



**Dennis Hirota, *Asura's Harp: Engagement with Language as Buddhist Path***

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DENNIS HIROTA's short but dense book brings the reader into contact with the heart of Shinran's teaching, revealing him to be not merely the propagator of a devotion or a path to salvation, but a radical thinker who, like the Zen masters, overturns the conventions of everyday understanding and discloses a different vision of truth, one that cannot be summarized conceptually but has to be lived. Hirota vindicates the intellectual comprehensiveness and radicality of Pure Land, which steps aside from everyday thinking not into blind devotion but to a higher plane of insight. His work is of crucial significance in reconciling the rich imagery of an ancient religious tradition with the constraints of contemporary rationality, and in bringing out the living spirit of Pure Land Buddhism, so easily lost sight of by those who focus only on standard representation of its beliefs and practices.

Seeking to open a dialogue between Pure Land and twentieth-century philosophers, Hirota points to "the pivotal role of language as the vehicle of awakening" (11), as attested by the centrality of hearing and saying the name of Amida Buddha. For Shinran, "1. thought and language are intimately intertwined; 2. they are understood to delimit and define; and 3. what is real lies apart from the scope of such thought and speech, for it is distinct from such conceptual circumscription" (18–19). The latter point might seem to undercut the stress on linguisticity, but in fact Hirota reserves a higher role for language under the auspices of Amida Buddha. The central tension of his thought, it seems, lies in the question of whether these two roles of language are compatible. One might also ask whether they might

be conceived on a broader basis, so that Amida Buddha has less the appearance of a *deus ex machina* saving linguisticity from its degraded state.

Shan-tao (613–681) voiced the “awareness of the nembutsu practitioner as simultaneously enmeshed in karmic evil and liberated by the Primal Vow” (21) and Shinran found a linguistic correlative for this: the hollow words (*soragoto*) of deluded living as opposed to the reality and truth of the nembutsu. So great is “the fundamental falsity of the world as human construct” (23) that sincere speech is impossible. “In respect to linguisticity as boundness to language, Shinran may be seen to stand with Western thinkers who stress the inescapable ‘thrownness’ of human existence and its inherently hermeneutical character” (25). The Heideggerian allusion here suggests that Hirota is working with a variant of the German thinker’s contrast between *Gerede* (idle talk) and authentic *Sprache* (speech), which is “the house of Being.” Discernment between the two is indeed a hermeneutical task, in the loftiest sense of hermeneutics. But is this task not short-circuited when yoked to a religious claim? In Christianity the language of Scripture is considered to be “inspired” and so protected from probing assessment. In practice, however, this is not the case; Scripture as “its own interpreter” (Luther) also becomes “its own critic” and is opened to critical insights from the human sciences as well. Does Hirota open the language of the Pure Land sutras to such critical assessment?

He stresses that language can have a salvific, transformative role when used compassionately by Amida Buddha. Moreover, the Buddha’s words, born of deep samādhi, manifest reality beyond ordinary language. The authenticity of this language seems to have little to do with the ordinary communicative functions of speech. For Shinran, truth rests on depth of contemplative realization and not on propositional correspondence. Nor can a doctrinal edifice be based on this realization: “there is a critical rift between the reality realized by the Buddha ... and the verbal expression of the teaching, so that logical, methodical construction of a doctrinal edifice upon an unshakable foundation of truth is impossible” (28–29).

Has the salvific language anything in common with the poetic naming on which Heidegger sets such store? Apparently, if left to itself this language would be reabsorbed into silence, but it is sustained only as an exercise of compassion. There seems little place left for a recognition of the illuminative power of language. “Wisdom as ‘no-activity attained through stilling the mind’ implies the cessation of conceptualization and language use, while wisdom as ‘reflection and judgment’ implies the perception of the beings of the world that leads to the use of language and concepts in the compassionate guidance of others” (31–32). Language takes on healing power, it seems, when a “calculative” approach yields to one in which language expresses a compassionate, interpersonal interaction.

