

The Unique Potential of Shin Buddhism in Western Society

by Rev. Dr. Alfred Bloom

Time does not permit me to go into detail on my life experience that led me to Buddhism and to Shin Buddhism. However, suffice it to say that I began as a fundamentalist Baptist and through a series of experiences finally arrived home in Shin Buddhism. It is against this background that I would present the unique potential of Shin Buddhism in American society, as an alternative path for those seeking a more realistic understanding of the self and a more personally satisfying approach to life.

In the time allotted to me, I can only enumerate a few points which I believe have significance for the propagation of Shin Buddhism in American society. In the first place, Shin Buddhism is a layperson's religion. It was directed by Shinran to lay people, farmers, merchants, hunters, townspeople who could not leave their social obligation to enter monastic orders or attain the exalted spiritual experiences achieved by eminent monks. Shinran challenged the elitist religion of his day by offering a way which involved a depth of spiritual experience within the context of ordinary life.

His understanding of the path of deliverance begins with the recognition of one's ineradicable, passion-ridden nature, defiled by all kinds of evils, as the basis of conflict and violence.

This view is often considered negative and pessimistic, though Buddhism has always recognized the pervasiveness of egoism and ego-attachments. Shinran experienced it with an intensity that transformed the understanding of religious life and practice. I prefer to see his view as realistic as it is evidenced in my own life. Shinran called people to reflect upon themselves deeply and realize the chains that bound them spiritually. This self-reflection is stimulated by the Buddhist ideal of the absolute purity of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but supremely Amida Buddha whose foundational story is related in the "Larger Pure Land Sutra."

Shinran perceived a dialectic in spiritual life, that the more aware one becomes of the depth of evil in oneself, the more one also perceives the compassion and wisdom that nevertheless sustains and nurtures one's life. The darkness of evil is exposed by the light of the compassion that breaks through the engulfing clouds of that evil. Shinran's understanding permits us to recognize the shadow side of ourselves, not in order to repress it, but to displace it by being grasped by a deeper ideal.

There are several consequences resulting from his view of the way of deliverance. One is that it is absolutely Other Power, **not** meaning that there is a power outside the self – God – that bestows deliverance, but that the power becomes manifest within the self in a new view of life, taking seriously the principle of interdependence and one's solidarity with all beings. These principles are manifested within the story of Amida's 48 Primal Vows which express in dramatic form the interdependence, and indivisibility of deliverance.

The second consequence is Shinran's recognition that religion itself is a danger to one's spiritual development. The belief that one may achieve enlightenment through one's own practice leads to comparisons, self-righteousness and the elitism that infects all religions (including later Shin Buddhism). Shinran's view of Other Power altered the understanding of religious life by transforming it from a religion of self-perfection or self-benefit to a religion of gratitude and commitment. Religious faith became an end in itself and not a tool or means to some other end. For Shinran, one becomes religious because one is aware of the

compassion that embraces one's life and expresses it in gratitude and sharing. The essence of religious faith is altruism. One lives to convey compassion to others.

As a further consequence, Shinran overcame the manipulative, oppressive, religious fears that attend Japanese folk religion. He noted that the gods bow down and worship the person of trust rather than people being fearful of angry spirits or deities and supplicating them. In this he was in line with a long tradition in Buddhism which has been often overshadowed by Buddhism's own involvement in folk religious practices. He is important in our day to counteract the uncritical, often frenetic, or fanatic, adherence to religious leaders claiming some special religious status or powers. Shinran never claimed to be anything more than a stubble-haired common person, neither a priest nor a layman.

Stumbling on Shin teaching in my religious search, I experienced personally the liberating effect of his teaching. It is for this reason that I believe strongly that Shin Buddhism has a greater potential in American society than has yet been reached because of its own historical conditions both in Japan and in America. If these limitations can be transcended so that the spirit of Shinran can freely express itself, there is an important role for Shin Buddhism in the future religious development of this culture.

Shinran was not moralistic, legalistic, authoritarian or elitist.

1. Within the Western context, I see Shinran's understanding of Amida as a significant alternative to belief in God as it has been developed in Christian tradition. Rather than a self-existent Creator God, separate from the creation and the world of human beings, Amida in contrast may be viewed as a "deconstructed God" symbolizing cosmic compassion and wisdom and the life force bringing us to enlightenment without the substantialist, metaphysical, objectivistic implications of traditional Christian theology. There is no need to prove the existence of Amida, as there has been of God. Amida is a religious symbol in the deepest sense of the term symbol, which focuses our spiritual vision on the ontological implications of our own being, that we cannot live without interdependence, caring, community, or compassion and love in some measure. He is realized as the depth of our existence.

The recitation of his name, as an element of devotion, is not magical, but a means to focus our attention on the deeper reality of our life. Our language about Amida sounds theistic, but anthropomorphism is involved in religious expression universally, because the human person is the highest reality that we know. But Buddhism warns us not to identify substantively our human conceptions, generated through egoistic concerns, with the ultimate nature of reality which is beyond conception and speech. Shin Buddhism counters the boot strap philosophy of life, but without theism seen as the ultimate principle. Where Christianity, as a result of its history, became cosmological in orientation, Buddhism, particularly Shin, is ontological. Buddhism and Shin do not intend to make a statement about the nature of the world, but to offer a perspective for evaluating life, human relations and the meaning of existence.

2. The philosophical background of Shin Buddhism lies in the non-dualistic Mahayana Buddhist tradition. In this context, Shin overcomes the rigid distinctions in Western religion between flesh and spirit, sacred and secular, and science and religion.

3. An important outcome of Shinran's insight was the nature of community. He established what is known as "dobodogyo" community, despite the influence of the hierarchical, ancestral orientation of Japanese society and religion. He offered spiritual equality to all people and rejected the use of the term disciple, saying that he did not have even one disciple, and he set aside the ancestral orientation declaring that he never said Nembutsu once for the sake of his parents and showing that we are all one, having been

mother, father, brother, sister etc. to each other through many many lives. He was egalitarian, and universalistic. There is a passage in the "Kyogyoshinsho," his major work, which states concisely his spiritual insight into the nature of faith which transcends all forms of human distinctions (Daishinkai). If the implications of this passage were carried out, Shin Buddhism would be a healing and reconciling force in the community in dealing with our ethnic, gender and sexual identity problems, though they did not exist in such a clear form in Shinran's time.

Conclusion

Shinran and Shin Buddhism offer a comprehensive understanding of religious existence with a cosmic-universal view of reality, a deep understanding of the condition of the self, a basis for religious experience and a foundation for meaningful existence.

Shin Buddhism is, therefore, a source for healing in society. Its realistic view of self embraced by unconditional compassion inspires self-acceptance and its correlate acceptance of others. It is a faith of reconciliation, transcending socially imposed distinctions, creating a fellowship of companions on the way. Shinran's teaching does not support repressive, competitive, moralistic, legalistic or authoritarian attitudes and structures in religion. It opposes exploitive, oppressive religious beliefs and practices, offering freedom from religious fears and removes the basis for ego-aggression based on certain types of religious beliefs. Shinran's way in modern society has the unique potential to bring healing to a fragmented and despairing world, if his spirit can become real within the community that proclaims his teaching.