Donran's Interpretation of 'ōjō' (往生) in his Ōjō Ron Chu and Bultmann's 'demythologizing'

Ryusei Takeda

I. Preliminary remarks:

Inevitably we are now destined to get involved in an encounter of the world religions. Instead of building up a dogmatic rampart surrounding us, we must summon up courage to surmount various impediments. The principal one of them is an obstacle which has barred the way toward the 'depth', as Paul Tillich significantly acknowledges,—the 'depth' where particularities of a religion are broken through to such an extent that the religion can be enhanced by a growth toward "spiritual freedom and with it to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of man's existence"¹).

This short paper is an attempt to lay bare such a 'depth' on the part of Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially Pure Land Buddhism, by throwing new light upon Donran's interpretation of 'ōjō' ('birth', which is an extremely misleading translation) and by exploring its nature in the light of Bultmann's 'demythologizing'.

A speculative interpretation is developed by Donran twice in his Ōjō Ron Chū: first under the section concerning 'vow-aspiration'²) and secondly under the chapter on 'contemplation'³). The former develops most fully the principle of 'ōjō', and this principle furnishes Donran in the latter with a basis upon which to penetrate the depth of 'ōjō' and to show how it concerns itself with the Pure Land Buddhist enlightenment.

II. Criticism of the traditional views:

2) Shinshū Shōgyō Zensho, I, pp. 283-284.
3) ibid., pp. 327, 328.
Re-examination of Donran’s interpretation of ‘ōjō’ must start off with a sustained criticism of the traditional views with respect to it. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a full discussion of the criticism. Hence, as far as the traditional understanding is concerned, I will deal here with only a few cardinal points which are implicitly germane to our subsequent discussion.

First, it has been traditionally observed that the concept of ‘ōjō’ which Donran interprets must be confined only to that of Vasubandhu Bodhisattva’s. However, this does not do justice to Donran’s own intention, which lies in clarifying the meaning of ‘ōjō’ in terms of the common Buddhist teaching that all beings are of ‘non-birth’ as if they were void. Thus, as is explicitly taught, ‘ōjō’ is concerned with ‘all beings’, not merely with a small group of Bodhisattvas.

Secondly, Donran’s definition of ‘ōjō’ as ‘birthless birth’ (this English equivalent will later be found unsatisfactory and irrelevant) is traditionally looked upon as what is feasible only within the ultimate realm of truth (paramārtha) over against the worldly; the future over against the present; the dharma-virtue over against the worldly manifestation; the essential being over against the practical functioning. But such a way of dealing with Donran’s definition of ‘ōjō’ goes counter to his own attempt to interpret the notion of ‘ōjō’ by viewing it right in the midst of the interconnection between the contraries above mentioned. If one tries to discern beyond the worldly, present, practical reality of growth and decay the unconditional meaning of ‘ōjō’, he finds himself at odds with Donran’s understanding of the term. Accordingly, it would be nearer the truth to assert that what Donran intends to lay bare with respect to ‘ōjō’ in his great commentary is that ‘ōjō’ is of ‘pratītyasamutpāda’ character. We shall return to this assertion in our discussion on the structure of ‘ōjō’. Here one thing is not to be overlooked as regards the idea

4) Ryōchū, Chūki; Ryōe, Shuishō; Chikū, Yokuge; Enen, Kenjingiki; Eun, Fuku-shūki; Dōon, Kikigaki; Nyūon, Köki; Jinrei, Kōjutsu; Senmyö, Kikigaki; Daiei, Genyō; Sōei, Kaiganki; Dōshin, Kakuhontsetsu; Hōun, Hikki; Engetsu, Ryakuge; Ekaku Koreyama, Kögi; Kakuju Yoshitani, Köhan; Eryū Mikogami, Kaisetsu.
5) Enen agrees to this view. (see Kenjingiki)
Donran's Interpretation of 'ōjō' (往生) (R. Takeda) (60)

of 'interconnection between the contraries'. By and large in the circle of Buddhist scholarship in Japan that idea has had its theoretical relevance in D. T. Suzuki's 'theory of identity' or Kitarō Nishida's formula 'self-identification of absolute contradictions'. But it seems to me that the modern temperament is uncongenial to these theoretical clarifications. Would it be still too early to point out the necessity of viewing that idea from a radically new angle?6)

