

Universal Themes in a Contemporary Classic of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism*

A Review Essay by Reza Shah-Kazemi

Those who have attained true spirituality have never talked in mournful accents of the sorrowfulness of life or of the bondage of Karma, for they have learnt to transcend it.¹

Rare are the books that both describe enlightenment and are also fragrant with its essence. *Naturalness* is surely one of them. In this book the description of *nirvana* is indeed enlightening for the attentive reader; but the perfume of *nirvana* is inebriating for the serious seeker. One is given in this precious text not just a perfume but also a veritable foretaste of *nirvana*, liberation from the ego, transcendence of Karma; this foretaste is like a bridge connecting theory and practice, mind and heart, ratiocination and realization—inviting the seeker to cross over from the one to the other. For Kanamatsu, the realization of this transcendence is by no means restricted to the domain of the supra-phenomenal, but rather overflows into our everyday lives—the extraordinary penetrates the ordinary, rendering it transparent to transcendence at every moment. Through the attainment described by Kanamatsu, the supernatural becomes visible through the natural, which thus loses all trace of mundanity and pettiness. On the contrary, being attuned to the natural entails being at one with the immanent root of nature, and living in accordance with it. This attunement with ultimate

* *Editor's Note:* This article was first published in a French translation: "Le Naturel: Un classique du bouddhisme Shin". Kenryo Kanamatsu. Suivi d'un commentaire de Reza Shah-Kazemi. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011. Translated by Ghislain Chetan.

¹ P.115. All references in this article are to the edition of this book published by World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 2002.

Reality, or this ‘affinity with the infinite’ (p.6) is what Kanamatsu means by *naturalness* (Japanese: *jinen*).

One feels that the English word *naturalness* has been freshly minted by this Japanese Buddhist in order to evoke—rather than define—the intrinsic *nature* of enlightenment to the Western reader. It is indeed the *nature* of enlightenment that gives to this book its title, *Naturalness*, a title which immediately alerts the reader to the universal dimensions of the message of this simple little book, which is already being widely referred to as a classic in the field. Far from being simply about a particular school of Buddhism, it reaches out to all those concerned with enlightenment *per se*, and shows how this is inextricably woven into our own true nature. For enlightenment is not treated in this book only as if it were a momentary state, a flash of illumination that comes and then goes; rather, it is described as a permanent state of consciousness, an unwaveringly compassionate orientation of the heart, which is in complete harmony with the nature of ultimate Reality; and this Reality, in turn, is the root of our own truest and deepest nature—‘ours’ in the sense that we belong to it, not it to us. We return to the root of our nature through the power generated by the symbiosis of faith and grace.² With the help of inspired images and symbols, Kanamatsu reveals the kind of life that flows from this wholehearted attunement to the nature of ultimate Reality, and in so doing elicits from the sensitive reader a profound yearning to identify with and realize for oneself what one truly is, by nature. To be told that one has to become nothing other than what one already is: such is the liberating message of this book.

It is certainly not the doctrinal content of the text, alone, that can account for the interiorising alchemy and liberating power it exudes. These qualities of the text have more to do with the uncanny ability of the author to transmit, with disarming simplicity, something of the light, the life and the love which radiate from the state of *nirvana*. Whatever be the degree of enlightenment realized by the author, only this ‘nirvanic presence’, we believe, can explain the extent of the transformative impact of the images, symbols, ideas and evocations offered

² It is to this mysterious return to the deepest level of one’s own being through faith and grace that Rumi appears to be alluding when he subtitles his masterpiece, the *Mathnawi* (to which we will return below): ‘The roots of the roots of the roots of religion.’

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