

## THE CHINESE BACKGROUND OF THE CONCEPT OF MAPPÔ

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The concept of *mappô* in the Pure Land tradition is often studied within the context of the study of Buddhist doctrine. We know that Shinran sought to make clear in the *Kyôgyôshinshô* that the idea of *mappô* was well established in the Buddhist scriptural tradition. In my remarks here today, however, I wish to approach such matters from a different direction. While the specific contours of the Shin concept of *mappô* evolved within the Japanese Pure Land tradition that culminated in the thought of Shinran, the general idea that we live in a degenerate age has broad and ancient roots in East Asia. It is those roots that I wish to explore briefly today. It is my hope that these reflections might help stimulate discussion of the interplay between the early Pure Land tradition and the Chinese society in which it evolved. I do not intend to argue that elements of Chinese culture provide a full or exclusive explanation of the Pure Land concept of *mappô*. I see no reason to question the validity of the Shin contention that the concept was derived from Buddhist scriptures of presumed Indian provenance. What I wish to suggest is rather a new metaphor, a new metaphor that might help enrich our appreciation of Shin's earlier Pure Land heritage.

Perhaps we might imagine the Chinese Pure Land heritage as twofold. Though each of us has two parents, we generally bear the surname of only one, to whom our debt is real and indisputable. Nonetheless, we are each equally the child of another parent, one who does not always receive equal credit. To remind ourselves that we owe our lives to our mother just as fully as to our father is clearly no slight to our paternal ancestors. Similarly, I believe that

while later Pure Land writers, including Shinran, made sure that we remember the Buddhist ancestry of the concept of *mappô*, it is also appropriate to explore the other aspect of the concept's heritage, to which we might refer metaphorically as its maternal heritage. That is, we may view early medieval China as quite literally the *matrix* within which Pure Land Buddhism was born. First, I wish to suggest that part of the Chinese heritage of the concept of *mappô* might be the *centrality* of the idea that we are living in a degenerate age. To the best of my knowledge, such an idea was not really crucial to most Indian Buddhism, any more than it was to any other form of Indian religion. Nor were such eschatological sentiments a characteristic of pre-Buddhist Japan. But in China, it was believed from quite ancient times that the present condition of the world has degenerated substantially, sometimes distressingly, from its earlier, more natural condition. Both the Confucian and Taoist thinkers of pre-Han China clearly assumed such a worldview. The philosopher Mencius even insisted that a true Sage appears only once each 500 years, and that we are now long overdue: this was in the third century BCE, well before the arrival of Buddhism in China.

However, in ancient times, neither the Confucians nor the Taoists seem to have felt a sense of despair, a sense that it might no longer be possible to achieve the desired goal (or "salvation," in the broadest sense). Nonetheless, such a sense of despair did begin to evolve in Chinese thought and religion after the disintegration of the great Han dynasty (that is, from about the second century of the Common Era). By the fourth century, a feeling had arisen among Taoists in particular that we are living at present in a corrupt and degenerate world, a world that is dominated by evil forces. Just as some Chinese Buddhists awaited the appearance of the future Buddha Maitreya, many Chinese Taoists keenly awaited the arrival of their own messiah (referred to by various names). Some people placed their faith in a prophecy that the new millennium would arrive in the year that we date as 392 CE, but their faith was cruelly dashed when the savior failed to appear as expected. Some of these Taoists turned their hopes to scriptures that told of a great loving deity who offered salvation freely to all who would accept it. And it is only here, in the Ling-pao tradition of Taoism at the very end of the fourth century, that we find any evidence that certain of the Taoists' beliefs may have actually been stimulated by an awareness of Buddhist texts and doctrines.

What seems to me important in this connection, however, is not so much the question of whether a certain form of a belief may be attested in this or that text of earlier or later date.

Clearly, the Pure Land Buddhists of sixth-century China, like Hsin-hsing and Tao-ch'o, based their belief in *mappô* upon scriptural traditions concerning the eventual degeneration of the Dharma and the sangha. But the idea that I wish to raise for consideration here today is the idea that a real human being -- in any age or culture -- ultimately cherishes a given religious belief for one implicit reason: because it makes sense in terms of that person's life experience. The Buddhists of early medieval China encountered a wide variety of religious concepts in the literature that they had inherited. But some of those concepts made more sense to them than others, and became more central features of their teachings as well as of their lives. What I wish to suggest here is merely that the Buddhists among whom the Pure Land tradition evolved in China saw the scriptural doctrine of *mappô* as being true and important because it fit in well with their own conceptions of history and their own perceptions of contemporary reality. The idea that the present age is a degenerate one made eminent sense to a number of learned and thoughtful Chinese Buddhists of the sixth and seventh centuries. And I think that this fact requires little special explanation, because many learned and thoughtful Chinese had always felt -- for a thousand years or so, at least -- that we are currently living in a degenerate age.

Perhaps what was unique in the experience of the Pure Land Buddhists of China was the *intensity* with which they wrestled with that feeling, and the need that they felt to address fully and directly *the soteriological implications* of the idea of *mappô*. Unlike the Confucians and Taoists of China, the Pure Land Buddhists of China turned to Buddhist tradition to understand the realities of the world in which they lived, and to help them decide what views to adopt in order to cope with those realities. I believe that it is here that we may gain a heightened sensitivity to the fact that religious individuals frequently find themselves at a subtle and delicate juncture, a crux between received doctrine and perceived reality, each of which to some extent reflects the shared reality in which individual and society participate. It is the extent to which received doctrine and perceived reality harmonize and resonate together that the individual finds strength in the tradition, and has the opportunity to reimpart new strength into the tradition by means of his or her own contributions.