Thirdly, the evaluation of the Donran's interpretation must be taken into account. It has been traditionally evaluated as brushing aside the censures of those who hold 'uccheda-drṣṭi' by condemning them as extreme. Or some argue that Donran intends to lead the devotees of ascetic Buddhism to Pure Land altruistic Buddhist teaching by showing how the doctrine of 'ōjō' expounded by the latter is to be brought in full accord with what constitutes the main teaching in the philosophy of Nāgārjuna7). Thus the tradition takes the Donran's interpretation in a negative way; but, in my opinion, it must be taken as pointing to the articulation of the Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy—the thought of 'pratītyasamtpāda'—underlying the doctrine of 'ōjō'. And this evaluation responds in a way to Dr. Mitsuyuki Ishida's significant warning to Pure Land Buddhism in Japan8).

III. Structure of 'ōjō':

The structure of 'ōjō' cannot be exhausted by a simple definition—'abandoning this (world) to go to that (world)' (捨此往彼)—which has been long accepted as the orthodoxical meaning of 'ōjō' by the Pure Land Buddhist tradition. Two major notions of this definition, i. e., 'this' and 'that', if literally taken, lead one to face the same kind of problem as that which concerns J. A. T. Robinson in his Honest to God. But Donran's elucidation of 'ōjō' shows us that we understand the whole doctrine of 'ōjō' wrongly when we construe the structure merely from the point of view of that simple definition.

'Ōjō' is not a static notion but a dynamic movement. It is a movement of two totally different directions—that of negating the substantial view of

---

6) What I have in mind is the philosophy of A. N. Whitehead.
7) Kakuju Yoshitani, Kōhan, p. 15.

— 448 —
birth-and-death, or that of 'purification' (vyavādāna) on one hand, and, on the other, that of going deep down to the reality of birth-and-death, or that of bringing into the fore the dependently conditioned origination (因縁生).

Put in another light, the former is a cosmological direction, the way toward the most transcendent realm, where a life in our thinking is totally negated. This realm is termed a 'realm of non-birth' (無生界). But it must be noticed that the notion 'birth' employed here has nothing to do with so-called 'birth' in our daily life; namely, with a 'birth' seen from the substantial view of birth-and-death, which is deeply rooted in our existence. Thus absolute negation of our birth-and-death substantially discerned is involved in a 'realm of non-birth'. Indeed, negation is the function of the realm and this negating force characterizes that realm as the everlasting transcendence. And this realm is nothing but the Pure Land (thus 'Pure' is not to be taken as static purity or pure state but rather as an act of purification).

The latter direction, which is deepened toward the real ('authentic') ground of birth-and-death in itself, is, what is called, an existential direction; namely, the way toward the most immanent realm where our life is 'authentically' grounded as a real life. It is the direction of absolute affirmation in which a place where all things originate with each other dependently conditioned (因縁生) reveals itself. Here the same terminology of 'birth-and-death' (生死) should not lead one to pass lightly over the definite distinction between the 'birth-and-death' substantially viewed and the 'birth-and-death' based upon the 'pratītyasamutpāda'. A passage of Daihida Ron (大智度論) testifies to that clear distinction. And, taken in their ultimate sense, those two radically different directions in themeselves take such a form of relation as that of 'pratītyasamutpāda', which is set forth by two formulae: 'neither one nor different' and 'succession of cause-and-effect'. What these formulae intend to lay bare is the negation of substance ('svabhāva' whose detailed discussion is found in the Mālamadhyamika-kārīka). Accordingly, the negation of substance

9) Taisho., V. 25, p. 338b-c.
Donran’s Interpretation of ‘ōjō’ (往生) (R. Takeda)

and the on-going movement are two fundamental constituents for the structure of ‘ōjō’. And they open up the place for the religious soteriology of Pure Land Buddhism—‘turning around’ (転) and ‘extinguishing’ (滅). At this point, however, space forbids exploration of these soteriological notions, and besides such an exploration would slightly detract from the aim of the present paper. Thus it would be enough at present to note that the movement of ‘ōjō’ gives rise to the Pure Land Buddhist conversion.