If this role of language falls short of vindicating the illuminative power of speech, the claims made for the nembutsu ascribe to language a status that goes beyond any such vindication: the nembutsu is superior to the skillful use of language for compassionate purposes, for it alone is “true, real, and sincere [*makoto*]” and is itself

reality and wisdom (33). From an initial view of language as hollow gibberish, we have passed through a functional view of it as an instrument of compassion, to a view in which language is the absolute reality itself. To clarify further the complementarity of these three perspectives and their dialectical relationships, it would be necessary to broaden the basis of the inquiry, tracing the potential inherent in the nature of language itself to be deployed in such different roles. What Shinran says about language could then be shown to have a paradigmatic significance for reflection on the resources of language in general.

Hirota does pursue his reflection further, drawing on classical Buddhist thought. T'an-luan taught that Amida Buddha was "the dharma-body as compassionate means." Shinran talks of the dharma body as "manifesting form and *revealing a name*" (36). The formless and the form, reality and the name, interpenetrate. This nonduality is the central feature of true language for Shinran. "This structure allows for accessibility while denying an objectifying grasp" (38). In a dialogical to-and-fro, "the concepts of dharma-body as compassionate means and of fulfilled Buddha-body are held in an irresolvable tension" (42), "a tension between the vertical movement of the timeless into time and the horizontal movement of causal, temporal process and fulfillment" (43). Such ideas cry out for translation into philosophical terms accessible to the modern mind.

Hirota places Shinran's thought about language in an existential context of encounter with the other and dislodgement of the self. In Shinran's distinctive engagement with language "reality as liberative practice enters a person's existence as language" (52). He seeks a language that imparts truth, and that is no longer confined to "propositional statement or assertion about the world from the stance of a reified subject" (63). Through hearing true words spoken by another (such as Hōnen), "the self is dislodged from an absolute standpoint and made aware of its conditionedness" (63). "Only in an existential encounter with otherness through dialogical engagement can the delusional attachments of our everyday life be broken" (64). Pure Land is thus not a Buddhism of ideas and texts but an interpersonal event. Since Shinran sees human beings as a prey to blind passions, only a word coming from a bodhisattva or a "good friend" can bring the wholesome shock of encounter with truth. Thus the highly personalized image of Amida and the centrality given to his Vow and the nembutsu is not a compromise of pure theory with popular devotional practice, but rather something intrinsic to Buddhist thought as redrafted in this existential key. The abandonment of self-reliance for Other-power is not just a leap of faith belonging to moments of religious intensity. Rather it spells a vision of human thought, language, and experience as a whole, revealing how they are infiltrated by the delusion of self-power.

When self-attachment prevails, Buddhist practice is marked by a double consciousness, the self observing the self in calculative judgment. But an encounter with the other enables one to live in one's own skin and "to stop reflecting knowingly on one's evil heart, and further to abandon the judging of people as good and

bad” (quoted, 73). Shinran answers questions posed in terms of ordinary consciousness from his own standpoint. Asked if it is important to do good and shun evil, he answers: “I know nothing at all of the two, good and evil... Even a good person can attain birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will” (81). This shift of perspective is the core event of Shinran’s thought, showing up the falseness and inauthenticity of ordinary categories.

This existential approach to Shinran’s dealing with language is a rich vein. Some other contemporary philosophical correlatives of Shinran’s ideas that Hirota proposes are rather less convincing. “For Shinran, the concept parallel to historicity is surely karmically conditioned existence, and the critical implication of linguisticity is ignorance” (125). Shinran does not have the contemporary awareness to the pluralism and relativity of historical cultural formations, including those of the Buddhist tradition. This awareness entails a sense of finitude and its limits, but without the tragic accents of those who judge pluralism and historicity as marks of imprisonment in *samsāra*.

Yet Shinran seeks “a coherent and intelligible understanding of oneself and the world that ignores neither the historical and emotional boundness of the self nor the variety and worth of experience” (121–22). The eye of wisdom does not flatten out human experience as a field of bondage and delusion, but rather brings “joy in and gratitude for one’s own life as the locus of the activity of wisdom-compassion that arises in one’s act from beyond the delusional horizons of the self” (123). A person cultivating such vision should have something to say on all philosophical themes connected with human experience, such as the topic of temporality, treated in dialogue with Ricoeur (126–34). The bridge that Hirota is building should bring wholesome fresh air not only to the Pure Land tradition but to Western philosophy.

Joseph S. O’Leary  
*Sophia University*