

# ***Honen and Shinran: Loyalty and Independence***

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## **Introduction**

From the time that I first began to study Shinran, I have been interested in his relationship with Honen. This interest was aroused by Shinran's claim that he simply followed his teacher Honen and transmitted his teaching correctly, resulting in the eventual application of the term *Jōdo Shinshū* (that is, *True Teaching [Essence] of the Pure Land Way*) to his movement in later times. Shinran never proposed that he started a new school. For him, the *Jōdo Shinshū* meant the teaching of Honen.

Yet, it is interesting to note that Shinran takes issue with other disciples of Honen, but never with the teacher himself. In view of Shinran's claim to be a faithful disciple of Honen, we would therefore expect to find a close identity with his teachings in Shinran's writings, if it was only a matter of correct transmission. However, crucial features of Shinran's teaching are not found in Honen's writings.

To reconcile the differences, it has been asserted in the Shin tradition that Shinran carried forward Honen's true intention or spirit. Also the distinction of tradition and personal insight is invoked (*dentō to koshō*) which suggests a dialectical relation between tradition and religious experience.

In this essay, I will explore major aspects of the relationship of tradition and personal insight as it relates to Shinran's interpretation of Honen's teaching. Due to space considerations, a full study is not possible. I will, however, attempt to clarify the relation of Shinran's understanding of Pure Land Buddhism and Honen's, basing my explanation on the thesis that, while Shinran had a close personal relationship and devotion to Honen, after the teacher and disciple separated as a result of their exile and Honen's death, Shinran's thought continued to evolve, sustained by his experiences living and working among the common people in eastern Japan. Shinran constantly maintained his loyalty to Honen and exalted him. However, he went beyond Honen's compassionate and inclusive understanding of Pure Land teaching based on his own religious experience and reflection. As a result, he interpreted the teachings to provide a stronger theoretical foundation to support the principle of sole practice of nembutsu.

## **Shinran's Personal Relation with Honen**

The traditional Shin Buddhist view of the relationship between Honen and Shinran rests on Shinran's own affirmation that he truly represents Honen's teaching. Yet, it is interesting that Shinran does not appear among the disciples of Honen traditionally accepted by the *Jōdoshū* itself. Rather, he has been regarded as heretical, creating a problem in understanding the relation of Shinran and Honen for modern scholars.

Nevertheless, the discovery of the letters of Eshin-ni, Shinran's wife, in 1921, settled once and for all the question of Shinran's historical relation to Honen. Further, the name Shakku, which, according to Shinran, had been given to him by Honen, appears among the signers in the "Seven Point Declaration" (*Shichikajō kishōmon*) presented by Honen to the authorities of Mount Hiei in 1204 to meet their complaints about improper activities and attitudes of his disciples. These historical evidences of connection to Honen lent greater credibility to Shinran's own account of his relationship to his teacher described in Volume VI of the "Kyō gyō shin shō," Shinran's major treatise, where he describes the event of his copying Honen's "Senchakushū" and drawing a portrait of Honen.

According to a letter of Shinran's wife, Eshin-ni, to her daughter Kakushin-ni, Shinran had been a *dôsô*, a type of temple priest, functioning in the *Jôgyozammaidô*, or Hall of Perpetual Nembutsu on Mount Hiei. However, he became so concerned for his future deliverance that he secluded himself in the *Rokkakudô* where he received a visionary message from Prince Shotoku that led him to Honen. Through this meeting with Honen and his subsequent study for some six years, Shinran received spiritual peace, which he attributed to the guidance and assurance given him by Honen. From that point, Shinran regarded himself a faithful disciple of Honen and dedicated himself to sharing that compassion and teaching with others. To a question presented by his disciples, Shinran replied: "As for me, I simply accept and entrust myself to what my revered teacher told me, 'Just say the nembutsu and be saved by Amida'; nothing else is involved."

