The course of my existence ... at bottom ... has been nothing but pain and burden, and I can affirm that during the whole of my 75 years, I have not had four weeks of genuine well-being.”<sup>63</sup>

Similar sentiments have been expressed by some of Japan’s finest writers. Fumiko Hayashi (1903–51), known for her free-spirited life, wrote: “The life of the flower is short, and full of suffering.” Novelist Soseki Natsume (1867–1916) wrote in a letter to his wife, “Humans may be animals meant to live and suffer.” It was the short-story writer and essayist Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892–1927) who said, “Life is more hellish than Hell.”<sup>64</sup> One does not need to listen to these laments to concur with the words of the Buddha, uttered some twenty-six hundred years ago: “Life is suffering.”

Yet we were not born to suffer; that is not why we live. The ultimate wish of every person is the same: to do away with suffering and cross life’s sea of tribulation with all cheer and happiness. This is the greatest challenge of mankind, and the solution lies in Shinran’s magnum opus, *Teaching, Practice, Faith, Enlightenment*.

## CHAPTER 3

# *The Root Cause of Suffering*

### THE BIRTH-AND-DEATH CYCLE

Why do people suffer?

An animal that is struck will yelp in pain and run away, but human beings insist on knowing the reason for an unpleasant experience, and what they can do to prevent it from happening again. Failure to pin down the cause with accuracy can lead to devastating results, as when curable illnesses prove fatal. Providing appropriate treatment for abdominal pain, for example, depends on knowing whether the source is an ulcer, cancer, nerves, or something else. Without a proper diagnosis, the patient's suffering will not abate. What if, for instance, a case of stomach cancer were treated as an ulcer? The damage would be irreparable, regret never-ending. Identifying the cause of a disease is of the essence in treatment.

In the same way, in order for us to enjoy a life of supreme pleasure, it is essential to examine the reality of the truth that life is suffering, and to identify the root cause of the suffering that permeates our lives. This is humanity's crying need.

Shinran identified the true cause of human suffering in these words:

Circling among the houses of the birth-and-death cycle  
Is caused by one thing alone: the doubting mind.<sup>65</sup>

The condition of going around and around in endless circles of torment without satisfaction or rest is referred to as “the birth-and-death cycle” or “the endless wheel of suffering.” The condition of endless suffering that we cannot escape is likened to a house apart from which we cannot live.<sup>66</sup>

The great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81), from his first-hand experiences in a Siberian labor camp, declared in *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* that the cruelest punishment of all would be to compel someone to do “utterly useless and nonsensical” work.<sup>67</sup> During his imprisonment, he and his fellow convicts did things like bake bricks, paint walls, and plow fields. Even though they were forced to do heavy labor, it was not without purpose, as through their toil the men produced food or built houses. Understanding the purpose of their work made it possible for them to endure the difficult conditions of captivity.

What if work was made punishment? Suppose convicts had to move a large mountain of dirt from point A to point B. Then, once the job was done, suppose the sweating men were ordered to move the mountain back to its original position. And when that was done, to move it back to point B, and so on. What would happen to men condemned to that sort of meaningless, pointless labor? It would cause a man to “hang himself after a few days,” as Dostoevsky wrote, or else to go mad, bash his head against a stone, and die. This is the punishment of “never-ending suffering.”

But in fact, is not life a great deal like this?

When at last I came  
to the peak that I had thought  
would surely be the last,  
I turned my eyes to the way beyond—  
mountain piled on mountain.

—Anonymous

Sickness, the death of a relative or loved one, a sudden accident, conflicts at home and at work, disputes with neighbors, examinations, competition, sudden layoffs, heavy debt, apprehension about old age: just as one difficulty is overcome, before one can relax, the next appears.

According to tradition, the souls of dead children are sent to the banks of “Sai no Kawara,” the dry bed of the river of souls, where they pile pebbles into small towers in an attempt to distract themselves from their suffering. A demon soon comes along and scatters the stones, forcing the children to start all over again. In the same way, everything that we, the living, painstakingly build up with sweat and tears is apt to collapse before our eyes in a second. “I can’t believe this is happening to me!” How many times have we said those words, full of amazement or chagrin or regret at some unforeseen disaster?

