

The Foundation of Shinran's Faith: Supremacy of the Vow in the 'Tannisho'

by Dr. Alfred Bloom, Emeritus Professor, University of Hawaii

Introduction

As the background to my discussion of the "Tannisho," I want to comment on my experience with Shin Buddhism. It will perhaps give some perspective on my interpretation of "Tannisho" as well as other Buddhist texts. To begin with, I was raised in a fundamentalist Christian environment. I was a Baptist. In my teenage years, I became an ardent believer. During the war I joined the army and had the opportunity to study Japanese. At the end of the war I went to Japan in the army of occupation and was active in a Christian group of GIs.

We went to churches to give talks and help the youth learn English so they could get jobs with the army and also to save their souls. On one occasion, as I was speaking the minister of the church compared my idea of Christian grace with Amida. I was shocked when I heard it, since I had been taught that Christianity was absolutely unique. There could be nothing like it.

I returned from the army and went to seminary. However, many questions had been raised in my mind. I gradually came to understand that the fundamentalist interpretation of Christianity was wrong and that there were many more religious alternatives than just Christianity. After going to two seminaries, I went to Harvard Divinity School where I was again able to take up the study of Japanese and learn more about Buddhism.

At that time, I got hold of a copy of Yamamoto Kosho's "Shinshu Seiten" and discovered that Shinran should be the focus of my study. I received a Fulbright scholarship and went to Japan for research. Eventually, I completed my thesis and published the text "Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace." The title reflects the issue I had been trying to solve since those army experiences. It was my attempt to inform students of religion of the depth and significance of Shinran's teaching, which had not been explored earlier in an academic fashion. Within the last year, after 25 years, the book has gone out of print. Nevertheless, it has fulfilled its task of making Shinran known and now more scholars are taking up the study of exploring the Shin tradition and publishing many important works.

In the course of my explorations, I encountered the "Tannisho" and against the background of my own religious experience and training found it a remarkable and deeply significant text for the understanding, not only of Shin Buddhism, but of religion in general. It was because of my interest in the "Tannisho" that I was able to develop a series of radio talks sponsored by the Moiliili Hongwanji temple in Honolulu, Hawaii, which eventually became the small volume: "Tannisho: Resource for Modern Living."

While I was studying the book, I had an encounter with a Japanese actor, Morishige Hisaya. You may be familiar with him. I was at a dinner party. When I was introduced as a University professor and student of Shin Buddhism, he commented that he understood the Psalms of the Old Testament but he could not understand the "Tannisho." As a more humorous retort, I responded that I understood the "Tannisho" but I could not understand the Psalms.

As I reflected on the exchange later, I began to realize that there was a significant point in our conversation. He had read the Psalms without anyone telling him that they were profound expressions of religious faith. He simply read the texts and reacted to their evident

meaning as he encountered the ideas. However, people for centuries have been told that the "Tannisho" is very profound text. When you tell someone that a book is profound, they will naturally assume that they cannot understand it and thus never read it. Or, if they read it, they will not be able to respond to the meaning because they assume they do not understand what they read.

Interestingly enough, Rennyo Shonin assumed that people *would* understand it when they read it. Consequently, he warned his followers not to read the "Tannisho" until they were 40 years of age. That is, too old to implement its religious perspective. As we shall see, the "Tannisho" is a text of spiritual liberation. Through the use of Pure Land teaching based in Shinran's understanding of shinjin or endowed trust, there is a liberating spirit that pervades the text.

The ideal of spiritual liberation offered by this work has made it enormously attractive and meaningful to many modern Japanese seeking a basis for their lives. Most notably, Kiyozawa Manshi made the book famous in modern times when he rediscovered it after centuries of obscurity. Kiyozawa ranked the "Tannisho" with the words of Epictetus, the Greek stoic philosopher, and the Buddhist Agamas, that is, the ancient Theravada Buddhist Sutras. His emphasis was on liberation from the self. However, the liberation from the self enables the person to be firm and tranquil amidst the turbulence and upheaval of the surrounding world. While not seeking, necessarily, to change the external world directly, the world transforms as the self transforms. Kiyozawa, in his own way attempted to bring about religious reform and the revitalization of Shinshu in the Meiji era. If taken seriously, it can also assist in revitalizing our own Sangha.

As a result of Kiyozawa's efforts, the "Tannisho" became widely known as a religious classic in the Shin tradition. Since that time it has become a literary and religious classic beyond the boundaries of the Shin sect. It has been translated into many western languages and, in effect, taken on a life of its own. Nevertheless, it is not as widely known or studied in our own temples. I encountered a temple president some years ago who said he had never heard of it, despite years of activity in the temple.

