

## Chapter 9

### *Life as Story (Part 2)*

The course of Shinran's life shows that he did not pass over his experience lightly. He reveals himself as existentially authentic and responsible when he attempted to explore that experience for its meaning for religion and for the direction it could give to his way of life. He did not merely attempt to excuse himself for his indolence and weakness, but he took these traits as signs of a greater truth. For him, his existential redirection became a pointer to a new understanding of Buddhism, and of its relation to ordinary people. He drew universal meaning from his experience and initiated a new era for Buddhism and, perhaps, for world religion. It is from such a perspective that, if we are to understand his thought as something more than mere repetitions of traditional assertions, we must grasp Shinran's experience. In his book "Naturalness," Rev. Kanamatsu states a point which is essential for this:

"When doctrine ceases to be regarded as something external to one's inner experience, it becomes at once the living principle of conduct; and when conduct is released from constraint or obstruction and becomes the free and natural movement of the spirit, joy expresses itself through everyday work."

Shinran's recognition of the depth of evil in man is significant as such a living principle of conduct, a recognition of the absolute bondage that, once acknowledged, leads to limitless spiritual freedom.

Shinran's thought, though based on an awareness of evil in the self, does not lead to a morbid, guilty reflection on one's sins. The counter or co-awareness of one's evil nature (*bonno*) is the sense of being illumined and embraced in Amida's grace and compassion. In effect, Shinran's sense of sin is positive because it is mediated through Amida's compassion. Historically, in the evolution of Buddhist thought, Shinran carried forward Zendo's doctrine of two types of deep faith — that of our sin and that of Amida's compassion, in such a way that for the Shinshu follower, the profound awareness of evil opens us to the embrace of compassion.

Shinran's recognition of our evil natures as the unifying bond among beings has the social consequence of removing excessive pride and arrogance from our personal relations. It increases our ability to accept others as they are, when we know what we truly are. There are ethical and social implications that are similar to, and yet critically different from the contemporary phrase: "I'm alright, you're alright," which has a point in showing that the

acceptance of others results from proper self-acceptance. It might be better put for Shinran: "I'm evil, you're evil, we're all evil together."

Shinran's perspective goes beyond the contemporary view of transactional analysis because it understands that true relations with others arise when we realize that all our actions are infected by our ego-concern. Once we recognize this, we can approach conflict and misunderstanding knowing that we too have contributed to it as much as has our opponent. With such awareness, we will be more disposed to seek mutual understanding, rather than self-justification. We will seek conciliation, rather than blame. Blame, aggression, guilt and hatred, as well as fear, vanish with such a mutual quest in conflict resolution. As the awareness of evil opens to the awareness of compassion, there is a liberation and freeing of the spirit. Anxiety for the future is resolved. Our lives are freed to develop the potential latent in them, in a process of actualization in which our focus shifts from our weaknesses to our strengths. We can then respond to life more freely.

In his total redirection of Pure Land Buddhism through his existential awareness, Shinran swept away all forms of religious legalism. He displaced the repressive practices of traditional Buddhism, and his emphasis on the motive of gratitude as a response to Amida's compassion provides the basis for an ethic which responds to life to the degree we experience its grace. In effect, Shinran's religion is a religion that attacks even religion, though this is a little stressed element in his thought. However, when one considers his criticism of "poisoned good," and his awareness of how people constantly put on a pose of good while they are evil inside, we see that he was acutely sensitive to the dimensions of religious hypocrisy in himself and his times. What he aims at is the demolition of every complacency, every self-satisfaction, even to the pretensions and egoistic desires we cultivate in religion. In the history of Buddhism, there may never have been a more iconoclastic person. Early in the Zen tradition, the Buddhist iconoclast I Hsuan had urged killing Buddha, or parents, or patriarchs. But Shinran urges "Kill yourself" — that self which you put on as a pose for others to see and regard. Or, to put it better, "let it be killed, let it die." The question for all of us today is, can we bear his challenge?

Our age is one which has stressed self-reliance, particularly in the capitalistic societies of the planet. We Americans exalt the myth of pulling oneself up by the boot straps, and this myth has distorted our personal, social and national life. The reality of the matter is that we all depend on others in some way for our existence. The myth of self-perfection and achievement blinds us to the exploitation and oppression of others, which we bring on them when we do not recognize how they support our lives. In its absolute dimensions expressed by Shinran, the

concept of “other power” is extremely important. In its deepest meaning, “other power” indicates the fact that our lives are not self-contained or isolated from the totality of reality. Our limited, bounded lives point beyond themselves to a wider reality symbolized as Amida, as all encompassing light and life and compassion. Jiriki — self power — is by contrast a short-sighted view resulting from, and in, alienation and egocentrism.

Perhaps the terminology Shinran uses may not appear meaningful to contemporary men and women. It is necessary to transpose his concept of evil and imperfection to contemporary meaning. Perhaps we can view it from the standpoint of Michael Novak’s book, “Experience of Nothingness.”