Over this hill, happiness lies waiting:  
clinging to that hope,  
seven hills have I crossed so far,  
this my fortieth year.<sup>68</sup>

These lines from a popular song struck a chord with the Japanese public precisely because everyone has experienced something like that. In hopes of attaining happiness, we scramble for dear life up the mountain in front of us, only to find a still steeper slope waiting on the other side. Tottering, we pull ourselves together and puff our way up again, thinking surely *this* will be the last one. Is not life a succession of such experiences? That is what Shinran meant by “circling among the houses of the birth-and-death cycle.”

#### HAVING AND NOT-HAVING

Floating up from the waves of life’s sea of suffering are cries like these:

“If only I had more money!”

“If only I had possessions!”

“If only I were famous!”

“If only I had more status!”

“If only I had my own home!”

“If only I had a sweetheart!”

And so on and so on. Believing that their suffering derives from some such lack, people set their sights on a nearby log or plank and swim for it with all their might—but will that get them across the sea?

The following anecdote may give food for thought. In a tropical country, an American was scolding a man dozing under a palm tree. “Why don’t you stop being so lazy? Get a job and make yourself some money!”

The man looked up and said, “What do I need to make money for?”

“Save it in the bank and before you know it, you’ll have a big pile.”

“What would I do with a big pile of money?”

“You could build a big house. Then if you made more money, you could build a villa where it is warm.”

“What would I do with a villa?”

“You could go out in the garden and take a nap under a palm tree.”

“I already *am* taking a nap under a palm tree!”

Such shallow visions of happiness are destined to come to nothing, as we can see all around us.

If, as many people assume, suffering can be attributed to a lack of money, things, reputation, or status, then someone blessed with all of that should enjoy a blissful existence. But is that so? History is full of examples proving otherwise; we need not look far to find many pitiable cases. Princess Diana, the flower of the British royal family, is said to have attempted suicide five times. She had beauty, prestige, wealth, an enviable marriage that was once called “the match of the century”—yet privately she bore inexpressible sorrow.

Yasunari Kawabata, author of *Snow Country* and the recipient of Japan’s first Nobel Prize for literature in 1968, gassed himself to death. Despite his genius and accolades, he too was a man of many sorrows.

American Wallace H. Carothers (1896–1937) invented nylon, which was soon used to produce stockings of dramatic resiliency. His employers at DuPont reportedly rewarded their brilliant chemist with exceptional treatment. For the rest of his life, wherever he traveled and whatever five-star restaurant he chose to eat in, the company agreed to shoulder the cost. Paying for a lifetime of travel and gastronomy must have seemed well worth the cost if it meant keeping their star employee happy. Yet Carothers committed suicide at forty-one.



If money, talent, honor, and status were enough to eliminate suffering, surely these three would not have seen fit to commit or attempt suicide. The Larger Sutra of Infinite Life states:

He who has no field is distressed and wishes for one; he who has no house is distressed and wishes for one. He who owns a field is distressed about the field, and he who owns a house is distressed about the house. It is no different with horses and other livestock, servants, money and treasure, food and clothing, and household goods: having and not-having are the same.

A person who lacks a field or house must trouble himself about seeking one out, and a person who owns land and houses must trouble himself with their management and upkeep. The same principle applies to all kinds of possessions: if we lack them we fret, and if we have them we suffer on their account. Haves are bound with chains of gold, have-nots with chains of iron. Whatever the chains are made of, the suffering they cause is equally real.

Śākyamuni Buddha taught that “having and not-having are the same”: in either state, our inability to escape from suffering is unchanged.

Whatever possessions and power we may obtain—even if we rocket off to outer space—unless we face the root cause of suffering, and unless this cause is eradicated, we can never set down life’s burdens.

## CHAPTER 4

# *The Dark Mind: The Source of Suffering*

### THE WORDS OF SHINRAN

What is the root of human suffering? As we have seen, Shinran's answer in *Teaching, Practice, Faith, Enlightenment* is plain and unequivocal: it "is caused by one thing alone: the doubting mind." The only cause is doubt. Shinran's words are free of tentativeness; as he expounds the sole solution to suffering, such assertions are frequent in his writings. Here "doubt" means the darkness of mind that does not know what will happen after death, concerning which we will have more to say in the following chapters.

Probably no one, on being told that the source of suffering is darkness of mind, will immediately see the light. People are much more likely to show bewilderment, or dismiss the assertion with a careless shrug. Even those who do take a critical look at themselves are likely to feel that their troubles are rooted in worldly passions such as desire, anger, and envy. These passions are known in the teachings of Buddhism as *bonno*, a word written with characters for "trouble" and "distress."