Shinran provides more detail on his relation to Honen in the "Kyô gyô shin sho" where he indicates that he was permitted to copy the "Senchaku hongan nembutsu shû" ("Senchakushû"), Honen's epochal work. Shinran wrote:

"Over the days and years, myriads of people received the master's teaching, but whether they were closely associated or remained more distant, very few gained the opportunity to read and copy this book. Nevertheless, I was in fact able to copy it and to paint his portrait. This was the virtue of practicing the right act alone, and the manifestation of the decisive settlement of birth." [1]

Shortly thereafter they were separated because of the proscription of the group by the government, as punishment for alleged crimes by certain disciples and criticisms of the monastic institutions of Mount Hiei and Nara Kofukuji. While Honen went to Tosa in Shikoku, Shinran went to Echigo in northern Japan, and they never met again.

In addition to his personal account, Shinran avers his connection to Honen in a famous passage in the "Tannishô" where he sees himself in the direct line of transmission from Amida Buddha, Sakyamuni, Shan-tao, Honen to Shinran. [2] He praises and exalts Honen in the "Kyô gyô shin shô" in his *Hymn on the Nembutsu of True Faith (Shôshinge)*:

"Master Genku, well-versed in the Buddha's teaching,  
Turned compassionately to foolish people, both good and evil;  
Establishing in this remote land the teaching and realization that are the  
true essence of the Pure Land way,  
He transmit the selected Primal Vow to us of the defiled world;  
Return to this house of transmigration, of birth-and-death,  
Is decidedly caused by doubt.  
Swift entrance into the city of tranquility, the uncreated,  
Is necessarily brought about by shinjin."

He also extols Honen in detail in his poems on the "Seven Great Teachers" (*Kôsô wasan*). I cannot quote the whole series of verses, but Shinran declares that the true Pure Land teaching (*jôdo shinshû*) was spread in Japan during *mappô* by Honen who was highly revered by other Pure Land teachers and respected by the Chancellor Kujo Kaneyane. Honen was widely viewed as a reincarnation of the great Chinese Pure Land teachers, Tao-ch'o or Shan-tao and a manifestation of *Seishi Bosatsu (Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva)*, as well as even Amida Buddha. Shinran emphasizes that Honen had a distinct concern for the masses of ordinary people.

"Genku emanated a radiance  
Which he always revealed to his followers,  
Without discriminating between wise and ignorant  
Or between those of high station or low." (110)

In addition, there are also stories of disputes in Shin tradition where Shinran argued points of faith with other disciples while they were in Yoshimizu. While Honen agreed with Shinran according to these accounts, the historical status of these stories is not clear, since they only appear within the Shin tradition. [3]

In the first case, the issue is the reception of faith as a gift of Amida, clearly advocated by Shinran. Honen is said to have sided with Shinran. The second case deals with the issue of attaining rebirth in this life in our present bodies and the rejection of the *raigô* doctrine of the last moment, also a major point of Shinran's teaching, in contrast to the principle that we attain birth when we die and experience the *raigô*. Honen notes that while both these views concerning rebirth and *raigô* have bases in scriptures, the former is the principle of the person who adheres to the Primal Vow or *nembutsu ôjô* and the second is the principle of the way of rebirth through the many Buddhist practices or *shogyô ôjô*. While Honen does not take a clear position in this matter, seeing it as a matter of previous karma and the differences in the capacity of people, the implication is that rebirth based in the Primal Vow would be the superior position. As these stories indicate, Shinran frequently emphasized his unity with his master by invoking Honen's authority as the basis for his teaching, while asserting his criticism of other representatives of Honen.

It is interesting to note that in his "Kyô gyô shin shô," Shinran quotes minimally from Honen, employing two passages out of some 403. Nevertheless, he expresses a high estimate of the text:

"The crucial elements of the true essence of the Pure Land way and the inner significance of the nembutsu have been gathered into this work, which is easily understood by those who read it. It is a truly luminous writing, rare and excellent; a treasured scripture, supreme and profound."

Despite the disparity between Shinran's regard for the text and the number of citations in his own work, Honen's work was no less authoritative for Shinran. Rather, it more indicates that Shinran was also an equally independent thinker, and in his loyalty to his teaching as far-ranging in his search for materials to support his interpretations of Honen's thought.