IV. In the light of Bultmann’s ‘demythologizing’:

My consuming concern here is to see how the concept of ‘ōjō’ as above developed by Donran substantially differs from the way in which Bultmann argues with respect to ‘myth’, ‘mythology’ and ‘demythologizing’11). From the careful examination of Bultmann’s contention in its relation to Donran’s clarification of ‘ōjō’, certain conclusions stand forth:

(1) It has ever been suggested12) that ‘demythologizing’ must be taken as a hermeneutic method into serious consideration even when one interprets basic notions of Pure Land teaching such as ‘jōdo’ (Pure Land) for example. There has been a tendency to view ‘jōdo’, hence, ‘ōjō jōdo’ (birth in Pure Land), within the context of mythology. But Donran interprets ‘ōjō’ as negating mythologizing. ‘Myth’, as is explicitly suggested in Bultmann’s definition of it, presupposes objectification. Objectification is in Donran’s view none other but substantiation. As pointed out, it is the nature of ‘ōjō’ that negates any substantiation. Thus ‘ōjō’ is characterized as ‘negation of mythologizing’, which is, of course, not ‘demythologizing’.

(2) Bultmann asserts that ‘myth’ should be taken as what expresses “man’s understanding of himself in the world in which he lives” (KM, p. 10). It must be interpreted, in a word, not cosmologically, but existentially. In Donran’s purview, however, ‘ōjō’ functions both cosmologically and existentially.

11) KM (Kerygma and Myth, 1953)
JCM (Jesus Christ and Mythology, 1960)
Reference is made to André Malet, The Thought of Rudolf Bultmann, 1969.
This 'both-and' correlation characterizes the unique way of the Buddhist approach to reality\(^\text{13}\). And within even the Christian theological circle severe strictures have been brought against Bultmann's reducing the nature of 'myth' to only its existential expression\(^\text{14}\).

(3) 'Demythologizing' is, after all, the method which is established on the basis of dualism between transcendence and immanence. When Pure Land Buddhism is compared with Christianity, the most meticulous care must be given to the notion of transcendence; in other words, to how it is treated, what it connotes, how it is correlated with immanence, and so forth. Bultmann's concept of transcendence finds its most explicit expression in his understanding of 'the Kingdom of God' (see JCM, p. 12). As we have already noted, 'ōjō' is, in Donran's view, of 'pratītyasaṃtāpādistic' character underlying transcendence and immanence. Such a character could be called 'pratītyasaṃtāpādistic' identity—an identity existing between transcendence and immanence. This identity completely separates Pure Land Buddhism from Christianity.

(4) Finally, Donran differs from Bultmann in his understanding of the content of 'faith'. Ultimately speaking, for Bultmann 'faith' is rooted in God, whereas, for Donran, 'faith' is grounded in 'birthless purification'—the field where any substantiation is negated—the point to which 'original vow' (本願), 'name' (名号), and 'Pure Land' (浄土) are all assimilated. 'Faith' emerges from 'knowledge' obtained in the process of 'birthless purification'; namely, the full realization of 'pratītyasaṃtāpāda'.

These four conclusions seem to me to be clues for urgent serious reflection upon Pure Land Buddhist doctrines focusing on the concept of 'ōjō' at a time when we cannot escape our deeper and ever deepening confrontation with the world religions.

\(^{13}\) See Keiji Nishitani, "禅における 「法」と 「人」" (Zen no Honshitsu to Ningen no Shinri, ed. Shinichi Hisamatsu, 1969) pp. 856-861.

\(^{14}\) See Wolfhart Pannenberg's "Hermeneutics and Universal History", Journal for Theology and the Church, vol. IV, 1963)