### SHINRAN'S YOUTHFUL STRUGGLE WITH WORLDLY PASSIONS

Like the cherry blossom,  
the heart planning on tomorrow  
is ephemeral indeed—

what sudden storm may not arise  
in the middle of the night?

Shinran lost his father at age four and his mother at age eight. Startled to realize that he would be the next to die, he entered the Buddhist priesthood at the age of nine, and wrote this poem on that occasion. For the next twenty years he lived on Mount Hiei in Kyoto, in a monastery central to Buddhism of that time, engaged in a pitched battle with his own worldly passions. The following account paints a vivid picture of his struggle:

Try as I will to quiet the waters of my heart, the waves of thought continually move; try as I will to achieve a mind bright as the full moon, clouds of delusion blanket it. If my next breath should stop, I would fall into Hell. How can I indulge myself in trivial socializing and wear myself out with useless studies? Swiftly, I must cast aside worldly desires and seek liberation.<sup>69</sup>

As he pursued ascetic training on the mountain at night, Shinran could see Lake Biwa in the distance, reflecting the full moon like a mirror. “Why cannot my mind be as serene as the water in that lake?” he would ask himself in deep frustration. “One after another, thoughts I should not think rise unbidden to the surface of my mind. My heart is aswirl with ideas I should not entertain. It is too horrible. Why am I a seething cauldron of anger and desire? I must do something ...”

Reduced to tears by the turmoil of his passion-filled mind, so different from the tranquil lake, Shinran raised his eyes to the sky above, where the full moon was shining brightly. “Why can I not see the moon of enlightenment as clearly as I can see the moon in the sky? Foul clouds befog the sky of my mind. Must I go to my death with a mind so black?”

Aware that every breath he drew brought him closer to the world of eternal suffering after death, Shinran became distraught. He thought, “With this great problem at hand, I have no time to waste. I must cast aside all earthly desires and quickly find a solution. There is not a second

to spare. Somewhere I must find a great teacher, a priest of true virtue, to show me the way to salvation.” The words recorded in the book *Panegyric* convey the anguish Shinran felt on leaving Mount Hiei behind, shedding bitter tears as he made his way down the mountain of so many memories.

Soon afterwards he would meet Honen (1133–1212), the founder of the Pure Land School of Buddhism, who taught him “the Vow of Amida which eliminates the dark mind that is the source of human suffering, and imparts blissful life beyond measure.” Shinran’s surprise and joy at this encounter and this revelation must have been beyond all imagining.

#### THE ENCOUNTER WITH HONEN

To meet with a true master  
is difficult above all else;  
the endless wheel of suffering  
comes only from the doubting mind.<sup>70</sup>

These lines from *Hymns on the Masters* may be paraphrased as, “Oh, how hard it is to find someone who can teach the true message of Buddha—that the source of human suffering is darkness of mind.” The words overflow with Shinran’s profound delight at meeting Honen and his strong emotion on learning the true cause of suffering.

The word used for “master” here refers specifically to someone who conveys the teachings of Buddha. A “true master” is one who teaches true Buddhism.

What do most Japanese people think of when they hear the word “Buddhism”?

The word calls up various associations. First in most people’s minds is “funeral Buddhism,” which thrives on funerals, memorial services, and sutra chanting. Next is “invocation Buddhism,” dispensing this-worldly favors to worshippers who pay to burn incense or cedar sticks. But that is not all. We could also name “sightseeing Buddhism,” which makes money off temple compounds and statues; “business Buddhism,” where priests pay more attention to operating various lines of business than to the faith, busying themselves with management of schools, kindergar-

tens and such; “double-duty Buddhism,” where priests moonlight as teachers, rent out temple compounds as parking lots, etc.; and finally, “death anniversary Buddhism,” which seeks to profit from memorial services marking the deaths of great masters like Shinran and Rennyo (1415–99; a descendant of Shinran’s who brought about a revival of the True Pure Land School or Shin Buddhism). Of course, none of these enterprises comes close to approximating the true nature of Buddhism.