### **Shinran as Exponent of Honen**

I have used the term "exponent" here rather than "defender" because Shinran does not openly present himself as a defender of Honen against such critics as Myoe (1173-1232). However, the content of the "Kyô gyô shin shô" may be better understood as Shinran's reaction to those criticisms as a disciple of Honen, as well as a declaration of his own faith. He attempts to present Honen's fundamental perspective, but does not simply replicate his thought. Rather than presenting himself as interpreting the "Senchakushû" in particular, Shinran gathers a variety of textual supports from Pure Land tradition in India, China and Japan, as well as Korean sources, to establish the primacy of Amida's name (*myôgô*), nembutsu and *shinjin*/true entrusting taught by the 18th Vow.

It is useful also to see him taking seriously the critique made by Myoe, and integrating the principle of Bodhi-mind (*bodai shin*) with the teaching of exclusive practice of the nembutsu advocated by Honen without referring either to Honen's apparent rejection of the principle or to Myoe's views. In working out his interpretation of Pure Land teaching, Shinran began with declaring that the "Larger Pure Land Sûtra" was the supreme authority and teaching for Buddhism, in contrast to the Tendai view of the supremacy of the "Lotus Sûtra." He also asserted that it was superior to the "Sûtra of Contemplation," which had deeply influenced Pure Land practices of visualization and the development of the nembutsu as recitation of the name. However, in the "Kyô gyô shin shô," Shinran's reliance on the "Nirvâna Sûtra" and the "Kegon Sûtra" is striking. The reason for this lies in Shinran's effort to integrate the

Mahayana teaching of Buddha-nature and Bodhi-mind into Pure Land doctrine to secure its position within Mahayana tradition, and provide it with a firm theoretical basis.

Nevertheless, to critics like Myoe Shinran's overall solution may have been no more acceptable than Honen's. Yet, Shinran goes beyond Honen when he declares that Pure Land teaching is not merely an *upāya* in Buddhism, or one option among many. Rather, it is in actuality the ultimate or final teaching of Mahayana Buddhism, an even more definitive position than that asserted by Honen. In effect, he made Honen's view of nembutsu more absolute by using the argument of the critic in support of his own defense of Honen's single, selected practice as a legitimate Mahayana teaching.

In this connection, I believe it is fair to say that Honen probably knew the implications of his thought when he advised his readers to keep the "Senchakushū" secret, not to leave it by a window, but bury it in the wall. Perhaps a clue to Honen's attitude can be found in the eloquent passage in the chapter on the Primal Vow in the "Senchakushū" where he rejects a wide variety of Buddhist practices from that of building temples and erecting images (practice performed by lay people seeking merit) to the rigorous practice of precepts carried out by monks in the quest for enlightenment. He clearly indicates that Amida's Vow does not require building temples, erecting images, cultivating intellectual attainments or moral virtues.

Honen's attitude to the Buddhism of his time may also be seen in his "Muryōjukyōshaku" ("Comments on the Larger Pure Land Sūtra"). In this text he discusses the five obstacles which place women in an inferior position in Buddhism, excluding them from the various major sacred precincts in Japan. He laments how sad it is that even though women have two feet and two eyes, they cannot worship in such sacred places as Mount Hiei, Mount Koya, Mount Kimpū or Todaiji. In the famous *Ichimai kishōmon*, Honen's testimony on one sheet of paper, written shortly before his death, he proclaims the deliverance of men and women equally through the recitation of the nembutsu. This testimony is a short, concise summary of his essential teaching. In it Honen praises the simple faith of nuns and monks who recite the nembutsu without getting tangled in scholastic details and speculations.

The basis for Myoe's criticism of Honen appears in several chapters of the "Senchakushū" but focally in chapter 3 on the Primal Vow. Honen characterizes Bodhi-mind as a type of practice not required by the Primal Vow. With respect to traditional Buddhist teaching, Myoe may have been correct in his criticism. However, the type of Buddhism which Myoe represented was elitist in the eyes of Honen and his followers. While Myoe was highly regarded as a virtuous monk, if he was to be seen as the exemplary model of the Bodhi-mind ideal, most ordinary people would be without hope. According to Honen, the ideal represented by Myoe and the monastic institutions of the time is not required by Amida's Vow. Rather, the simple recitation of the name accords with His Vow and is therefore open to all. Shinran followed up the spirit of Honen's critique with his own delineation of the nature of faith which lies beyond all such human distinctions in the passage on the "Great Sea of Faith" in the "Kyō gyō shin shō." [4]

