

THE TWO RIVERS AND THE WHITE PATH

DHARMA ARCHIVE ENTRY #24

The idea of Pure Land as the way to refuge and security is famously embodied in the medieval Chinese Buddhist parable of the white path, created by the master Shandao. In this story, a traveller is lost in the wilderness. Bandits and wild animals attack him, and he runs away until he comes to a riverbank. The channel is filled by two rivers, one of churning waves and the other of raging flames. He sees a narrow white path between the two rivers, but it seems impossible to cross over successfully. Terrified, exhausted, and threatened from all sides, it looks like the traveler will meet his end here at the border. But just then, the voice of Shakyamuni Buddha comes to him, telling him he can make it, and he hears the voice of Amida Buddha calling from the other side, promising he'll be protected. The traveller crosses over onto the white path and enters the peaceful land of the Buddha, where he lives safely and happily ever after.

This parable, of course, depicts the Pure Land understanding of our human condition, which is fundamentally about the search for a secure home in this world of troubles. The river of churning waves is humanity's greed, while the river of raging flames is our burning anger and hate. The wilderness is this ordinary world in which we suffer. The other shore is the Pure Land, a way of depicting nirvana in the form of a place offering safety and protection after the misery of wandering and exile. Not surprisingly, the white path was one of Shinran's favorite stories. For him, it was more than a figment of the imagination, for it described his experiences in terms that felt real.