All too often, those monks who do speak of Buddhism mistakenly teach that worldly passions like desire, anger, and envy are the source of suffering, and offer advice on how to overcome them. To meet with a true master—one who teaches that the ultimate root of suffering is darkness of mind—is truly as rare as stars on a rainy night. It is not hard to understand why Shinran wrote with such exultation of his rare good fortune in encountering the priest Honen, who taught him the truth about the “wheel of suffering.” How happy he must have been to meet Honen, how thrilled to have his darkness of mind eliminated! Elsewhere in *Hymns on the Masters* he described his reaction in these words:

Never in all my lives in aeons past  
did I know the strong power for liberation.  
Were it not for the true teacher Genku,<sup>71</sup>  
this life should have ended in vain as well.<sup>72</sup>

This means, “From endless ages past, I knew neither the source of suffering nor the power of Amida’s Vow to eradicate it. If I had not met the teacher of true Buddhism, Honen, I would have lost this precious chance as well and suffered eternally after death, never knowing either the purpose of my life or the way to fulfill it. Honen saved me from imminent peril.”

What, then, is the nature of the dark mind that is the root of human suffering?

## CHAPTER 5

# *The Mind Shrouded in Ignorance*

WE ARE ALL TRAVELERS TOWARD THE WORLD AFTER DEATH

The “dark mind” means the mind shrouded in ignorance of what happens after death.

People often shy from the subject of death as somehow ill-omened, as if to say, “Don’t talk about it, or you’ll be next to go!” You are as likely to fall dead after talking about death as you are to come into a windfall after talking about money, to be awarded a Nobel Prize after talking about the nominees, or to have a house build itself after you have been talking about a blueprint. The death taboo goes unchallenged, but it is silly.

In the Japanese language, the number four is a homophone for death. As a result, hospital sickrooms have no number four, elevators have no button for the fourth floor, and so on. (A similar phenomenon occurs in the West, where the number thirteen is considered unlucky, and many high-rises have no thirteenth floor.) Such resistance shows the extent of people’s fear of the terminal station of life through which all must pass.

New Year’s decorations,  
mileposts on the journey  
to the other world—  
auspicious and not auspicious  
at the same time.

In this poem, the Zen monk Ikkyu (1394–1481) makes the point that human beings are all travelers on a journey to the next world—that is, the world after death. There is no doubting the truth of this observation. Each day that we live brings us one day closer to death. Stopping all the clocks in the world would not stop our progress along that route. This is a stern reality shared by everyone alive. Nobody would knowingly set foot in an aircraft certain to crash, yet from the day of our birth, each of us is a passenger on just such a doomed flight.

#### THE TIGER IN THE MOUNTAINS

Death is the destiny awaiting us all, and yet few people give it much serious thought. We would rather just not dwell on it. The sudden passing of an acquaintance, a friend, or a relative forces us to stare the unpleasant fact of death in the face, which may cause some to tremble with anxiety and fear; but that is only a temporary state. We soon forget again, filling in the hole in the heart with questions of how best to live. Accepting death's inevitability does not stop us from pushing it into the distant future.

All this time it was  
only other people who died,  
or so I had assumed—  
now the thought of my own death  
is more than I can bear.

This poem is said to have been written by a physician on his deathbed. The difference between attending other people's deaths and contemplating one's own imminent demise has been likened to the difference between seeing a tiger in a zoo and coming face-to-face with one in the mountains. Even if we tremble with anxiety and fear when someone close to us dies, we are looking at a caged tiger, not at the wild beast loose in the mountains.

But what if you were told that you suffered from terminal cancer and had only one month to live? According to Hideo Kishimoto, the former

professor of religion at the University of Tokyo who battled cancer for ten years before passing away, at such a time all else recedes, leaving only the burning question, “What will happen after I die?” Kishimoto’s record of his confrontation with death is gripping.

What does it really mean, the cutting off of life? Certainly it means the end of the physical life of the body. Breathing ceases, the heart comes to a stop ... But human life is not constituted only by the physiological body. At least while a person is alive, it is common sense to think of him or her as a spiritual entity as well. In the now of life, one has a consciousness of self. There is someone whom one knows as “oneself.” Matters quickly focus, therefore, on the point of what will become of “oneself” after death. This is the great question for all human beings.<sup>73</sup>

#### COMFORTING THE DEAD

Even people who deny that there is life after death often change their mind on the death of a friend or acquaintance. They may speak of the “spirit of the departed,” or offer prayers for the repose of the loved one’s soul. In Japan, the set expression *gomeifuku o inorimasu* is specifically a prayer for happiness in the other world, obviously based on the assumption that such a world does exist. Set expressions directed through tears to the deceased include *yasuraka ni onemuri kudasai* (“Sleep in peace”) and *mayowazu ni jobutsu shite kudasai* (“Attain Buddhahood straight away”). After a shipwreck or other disaster at sea, it is common for bereaved people to go to the accident site to throw out flowers or other tokens from a plane or boat. This is no empty ritual. Mourners’ faces are solemn, their gestures circumspect.

