

'Kyogyoshinsho' – Foundation and Resource for Shinran's Understanding of Nembutsu

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I have selected the topic of the "Kyogyoshinsho" because this text, among all of Shinran's writings, shows him not only to be a religious leader, but also a thinker and intellect as well. The work also expresses his sense of mission and dedication to share the dharma with others. In order to fulfill his mission Shinran had to position Pure Land teaching in the context of the religions of his time, that is, Japanese native religion and the various sects of Buddhism, as well as in relation to other schools of Pure Land teaching claiming Honen as their authority.

It is Shinran's declaration of faith and his understanding of the fundamental meaning the Nembutsu and Buddhism. However, the text has been little known or understood even among Shin followers, because the text was not easily available. There was no printing. Copies were made laboriously by hand. In addition, most people were illiterate. Shinran, as a scholar, wrote in the Chinese style -- kambun -- though he also translated it into Japanese for leaders of the congregations he had established. Consequently, the "Kyogyoshinsho" is not a devotional book or a text we read for enjoyment. Rather, it is a text which must be studied. We are most fortunate in our age that the entire text has become available through the translation made by the Hongwanji International Center. It is a weighty text, published in four volumes. Each volume is readable and has an excellent introduction to explain important aspects of the text.

As we approach the new era, it is very important that we understand our faith and relate it to the issues of our time. We should not only "feel" Jodo Shinshu, but we should "know" it. In the "Kyogyoshinsho" Shinran lays out the reasons and basis for his faith. It is his confession of faith and gratitude, based on his own experience of spiritual despair and disillusionment which he encountered during his monastic life on Mount Hiei and his later explorations of the teaching together with his teacher Honen. As a result of many years of reading, research and reflection, Shinran compiled this text as his enduring witness to the meaning of Amida Buddha's Primal Vows for his life and for humanity. The text is perfumed with his deep gratitude, compassion and a critical spirit, embodied in a universal spiritual vision of the all-embracing compassion and wisdom of Amida Buddha which rejects no one.

One may ask, why is intellectual insight important and even necessary? We can see that our ancestors, who never had such materials available, lived by their faith joyfully and meaningfully. This is true. But the times have changed and more is demanded as a result of higher levels of education and the diversity of religious alternatives open to people, as well as the spiritual need of the time for a comprehensive, compassionate perspective on life. It is clear, however, that not everyone will be a scholar. They do not need to be. The issue is not scholarship. The issue is personal involvement and the quest for understanding. It is the questioning and questing attitude that Rennyo advocated in his letters. If one does not care to understand one's faith, it becomes blind faith.

Though not everyone may have opportunity for deep study, someone must do it, otherwise the tradition withers and shrivels. I use a car, moped and computer, but I don't know in detail how they operate. I cannot be an expert in everything. Nevertheless, someone must know these things so when they break down, I can get them fixed. We are not speaking here of all of us becoming experts and technicians. However, in religion we are talking about ourselves, the quality and depth of our lives. In the process of religious development and growth, no one can do it for you. Each person must make some effort to study the faith

or it loses its vitality and meaning, not only for oneself, but also for those who will come later, our children and grandchildren.

Consequently, I am brought back to the "Kyogyoshinsho" as the foundation of Shin Buddhism. Though Shinran wrote numerous works and composed poems, gathas, this text is organized and structured to deal with the major points for understanding Shin Buddhism. It is the text book of faith. People frequently criticise book learning in contrast to experience. As far as it goes, it is true. One's experience is crucial for the way one deals with texts and how one lives. Books teach us many things, because they are the result of other people's experiences and are valuable for us. Without the "Kyogyoshinsho", how would we know Shinran's thought that inspires our faith today? How would we know the meaning of the Primal Vow he transmitted? Maintaining and sharing the faith depends on our knowledge of what he wrote.

The "Kyogyoshinsho" itself is a work in six sections, Teaching, Practice, Faith, Realization, True Buddha Land and Transformed Buddha Land. The text is divided in two parts. The first five chapters give an outline of the essential content of shinjin or true entrusting. The second division is the final sixth chapter which deals with Shinran's view of other traditions of Buddhism and Japanese religion. The first division, comprising five chapters, correlates each aspect of the faith with central Vows of Amida Buddha. For Shinran all aspects of religious reality and experience are the manifestations of particular Vows.