While it is not possible to go through the book in detail here or to deal exhaustively with Shinran's teaching, I have developed several topics which I believe focus attention on some important issues for religious faith arising from the text. In this initial discussion, I want to consider the Primal Vow as the foundation of Shinran's religious experience and thought. In the second presentation, I will discuss the deeply personal character of Shinran's approach to religion. Subsequently, we will look at the "Tannisho" as a manifesto of spiritual liberation and finally the relevance of the "Tannisho." In this segment of our study I will summarize the religious perspective or style of life of the "Tannisho" which is the basis for its modern significance.

1. The Inconceivable Primal Vows

The "Tannisho" opens with a clear statement of the foundation for spiritual liberation through the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha. It states:

When the thought of saying the Nembutsu emerges decisively from within, having entrusted ourselves to the inconceivable power of Amida's vow which saves us, enabling us to be born in the Pure Land, in that very moment we receive the ultimate benefit of being grasped never to be abandoned.

Amida's Primal Vow does not discriminate between the young and old, good and evil; true entrusting alone is essential. The reason is that the Vow is directed to the being burdened with the weight of karmic evil and burning with the flames of blind passion.

Thus entrusting ourselves to the Primal Vow, no other form of good is necessary, for there is no good that surpasses the Nembutsu. And evil need not be feared, for there is no evil which can obstruct the working of Amida's Primal Vow. ("Tannisho: A Shin Buddhist Classic," Taitetsu Unno, trans., Honolulu: Buddhist Study Center Press, 1984, p. 5).

This passage, with its flowing, lyrical style, is an eloquent statement of the very foundation of Shinran's teaching. Though we speak of the Nembutsu as the central idea of Shinshu, the Nembutsu is rooted in the Vow. Not enough attention is paid to the understanding of the Vow as the symbol and expression of the nature of spiritual reality. When Shinran recounted his experience of faith through his teacher Honen, he exclaimed: "How Joyous I am, my heart and mind being rooted in the Buddha-ground of the Universal Vow, and my thoughts and feelings flowing within the dharma-ocean, which is beyond comprehension" (Shin Buddhism Translation Series, "The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way," Volume IV, Transformed Land, p. 616).

In the preface to the "Shoshinge" in the "Kyogyoshinsho," Shinran states: "The Vow on which true and real practice is based is the Vow that all Buddhas say the Name. The Vow on which true and real shinjin is based is the Vow of sincere mind and trust. These are the practice and shinjin of the selected Primal Vow....The Buddha and land are the fulfilled Buddha and fulfilled land. All of this is none other than the ocean of true reality or suchness, the inconceivable Vow" (Shin Buddhism Translation Series, Ibid., I, p. 159).

For Shinran, all of spiritual reality is the expression of the Primal Vow. If we put this into modern terms, Shinran is indicating for us that history is moved by a spiritual dynamic, profound aspiration in which all beings seek a higher realization and fulfillment of their lives. The Vows are a power in things working for growth and creativity, and for the transcendence of all limitations. Shinran expressed this dynamic reality in the terms of Pure Land teaching. The Vows represent aspects of the nature of Amida Buddha as the Buddha of Eternal life and Infinite Light (some mention can be made of the central Vows in Shinran's thought: 12,13,17,18,11,22; and for his own experience, 19, 20).

Consequently, when Yuienbo, the compiler of the "Tannisho," arranged the quotations from Shinran that he remembered, it is important that he prefaced them with the recognition of the supremacy of the Primal Vow. It is only through our constant awareness of the power of the Vow in our lives that we can avoid the deviations or errors which Yuienbo was attempting to correct within the early Shin sangha. Briefly, let us consider this opening passage:

When the thought of saying the Nembutsu emerges decisively from within, having entrusted ourselves to the inconceivable power of Amida's vow which saves us, enabling us to be born in the Pure Land, in that very moment we receive the ultimate benefit of being grasped never to be abandoned.

This passage tells us that even before we actually recite the Nembutsu verbally, the inconceivable power of the Vow stirs our faith, and we are embraced in that moment by the Buddha's compassion. We will never be abandoned or rejected. The assurance we have of final enlightenment comes not from our feeble and unsteady, wavering minds and hearts, but from the Buddha whose nature and purpose is to bring all beings to enlightenment.

This affirmation is extremely important when we survey the religious world. Most religions establish criteria and requirements that must be fulfilled in order to attain salvation. The degree of perfection demanded leaves the majority of people doomed. It is the unconditional compassion of Amida working in his Vow that brings about our deliverance or final enlightenment not what we do for ourselves. Understanding this perspective transforms the nature of our religious life and the way we relate to people. Knowing that the

source of our deliverance is in the Vow, we cannot be self-righteous or put on an air of superiority. This is the basis of the dogyo-dobo horizontal community that characterizes Shinran's relations to his disciples.