Every August, Japan remembers its war dead with memorial services called *ireisai*, literally “soul-comforting ceremonies.” Without the assumption that souls of the dead exist and need comforting, ceremonies like this would never take place. In the natural order of things, one does not offer comfort to someone who is happy, as there is no need to do so.



Yet many Japanese continue praying for the happiness of souls in the next world while denying the existence of an afterlife; something keeps them from acting in accord with their denials.

Such actions can be laughed off as social niceties only by those still fortunate enough never to have experienced the death of a relative. Sooner or later, death forces itself on the attention. Some protest, "You will never know what happens after death until you die anyway, so the subject is not worth discussing"—yet those same people think nothing of planning against fires and saving for old age without knowing whether they will ever experience either contingency. In fact, most of us will never be in a fire, and anyone who dies young need not worry about old age, and yet—"just in case"—people go on assiduously taking out fire insurance and saving for a rainy day. Nobody says, "You will never know what old age is like until you are old anyway, so who cares?" The inconsistency of taking seriously the possibility of fires and old age while ignoring the absolute certainty of death seems not to occur to anyone.

Excuses abound. "Thinking about it will not change anything." "I'll worry about it when the time comes—if I spent my time thinking about that now, I could not live my life!" Something in death makes people stubbornly avert their eyes, as if facing up to its inevitability would compel a drastic choice between unconditional surrender and last-ditch resistance.

As long as one's health remains good, it is possible to adopt the easy-going view of death as "repose" or "eternal sleep," and claim not to find it menacing at all; in the clutch moment of one's own imminent demise, however, all that matters is what lies beyond death's curtain. In life we contemplate the absolutely unknown "after death," uncertain whether there is any such thing, or any reason for hope. This state alone—the state of ignorance and anxiety about what will become of one after death—is called the "mind of darkness" or "dark mind." Darkness here refers to human ignorance or uncertainty about what will happen after death.

## CHAPTER 6

# *The Dark Future Casts a Shadow on the Present*

### WE MASK OUR ANXIETY ABOUT DEATH

Many readers may wonder how the dark mind uncertain about what lies beyond death could be the root cause of suffering in life. But what happens when the future is shadowy? To gain some insight, think of these examples: an important exam looming three days off weighs heavily on the mind of a student; a patient facing major surgery in five days is unable to relax and enjoy himself.

When one's future is dark, the present is likewise darkened. This is clear if you think of the mental state of airplane passengers who learn their aircraft is doomed. No meal could taste good to them, and no movie, however hilarious, could entertain. What might otherwise have been a pleasant trip has been transformed completely. Fearful and anxious, the passengers are thrown into confusion, some of them shrieking in terror. In this case the root of their suffering is the impending crash, but fiery death is not the only horror: the flight toward tragedy is itself a kind of hell.

To repeat, when the future is dark, the present is likewise darkened. The darkness of the present is owing to the darkness of the future. Anxiety about what may lie beyond death is inseparable from anxiety in the here and now. It stands to reason, therefore, that efforts to make the present bright without resolving this darkness of mind can only come to nothing.

When he was nearly fifty, the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) came to this very realization. Knowing that death might strike today or tomorrow, how could anyone rest easy? Shocked at this discovery, he lost all interest in work.

I simply felt astonished that I had failed to realize this from the beginning. It had all been common knowledge for such a long time. Today or tomorrow sickness and death will come (and they had already arrived) to those dear to me, and to myself, and nothing will remain other than the stench and the worms. Sooner or later my deeds, whatever they may have been, will be forgotten and will no longer exist. What is all the fuss about then? How can a person carry on living and fail to perceive this? That is what is so astonishing! It is only possible to go on living while you are intoxicated with life; once sober it is impossible not to see that it is all a mere trick, and a stupid trick!<sup>74</sup>

Sooner or later, even my precious family must come up against death: that thought took away Tolstoy's joy in his family and in his art, the two things that had previously sustained him. His writing had been going well, but once he took a long, hard look at the inevitability of death, his world shattered into a thousand pieces.