Though it is clear, as Myoe indicates, that this rejection goes against centuries of Pure Land teaching itself, it is important to keep in mind that Honen focused his attention on the people and not merely on the niceties of scholarly, or buddhalogical discussion. Shinran, however, in order to resolve the problem occasioned by Honen's rejection of the practice of Bodhi-mind for Pure Land teaching, shifted the attention away from practices and their elitist implications to the issue of the mind or motivation of practice within the Pure Land teaching. Bodhi-mind no longer symbolized for Shinran the rigorous disciplines in the attainment of Buddhahood, but the active working of Buddha's compassion and wisdom within the faithful providing the inner motivation and conviction that grounds religious life. It was the true mind of Amida (*shinshin, makoto no kokoro*), conferred in *shinjin* (true

entrusting). This understanding is the basis for the differences we can observe between Honen's thought and Shinran's.

## Differences Between Honen and Shinran's Thought

Shinran clearly and sincerely saw himself as a true exponent of Honen's teaching of Nembutsu and Pure Land teaching. Nevertheless, as I have indicated, there are aspects of Shinran's interpretations that do not appear in Honen's writings. Earlier I mentioned the distinction of tradition (*dentô*) and personal insight (*koshô*). This differentiation suggests that Shinran grounds himself in tradition, but through his religious experience, he sees more deeply into the tradition. As a consequence, he fulfills the intention of the tradition, while offering new insights in an effort to clarify its meaning. [5]

The issue of Bodhi-mind looms large in this discussion, because it appears that Shinran was correcting his mentor. Without arguing this point, I would suggest that it is clear that Shinran maintained Honen's emphasis on the singularity and sufficiency of the nembutsu rooted in *shinjin* alone to bring ultimate enlightenment, while using the argument of the opponent, Myoe, in the service of this principle.

In order to support his view, Shinran had to elevate the meaning of Amida from simply a Buddha who had attained his enlightenment through practices to Amida as the eternal Buddha (*kuonjitsujô*), without beginning or end, the Buddha who is the direct representation of the *Dharmakâya* or Buddha nature in all things. Shinran quotes the "Nirvâna Sûtra" in the context of his interpretation of the mind of entrusting: "Great shinjin is none other than Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is Tathagata." [6] This understanding provides the foundation for other aspects of Shinran's thought.

In my view, while the restoration of the principle of Bodhi-mind to the discussion of Pure Land faith by Shinran seemingly acknowledges Myoe's criticism, for Shinran, it was perhaps more an effort to root Pure Land teaching in Mahayana thought. At the same time, he maintained Honen's struggle to assure the ordinary people of his day that they also could attain enlightenment through trust in the Primal Vow. This Shinran asserts, as had Honen, could be done in the form of the nembutsu within the context of their ordinary lives, as effectively as the traditional forms of practice done by great monks such as Myoe himself and others who practiced in the renowned monastic centers.

The most significant of these reinterpretations of the tradition is found in the fulfillment passage of the 18th Vow in the "Larger Pure Land Sûtra." Here Shinran reinterprets the term *ekô*, which has generally signified transfer of merit on the part of the practitioner. The alteration he makes in the natural reading of the passage transforms its meaning to show that true entrusting/faith is conferred by Amida Buddha through the working of his Primal Vow and does not root in any striving of the practitioner. This interpretation rests on Shinran's recognition that his deliverance and the faith underlying it were the result of Amida's effort on behalf of sentient beings and not the product of his own resolve or effort.

Honen's suggestion that the practice of nembutsu naturally yields the three minds (*shijôshin*, sincerity, *jinshin*, deep mind or faith, and *ekôhotsuganshin*, the mind to transfer merit toward [birth in the Pure Land]) may have given Shinran a clue to understanding the relationship of trust/faith and nembutsu. Shinran maintained that we are grasped by trust in the Vow, which inspires the recitation of the nembutsu as an expression of gratitude. According to him the recitation of the name itself does not give rise to trust.