The chapter on teaching is primarily the eighteenth Vow and establishes the true authority which is the basis of Shin Faith. Shinran locates this authority in the Larger Pure Land Sutra because it relates the foundational story concerning Amida's Vows and establishment of the Pure Land. The chapter on Practice gives the Buddhological basis of the Nembutsu showing that it is the fulfillment of the seventeenth Vow which declares that all Buddhas praise Amida's Name. The Name as the essence of the Nembutsu is the spiritual foundation for our recitation of that name and its role in assuring us of enlightenment.

The chapter on Faith or shinjin is the crucial section of the text. It is grounded in the eighteenth Vow also and discusses the three minds of the Vow, sincerity, trust, and aspiration for birth in the Pure Land, which are essentially the manifestation of Amida's true mind. This mind is manifested in the human spirit as conviction and commitment. Faith in Shin Buddhism is not merely belief in a system of teaching, but an inner awareness of the truth and reality of the Vow and the conviction that inspires lively religious life. In this way, Shin Buddhism is experiential. Something moves the person inwardly with the realization that here is the truth.

Chapter four, Realization, and five, True Buddha Land, turn from present realities of religious experience and life to our future fulfillment. Realization is based on the eleventh Vow that, we are among the group of the truly settled and assured of Nirvana. This assurance is received in this life, while after attaining birth in the Pure Land, we return to this world to work for the deliverance of all beings in accord with the twenty-second Vow. The True Buddha Land is based on the two Vows, twelve and thirteen which promise that Amida Buddha will be the Buddha of eternal life and infinite light.

The True Buddha Land signifies that entry into the Pure Land is the attainment of Buddhahood. In these designations Shinran is not interested simply that we are born in the Pure Land in order to be happy and have a life in paradise. Rather, he shows that, identified with the Buddha, the true purpose of religious life in this world and in the future life is to share the dharma with all beings and bring about their deliverance. To be religious is not to be selfish and self-centered, concerned with one's own enjoyment or only of those immediately related to us.

For Shinran, each Vow with its fulfillment is for all beings. Our true fulfillment is to play a role in that goal in this world and in our future. Shinran gives the most elevated and spiritual definition to interest in personal survival after death, which is an important aspect of religion. He removed egocentric, selfish concerns from religion, making it an expression of gratitude and compassion. When we observe the structure of Shinran's thought about the fulfillment and meaning of human life, it is clear that it is comprehensive, covering the past in the foundational story of Amida's becoming Buddha. It deals with the present in the reality of the name and the experience of true entrusting. It holds up an ideal of the future as we also share in the process of guiding all beings to enlightenment. With the sixth chapter, Shinran deals with present issues of our relation to alternative ways of thinking and living. He deals with the inward and outward aspects of religious life; spiritual reality and personal experience.

The sixth chapter of the "Kyogyoshinsho" requires some special attention. Here we see that Shinran did not live in a vacuum, isolated from the rest of the world of his time. He had to relate his experience and thought to the various alternatives available in his society. Shinran explores alternative forms of Buddhism, focusing particularly on Pure Land Teaching because of the confusion created by disagreements in interpretation of Honen's Nembutsu teaching among his successors. We have called this section his philosophy of religion, because he sets in order from his opponents.

Shinran's analysis of Pure Land teaching brings out principles common to other approaches to deliverance and enlightenment in Buddhism. His critique is aimed at self-power, self-striving forms of religious endeavor and in principle extends to all other forms of religion. He also takes up folk religion and the basic style and character of Japanese religion. According to Shinran's perspective, religions may be typed in terms of the Primal Vows dealing with the path to enlightenment. Here three Vows become the focal Vows, the twentieth and the eighteenth. The nineteenth Vow, represented by the Pure Land Meditation Sutra covers all religious alternatives designated as self-striving, or perhaps in our time, self-help. Today, meditation is widely advocated in a variety of forms from Yoga to Zen and Vipassana or T.M.

One can get a following easily by promoting some form of meditation and offering peace of mind, health, wealth or some form of release from stress, etc. Morality or good deeds involves the common assumption in religions worldwide that one earns salvation through good works. Religion has been a strong support of morality by proposing that good deeds bring benefits and bad deeds bring punishment, usually from some deity. In the case of East Asian religions the area of morality meant submission to ruling authorities and reverence for parents and ancestors.