Pascal expressed his misgivings this way: "We run carelessly to the precipice, after we have put something before us to prevent us seeing it."<sup>75</sup> Indeed, we are like runners going full tilt in pitch-darkness. Without masking our cold fear of the unknown—the answer to the question "What will become of me after death?"—we cannot go on living. The advances of material civilization may make life easier, but they certainly cannot provide lasting happiness; they may mask the darkness temporarily, but they do not eliminate it. They are simply different ways of masking our fear. No such distraction is permanent, in fact, nor does it solve anything. Whatever we may turn our hand to lasts only for a flash, and we can find no heart's ease, living in a fleeting world that is like a burning house.

## THE CRUCIAL MATTER OF THE AFTERLIFE

If a man's birth could be likened to an airplane lifting off from an aircraft carrier, then a lifetime of fighting desperately against heavy odds would correspond to a struggle against air turbulence and tempests, amid skirmishes with enemy planes. After a fierce fight, the pilot returns, only to find the carrier gone without a trace. Nothing meets his eye but the vast ocean. His fuel gauge reads zero. He looks back on the long, desperate struggle he has just endured, wondering what it was for, and curses himself for a fool.

"As life ends, regret and fear occur by turns." These words from the Larger Sutra of Infinite Life surely sum up the frame of mind of the pilot as his plane crashes into the sea. Just as for an airplane there is no worse fate than a crash, so in life there is no event of greater consequence than death. That is why Buddhism speaks of the "crucial matter of birth-and-death," or the "crucial matter of the afterlife."

We have squandered our days. We have sought the wrong objectives. Talent, property, and power have earned us the respect of others without affording us either joy or satisfaction. Why have we not rather sought happiness to satisfy the soul? We are left with nothing but sighs of regret. So wrote Seneca, a Roman philosopher who lived in the first century.<sup>76</sup> This lament can only be the regret of someone taken aback by the blackness of his prospects after death (darkness of mind).

This is the pitfall that no one sees coming until the last curtain of life. Perhaps that is what prompted Russian writer Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) to write, "Life is a vexatious trap."<sup>77</sup>

In the Larger Sutra of Infinite Life we also read, "People of this world are shallow and vulgar, struggling over things of no urgency." In other words, completely distracted by what is in front of their noses, people do not realize the essential task of life: to eliminate darkness of mind. This is the alarm sounded by Śākyamuni Buddha.

Shinran declared authoritatively that the root of suffering is darkness of mind, and that to eliminate this darkness and gain lasting happiness is the purpose of human life. The truth of this teaching should now be apparent.

Once we know this crucial matter of birth-and-death, debates over whether or not life has a purpose are beside the point. For indeed, at that very moment the purpose of life will be thrust upon us with unmistakable clarity.

## CHAPTER 8

# *Shinran's Fulfillment of Life's Purpose*

### A CRY FROM THE HEART

After commenting on the tragedy at Rājagṛha, Shinran turns to his own experience, expressing his thankfulness at having encountered salvation in this heartfelt and vivid cry of joy:

Ah, how hard it is, even in many lifetimes, to encounter the strong power of Amida's Vow! How hard it is, even in myriad aeons, to obtain faith that is true and real! Anyone blessed with this faith cannot help but rejoice at the benevolent workings [of Amida] since the distant past that have brought it into being.

Had I remained covered by the net of doubt in this life as well, I should have had to keep wandering, lost, through vast aeons. How genuine, the true words of Amida that embrace us and never forsake us, the absolute doctrine that is surpassingly wonderful! Listen and believe without hesitation or delay.<sup>82</sup>

To paraphrase: "Ah ... how wonderful! The life of joy that I, Shinran, sought for so long, through many lives and aeons, is now mine! This is absolutely due to Amida's great saving power that embraces all. I am overwhelmed with deepest gratitude. If this life too had ended without my dark mind clearing, for endless ages to come I should have gone on

suffering. I must hurry to tell everyone this truth, let them know that this vast, shoreless world of the mind exists!”

The exclamation “Ah!” conveys inexpressible surprise and delight, the likes of which Shinran has never known before. The “strong power of Amida’s Vow” refers to the vow made by Amida out of his intense desire to eliminate the root of suffering of all people, that they may achieve the purpose of life. “Faith that is true and real” refers to the life of joy that is obtained once the root of suffering is eliminated and life’s purpose achieved, in accordance with Amida’s Vow. Shinran understands this is no easy happiness, to be had after a mere century or two of searching; he understands that he has found what cannot be found “even in many lifetimes,” gained what is hard to gain “even in myriad aeons.” Having found and gained something so impossibly rare and precious, it is only natural that he cannot repress a shout of sheer joy: “Ah!”