With the assurance of trust received in this life, Shinran stressed that the status of the *Company of the Truly Assured* (*shôjôju*) or non-retrogression is attained in the instant of trust, rather than after birth in the Pure Land as in traditional Pure Land thought.

Consequently, he rejected the traditional understanding of *raigô* (the meeting with the Buddha) or *rinjû shônen* (the right thought at the moment of death) which has been a major concern throughout Buddhism and maintained by Honen and his disciples. This is the promise that the Buddha will meet the followers of nembutsu and accompany them to the Pure Land. For Shinran, *raigô* is not a matter of the moment of death, but the moment when *shinjin* arises and one is embraced by the Buddha never to be abandoned.

From Shinran's point of view, *shinjin* or trust in the Vow is the true mind of the Buddha whose essence is the Bodhi-mind. This Bodhi-mind is characterized by wisdom and compassion and the desire to bring all beings to enlightenment. This mind is at work in the world guiding people to trust in the Vow. It is also, the realization of the Buddha-nature, manifested in trust and conviction concerning the Vow or, negatively put, in the absence of any doubt in the truth of the Vow, as well as a deep sense of our passion-ridden condition. In this way, Shinran showed that faith is Bodhi-mind and the reality of Buddha-nature, not as a resolve to achieve enlightenment engendered by the practitioners themselves or as a goal of realization through religious discipline, but as the ground or basis for the arising of trust within the devotee. So, trust has as its essence the wisdom and compassion of Amida Buddha, which becomes expressed in personal religious experience as the two types of deep faith (*nishujinshin*). In the practitioner's religious consciousness there is the dialectical awareness of one's inveterate and inescapable passion-ridden egoistic nature illuminated by Amida's wisdom and at the same time the awareness of, and confidence in, Amida's compassionate embrace, which never abandons.

With respect to the recitation of the nembutsu itself, Shinran held to neither single-recitation-thought or many-recitation-thought. He advocated that *shinjin* and the assurance of enlightenment is established in this life in an instant of thought or with a single recitation inspired by *shinjin*. Nevertheless, he advocated the continuing recitation of the name out of gratitude for the deliverance experienced. He also maintained that the nembutsu was neither a practice nor a good deed, and rejected the assisting or subsidiary practices advocated by some disciples of Honen.

## Conclusion

I have briefly tried to survey Shinran's unity and devotion with Honen, and take a look at some differences in thought and interpretation that can be observed in Shinran's writings. It is my view that the issues in the conflict between Myoe and Honen and Shinran's contribution to the problem should be put in their social context.

The nascent Pure Land movement, while teaching what Pure Land teachers had taught for centuries, namely that the recitation of nembutsu was a means for birth and enlightenment, posed a great menace in this case, because it involved an attack on the institutions of Buddhism which, as owners of great manors, taxed the people under threat of divine retribution, if they did not pay.

Honen's radicalism went beyond simply rejecting the concept of Bodhi-mind ideal and maintaining secrecy. There have been suggestions that Honen had a private and public persona. We cannot judge his motivations at this point. Obviously, he shared his thoughts with his disciples, and Kujo Kanezane, for whom he wrote the "Senchakushû," apparently either sympathized with him or never caught its implications. However, they were not lost on Shinran who spent a good part of his career among the peasants and townspeople in eastern Japan. Shinran shows a sensitivity to the social and religious position of his followers.

These developments in Pure Land teaching illustrate that the potentiality of a movement cannot be judged totally by the rightness or wrongness of a teaching measured against

tradition. Whatever the problems in Honen's and Shinran's interpretation of Buddhist and Pure Land tradition, the nature of the teaching ignited a flame that eventually gave rise to a variety of groups, appealing to the masses, while promoting the teaching and acknowledging Honen as their founder. Shin Buddhism, as a major outgrowth of Honen's influence, became a conspicuous example of Buddhist populism under Rennyo, the eighth abbot in Shin Buddhist lineage (1415-1499). Shin Buddhism, following Shinran, has always held Honen in high reverence as the fountainhead of the teaching of trust in Amida's universal Vow and the spiritual equality of all people.

### **References**

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