Amida's Primal Vow does not discriminate between the young and old, good and evil; true entrusting alone is essential. The reason is that the Vow is directed to the being burdened with the weight of karmic evil and burning with the flames of blind passion.

The second segment of this passage makes three important points. The first is the universality of the Vow. In this context he focuses on age and moral qualifications. However, in the Faith Volume of the "Kyogyoshinsho" he indicates that the Great Sea of Faith transcends age, sex, economics, intellect, religion, morality, mode of enlightenment, number of Nembutsu, or any human distinction that may be invoked as a criteria to evaluate another person's faith. Shinran gives us the clearest rejection of the judgmental attitude that tends to afflict religious people and encourage hypocrisy.

The second issue is that entrusting alone is essential. This is the central feature of Shinran's teaching that has made it famous over the centuries and distinctive among Buddhist schools. Generally speaking, traditional Buddhism in all its various forms has focused on practice as the essential way to enlightenment, and particularly meditation in some form, though also teaching the preliminary character or importance of faith.

For Shinran, prior to all aspects of practice is the character of the human spirit and mind. That is, what people think they are doing and with what attitude their actions are performed determines the character of their religious perspective. If they think that religious actions are based in their own ability to achieve good, they misunderstand the power of the ego and ego-delusion which leads to cloaking egoism in the guise of religious effort. Faith-awareness makes it clear that whatever good we do, has its root in the working of universal compassion.

Thus entrusting ourselves to the Primal Vow, no other form of good is necessary, for there is no good that surpasses the Nembutsu. And evil need not be feared, for there is no evil which can obstruct the working of Amida's Primal Vow.

Shinran declares the total supremacy of the Primal Vow. He states that "no other form of good is needed." Nothing is superior to the Nembutsu. This affirmation correlates to the section "Tannisho" VIII where Shinran states that the Nembutsu "is neither a religious practice nor a good deed. Since it is practiced without my calculation, it is 'non-practice.' Since it is not a good created by my calculation, it is 'non-good.' Since it is nothing but Other Power, completely separated from self-power, it is neither a religious practice nor a good act on the part of the practitioner."

Here we should understand that for Shinran the Nembutsu, as the conscious manifestation of shinjin, endowed trust, arises spontaneously and freely. It is without hakarai which indicates deliberateness, calculation, devising. Hakarai is something done with ego intention and therefore, being the kind of people we are with raging passions and ego interest, all actions become self-serving. Religion for Shinran could never be obligatory or done merely for social reasons.

With the grounding in the Vow religious faith becomes the natural expression of the human spirit, which recognizes that there is something greater that embraces our lives and gives them meaning and value. The value and meaning of human existence is symbolized in Amida's Vows as the life of the universe realizing itself in the dynamic life of nature and the yearning for spiritual fulfillment in human life.

Just as there is no good that surpasses the Nembutsu as the requirement for enlightenment, there is no evil that can obstruct or hinder the fulfillment of the Vow in bringing us to enlightenment. It is possible to view the supremacy of the Vow in external or internal dimensions. Externally, it suggests that no matter what opposition followers of the Nembutsu may face, those opponents cannot finally overcome the faith. Shinran himself faced such challenges when he was exiled along with other followers of Honen. Pure Land teaching was persecuted for many years in Japan until it became a recognized and accepted faith among all the other Buddhist schools. While we do not face overt persecution, the cultural environment within which we live threatens to undermine religious commitment through ongoing secularization and the allure of the material culture we have created which makes religion merely a colorful decoration or condiment to the salad of life.

Internally, no evil can obstruct the Vow or Nembutsu, and no evil need be feared suggests that we are never too evil to be embraced by the Buddha's compassion. There were people in Shinran's day, who by profession or other reasons, were continually committing acts defined as sinful and impure in traditional Buddhism. It was virtually impossible for such people to receive the assurance that they would ultimately be delivered. Warriors, prostitutes, butchers, merchants, hunters were all in professions which traded on human passions and created karma. The message of Pure Land teaching, and particularly Shinran, declared that there was hope for all. No one would be left out, because the Buddha's Vow had been fulfilled.

In the "Kyogyoshinsho," Shinran illustrated this fact by recounting the story of Prince Ajatasatru who had committed what was the unforgivable sin in bringing about his father, King Bimbisara's death. He symbolized the lowest, despicable evil. Yet, through the Buddha's compassion even he would eventually attain Buddhahood. This hope liberates the human spirit to live creatively and meaningfully in this world of suffering in the spirit of gratitude and compassion for all beings.

In this opening passage, therefore, Shinran offers an important alternative among the plurality of religious paths in our time and an inspiring vision of universal compassion that inspires hope, courage and commitment. We must take this vision seriously for our individual lives, as well as that of our sangha.