Then, thinking with emotion of how far back in the past Amida’s grace extends, he can barely keep back tears of happiness: “Anyone blessed with this faith cannot help but rejoice at the benevolent workings [of Amida] since the distant past that have brought it into being.”

There is a saying that the higher the mountain, the deeper the valley. From the great height of the mountaintop of his salvation, Shinran feels a thrill of amazement at the depth of the valley of darkness of mind. This is why he sighs, “Had I remained covered by the net of doubt in this life as well, I should have had to keep wandering, lost, through vast aeons.” Here “net of doubt” is another way of saying “darkness of mind,” the source of all suffering. Shinran marvels that if he had died without having his darkness of mind eliminated in this life by the power of Amida, he would surely have had to continue suffering for ages on end. It has truly been a narrow escape.

Reading these words, it is easy to picture Shinran with eyes shut and hands pressed together in fervent thanksgiving to Amida. He then declares, “How genuine, the true words of Amida that embrace us and never forsake us, the absolute doctrine that is surpassingly wonderful! Listen and believe without hesitation or delay.” This means, “It is real! It is true! Amida’s Vow is not a lie. Everyone must hear—I, Shinran, am a living witness. I want everyone to quickly know the truth of Amida’s Vow.”

Shinran has gone beyond fulfilling the purpose of his life. This beautiful confession overflows with his deep excitement at fulfilling, through the power of Amida, not just the purpose of this life but that of “many lives and myriad aeons.”

#### THE VAST OCEAN OF DAZZLING BRIGHTNESS

Shinran also uses the analogy of ocean and ship in praise of Amida's Vow:

Now that I have boarded the ship of Amida's great  
compassion,  
now that I am afloat on the vast ocean of brightness,  
the breezes of supreme joy blow softly  
and the waves of all woe are transformed.<sup>83</sup>

“Lifted aboard the ship of Amida's great pity, I look on the sea of suffering that is my life and see a vast ocean of dazzling brightness. How wonderful it is to be alive, like voyaging over the sea with a fair wind in the sails!” This is Shinran's log of a radiantly happy journey by sea.

“Now that I have boarded the ship of Amida's great compassion” is a glad declaration that he has fulfilled the purpose of life in accordance with Amida's Vow. Clearly, the purpose of life is by no means vague. “Now that I am afloat on the vast ocean of brightness” expresses his joy in having his dark life changed to one of bright rejoicing. Only one who has wept at the darkness can laugh at encountering light; only one who has been buried in the depths of the sea can know the joy of floating on the surface of the water.

Why endure the sufferings of this life? Why go on living? This crucial thing eludes our understanding. Yet if we live only for the sake of living, what differentiates us from animals headed for the slaughterhouse? If we live only to await death, we are in fact buried beneath the waves.

What was the nature of the life experienced by Shinran once he had been borne to the surface of the “vast ocean of brightness” and freed from the agony of uncertainty over the meaning of life, rejoicing that he was born? His answer is brief and brimming with confidence: “The



breezes of supreme joy blow softly and the waves of all woe are transformed.” This is a paean to Amida for his gifts of radiant joy and vigor to overcome any difficulty in life.

Elsewhere, Shinran described the world of “soft breezes of supreme joy” thus:

If anyone in this evil, corrupt world  
has faith in the Vow of Amida,  
unnamable, inexplicable, inconceivable  
blessing fills his being.<sup>84</sup>

In other words, “I, Shinran, am ridden with evil, yet with my dark mind now eradicated, joy beyond description swells continually within me.”

Shinran is in ecstasy at having been saved by Amida’s Vow. His absolute happiness causes him to place his palms together in endless thanksgiving. This day is blessed. Still more marvelous is his very breathing at this moment, each successive inhalation and exhalation a thing of wonder. The more clearly he sees his lack of a joyful mind, the more deeply he rejoices in his salvation. This paradox moves him deeply. He knows for a certainty that the purpose of life is entrance into this absolute state. This is the state of “twofold revelation,” about which we will have more to say below (see Chapter 11).

The bliss bestowed by Amida that always fills him, and that can never be destroyed by fire, washed away by a tsunami, or stolen by a thief, he describes here in ringing words: “Unnamable, inexplicable, inconceivable blessing fills [Shinran’s] being.”