The second path is the 20th Vow which Shinran interprets to refer to the meritorious practice of Nembutsu. In this path one uses the Nembutsu as a means to acquire merit for birth in the Pure land or for other benefits and to purify oneself from all evils. The 18th Vow is the supreme Vow of endowed trust as outlined in the first five sections of the work. It is the true path of Nembutsu, the Nembutsu of true faith. This schematic, symbolic organization of religious principles around the Vows was not just an abstract theory for Shinran. He testifies that he himself had experienced all these alternatives in the famous passage called Turning through the Three Vows. We gain a glimpse of his development from autobiographical statements in the "Kyogyoshinsho", as well as his wife, Eshin-ni's letters where she relates his deep religious anxiety and uncertainty encountered in the course of his monastic life.

Through his training and religious life Shinran came to understand that the demands for purification and rigorous discipline in Buddhism are self-defeating. It is a problem to know how much purification we need to assure enlightenment, or how pure we may be at any time. As the Chinese teacher Zendo pointed out, we have been revolving for countless eons

on the wheel of births and deaths, and we have not been enlightened. We are still revolving, like a revolving door. Hence, the quest for purity is endless and like the horizon moves forward as we move forward. From another angle, Shinran noted the self-righteousness of those who do good. The greatest problem are those who are good and know they are good.

All human, finite actions are open to comparison. A person may do something better, longer, more frequently than someone else and so become proud of their superiority. Another problem is that sincerity is required to validate religious action. However, who knows when they are sincere? We all act out of a variety of motives when we do something. We never have pure motivation. Religion may become a cloak for ego aggression; a way of sorting people out the good from the bad, the pious from the pagan. If we look at history, we see that religion has often been the cause of problems rather than the solution.

In Shinran's religious view, therefore, self-striving religion, egocentric-religion is erroneous because it does not truly resolve the problem of human fulfillment and itself can become a source of self-congratulation. While the worldly good deeds advocated by the nineteenth Vow are important for the well being of society, they may become distorted when used as a means of gaining personal power and benefits. The intended good, what we call "do-gooding" often demeans the recipients of that good and masks the real problem in society, which is our desire for power, recognition and status. When Shinran found the paths of the nineteenth and twentieth Vows inadequate to deal with his despair, he turned to the eighteenth Vow under the guidance of Honen. There he found true spiritual release which he recounts with joy and gratitude in the epilogue of the "Kyogyoshinsho."

The solution to the religious problem for Shinran was to displace the ego from its self-seeking position. The only way to do this according to him, was to understand one's nature through deep self-reflection and through encounter with the teaching of the Vow. We must realize that we can do nothing to advance our spiritual condition. Rather, it has been achieved through the Vow and Amida's unconditional compassion which excludes no one. When we trust in the Vow and experience release from self-striving, religion becomes a matter of gratitude rather than competition. It is response and responsibility for Amida's compassion.

Shinran's insight is important in our contemporary society because religion has been made an instrument of ego-satisfaction and self-interest. The questions people ask are: "What do you get out of your religion?" "What does it do for you?" For Shinran, there is no benefit from religious faith. We don't get anything out of it. While Shinran speaks of benefits, they are truly spiritual benefits of having great joy, awareness of Buddha's compassion and having gratitude, of always practising great compassion and having the assurance of one's ultimate fulfillment.

While everyone desires the worldly benefits of health, wealth and success, they must be viewed carefully for the understanding of spiritual reality they imply. Praying for some benefit means that a god is asked to play favorites, to bless me rather than someone else. We see it frequently in sports where the player attributes his victory to god, despite the fact that there are believers on the other side as well who were praying. It happens in war that enemies who hold the same religion pray to god for the victory of their side.

Consequently, Shinran exhorts his followers not to be concerned with such beliefs and prayers. They are merely reflection of our ego-centrism which ultimately blocks our enlightenment. According to Shinran, the only reality is Amida Buddha. The reality symbolized by Amida supercedes the lesser gods and powers of the ancient folk religion. He shows that the gods of the universe are subordinate to and allied with Amida. Therefore, there is nothing to fear from the gods for those who trust in Amida. Shinran declares that

for those who trust in Amida, the gods bow down and worship that person, rather than people fearing the gods. Shinran liberated his followers from all forms of spiritual domination, oppression and exploitation. However, Shinran was not simply trying to promote his way at the expense of others. He was also a force for reconciliation. Though he disagreed with others, he never condemned the person, but rather focused on the adequacy of their ideas.