Finally, what does it mean that the “waves of all woe are transformed”? The nine decades of Shinran’s life were full of vicissitudes. He was the object of constant derision, abusive taunts, oppression, and persecution. Even while coming under concentrated fire, he could only join his hands in gratitude to the marvelous power of Amida’s Vow, which worked this perfect joy:

Mindful solely of the depth of Amida’s benevolence, I pay no  
mind to others’ derision.<sup>85</sup>

"While receiving the immeasurable grace of Amida, I cannot return even the smallest particle of what was bestowed on me. Am I a monster of ingratitude, the scum of the earth? I must do something!"

Not even the fiercest billows in the sea of suffering could stop Shinran's progress as, moved to tears by the profound benevolence of Amida, he surmounted all difficulties with penitence and joy. Nor is that all: the turbulent waves causing him such distress were transformed into a source of happiness. (For further explanation of this point, see Chapter 23.)

#### THERE IS A GREAT SHIP

Surrounded only by sky and water, each of us is swimming for dear life in the sea, searching for a nearby log, stick, or board to cling to for support. All around are vast numbers of people similarly tormented by wind and waves, betrayed by the logs and sticks they have found, choking on saltwater, drowning or drowned. Offering earnest pointers to all who are floundering is an assortment of "swimming coaches": endeavors such as politics, economics, science, medicine, the arts, literature, and the law.

When will people be amazed at the absurdity that no one is asking the most important question: "What should we swim toward?" That is, "Why must we live?" The silence on this topic is life's greatest mystery, and surely humanity's greatest tragedy.

The painful sea of birth-and-death knows no bounds.  
We have long been submerged.  
Only the ship of Amida's Vow  
will take us aboard and carry us across without fail.<sup>86</sup>

To paraphrase: "We have long been floundering, lost in the vastness of the ocean of suffering; the only thing that can take us aboard unconditionally and carry us to the far shore without fail is the Vow of Amida."

The Vow-ship sails across wave after towering wave; however high the waves, the ship is higher still. Shinran pointed out the real existence of this great ship that can rescue us, and the direction in which it lies.

## Afterword

Why do we live? What is the purpose of life? Shinran's answer is unambiguous. "The purpose of life is neither to amass money and treasure, nor to win honors and status. It is to have the source of suffering eradicated and be filled with joy, rejoicing that you were born human, and live in never-ending bliss."

The purpose of life is also expressed as "enjoying the benefit of *sesshu fusha* (being held fast and never forsaken)," or as *muge no ichido* (the path of no hindrance). Delight in being alive radiates from the pages of Shinran's masterwork *Teaching, Practice, Faith, Enlightenment*, which begins and ends with the words, "How joyful I am!" It is a manifestation of the blazing joy of one who has attained the purpose of life.

"Why is it wrong to take another person's life?" When a child asks this question, too often adults are at a loss, unable to give a satisfying reply. For adults as for children, the greatest sadness is not to know the joy of living.

Humanity is befuddled, unsure whether life has any meaning, or why those in pain should bother to carry on. Amid this general confusion, Shinran's words ring out loud and clear: "How wonderful it is to be born a human being!" Once the essential dignity of human life is understood, people should see why organ transplantations to extend life are worthwhile, why suicide is never a good option, why every human life is infinitely precious. Then, with doubts over the meaning of human existence resolved, each one can go resolutely forward to work on whatever besetting problems there may be.

Once life's true purpose is known, all trouble and suffering acquires meaning. Live for life's true purpose, and all your efforts are sure to be rewarded.

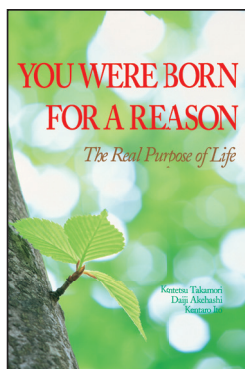
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## Why Do We Live?



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## YOU WERE BORN FOR A REASON

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**Where can we find true happiness that will never fade away?**

**What is there in life that will never betray us, that we can devote ourselves to without regret?**

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“Without lasting joy or fulfilment in living, the days merge into one indistinguishable blur of eating, sleeping, and getting up. Living such a life is like running a footrace with no goal.”

“French writer Albert Camus said that deep in the human heart is a ‘wild longing’ to know the meaning of life. We want to know, indeed we must know the meaning of life if we are to go on living.”

“Once life’s true purpose is known, all trouble and suffering acquires meaning. Live for life’s true purpose, and all your efforts are sure to be rewarded.”

★ ★ ★

*YOU WERE BORN FOR A REASON* is the English translation of the best-selling Japanese book on Buddhism, *Naze Ikiru*, which means “Why We Live.”

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