In addition, he tried to show that, despite differences which appear among teachings, they must be seen, from the standpoint of the Vow, as part of the overall design of the Buddha to bring all people to enlightenment. As a means to harmonize divergent religious practices, particularly those in the Pure Land tradition, Shinran developed the theory of "kensho-onmitsu" or "on-ken," the distinction of the hidden and manifest. According to this theory, people practice according to the nineteenth or twentieth Vows. Although in themselves they are inadequate to assure final enlightenment, as Shinran knew himself, they are stages offered by the Buddha to guide people to the eighteenth Vow and to true entrusting. As people experience the frustration and uncertainty of their path they become open to the message of the Vow and develop trust. All forms of religious teaching from this standpoint are upaya or hoben, that is, compassionate means of the Buddha. The theory has much to say about our attitude to other faiths. Shinran does not condemn. He analyzes the adequacy or inadequacy of a view. He does not simply oppose for the sake of opposition. He also recognizes the common human aspiration involved in religious faith. All people in their respective faith are seeking the meaning of human life. Human beings, conscious of the fragility and brevity of life, seek an ultimate fulfillment.

Shinran sees the yearning of the sea of beings as the working of the Vow in all things (Yuishinshomon'i). Shinran recognizes the compassion of Amida in all expressions of faith. This is not to say indifferently that they are all the same. He looks from the standpoint of trust in Amida's Vow. Such a perspective enabled Shinran to deal with all people with compassion and to guide them with sensitivity and to see into their true spiritual condition. Arguing religion is fruitless. Rather, we should illuminate religious views by getting to the core issue of the ego and its involvement with religion.

The question is not whether a given religion is true or false in comparison to ours, but whether a religion encourages or supports ego-centric, self-seeking attitudes; whether it divides people, labeling them good or evil because they do not agree with that religion, or whether, like Shinran, the religion brings people together in recognition of their common human search for meaning. Shinran gives us the standpoint in the "Kyogyoshinsho" to approach contemporary issues by going into depth on the process of deliverance and the central experience of true entrusting. He also gives us guidance in understanding religious alternatives and the issues they raise.

Finally, he gives us insight into both the diversity of religious practices and the unity of religious aspiration which is grounded in the power of Amida's Vow as the basis for hope for all people. More than that, under the cover of this thought Shinran conveyed a broad spiritual vision which stirred people in his time and has the capacity to do so today. His vision embodies the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism, giving it, perhaps, its most universal and yet personal expression. Further, through personal self-reflection and study, the teaching opens the inner world of the human spirit, while its outer expression transcends all manner of human distinctions and discriminations.

Consequently, the "Kyogyoshinsho" remains as the sourcebook and guidebook for all Shin Buddhists. It is the charter for the revitalization of the sangha in this momentous time of change and transition. The symbols and images that Shinran employs in his work are relevant to our modern search for meaning. Shinran, as a result of his own search for spiritual fulfillment, found the answer to his questions in the Pure Land path which shares

the Mahayana awareness of the larger, cosmic context of human existence which is animated by the spirit of the eternal Buddha's compassion and wisdom.

Compassion and wisdom are symbolic terms which reflect the reality that all life is sustained through interdependence and that we are a part of a larger world order which we sometimes speak of as Buddha's Golden Chain. It makes clear our responsibility to nurture life. Shinran understands that reality is inconceivable. It is a great mystery. Our own existence is a great mystery, when we contemplate the wonders of our mind and body, let alone the vast realm of nature and the cosmos.

The world of spirituality which Shinran sets forth in the "Kyogyoshinsho" gives a context of meaning and direction for our modern living, even in the face of the many contradictions and negations of everything we may consider true and worthy. Essentially, Shinran gives us a perspective to respond to the question: what does it mean to be human? How can we affirm and fulfill our humanity in this kind of world? Through the teaching of the "Kyogyoshinsho" Shinran gives us a lens to focus the issues of human existence and the basis for living with self-reflection and affirmation. As the lens of a magnifying glass concentrates the rays of the sun and produces fire, so the "Kyogyoshinsho" focuses the meaning of the Nembutsu, Amida's name and Vows to fire up the commitment necessary for the renewal and revitalization of Shin Buddhism in the new age.