According to Novak, the experience of Nothingness is that empty feeling one has when suddenly he is confronted with the vanity, futility or absurdity of one’s everyday life. Such an experience of nothingness, if entered courageously, carries one to new depths of awareness. The alienation, aloneness and absurdity that expresses itself in traditional religion’s concept of sinfulness is brought home through a perception of the superficiality of our contemporary values and our modern way of life. Man stands exposed in the modern world without supports for his life, which he pursues out of habit, egoism, custom, duty, or the simple fear of changing. Such life has lost all reason or purpose. It is indeed alienated, full of anxieties, fearful, lonely, despairing and existentially absurd. There is a spiritual vacuum, or loss of meaning, an aching inner void against which we must continually apply the placebos of material gains and success, the myth of individualism, the illusion of self perfection, the delusion of self reliance. Such a world, unlike that of Shinran’s inner dimensions, is psychologically unreal.

When Shinran experienced such emptiness at the end of his long period on Mount Hiei, it drove him to questioning and decision. From that questioning, he finally broke through to a new life. As I have probed the materials concerning Shinran’s life and thought for this study, I have become more and more aware of the historical complications involved in attempting to determine the precise point of his conversion, whether it was in Yoshimizu during his association with Honen, or later in the Kanto area when he began his work among the people in that distant province. There are complications in trying to discover and clarify the various threads of influence on his thought, whether it was the Hongaku Hommon (the concept of Primordial Enlightenment) thought of Tendai, the Ichinengi (one thought) principle of Kosai, or “Lotus Sutra” and Prajna (wisdom) influences circulating in the Kanto area and emanating from Kanto Tendai sources. Nevertheless, all scholars agree that from this environment

Shinran fashioned a distinctive way of thought and life which has attained historical durability and religious importance even when the contributing streams of influence have long been forgotten.

The style of life which Shinran manifested is summed up in the phrase “Hisohizoku” — “neither priest nor layman.” Shinran used this term in the “Kyogyoshinsho” when he related the event of his going into exile with the disciples of Honen in 1206. He wrote:

“Hereupon, scholars of the Kofukuji temple presented a petition to the Throne in early spring in the Hinotono-u year of Shogen, during the reign of the Ex-Emperor Gotoba-in (Takanari by name) or the reign of Emperor Tsuchimikado-in (Tamehito by name). Lords and vassals who opposed the Law and justice bore indignation and resentment (to the Nembutsu teaching). Thus, Master Genku, the great promulgator of the True Teaching, and his disciples were, without proper investigation of their crime, indiscriminately sentenced to death, deprived of their priesthood and exiled under criminals’ names. I was one of them. I am neither a priest nor a layman; hence, I surnamed myself ‘Toku’. Master Genku and his disciples spent five years in remote countries in exile.” [1]

The “Tannisho” contains a similar notation, added at the end:

“Shinran was stripped of priesthood and given a layman’s name. Hence, he was neither a priest nor a layman. Thus, he surnamed himself ‘Toku’ (short haired) and was reported to the Throne by this name. The judicial report is still preserved at the recording office. So it is said, after the exile he called himself ‘Gutoku Shinran’.”

The essential meaning of these passages is that Shinran was defrocked and returned to a layman’s status by the state. We are told in other texts that he was given the name Fujii Yoshizane. However, in this event, the new status was a penalty for a crime and, therefore, as far as society was concerned, he was neither a true monk nor a proper layman. He was banished from the scholastic, more intellectually oriented society of Kyoto into the difficult existence of struggling for survival in a hostile environment far distant from his familiar associations.

For Shinran, exile must have been a demanding and sometimes dispiriting situation. In his book, “Zettai Kie no Hyogen,” Prof. Bando indicates that Shinran’s life in exile was not as severe as that of Nichiren, since Shinran was cared for by Lord Kanezane, and since Honen’s teachings had been spread in the Kanto region. Nevertheless, the experience of disruption

from the temple environment of Kyoto provided Shinran with the opportunity to continue to explore his 35-year course of searching for enlightenment. The new perspective of Hisohizoku and Gutoku opened for Shinran a new sphere of inquiry into the true meaning of the Nembutsu.

It was during this period of his exile that Shinran married. The number of his marriages and the conditions surrounding them are not really known. In modern times, all Buddhist priests may marry. In Shinran's day, such a departure was regarded as the breaking of precepts and was a difficult thing to do, though there are examples of priests with either wives or concubines in the periods before and contemporary with that of Shinran.

Terada Yakichi, in his work "Shinran's Philosophy and Faith," emphasizes the great advance Shinran made at this point in the development of Mahayana Buddhism. He notes that while on the doctrinal level Shinran clarified and purified the concept of "easy practice," [2] his greatest achievement came in dealing with the mode of life of a Nembutsu follower. Based on the doctrine that the salvation of the evil person was the object of Amida's Vow, Shinran was able to overcome the limits of traditional Mahayana teaching and practice. He showed that essentially the priest and layman were one, or, to put it in his terms, in true Mahayana practice, there is neither priest nor layman. From Shinran on, there was to be no difference in everyday life between the way of the priest and that of the layman. We may say that in this, Shinran transcended the dualism remaining in Buddhist practice and gave social reality to the principle that all beings have Buddha nature.

Terada sees the basis for Shinran's outlook in the words of Nagarjuna, who stressed in the "Daichidoron" that within lust, anger, and ignorance, there is the way of the Buddha. In this vein, Shinran himself in the "Kyogyoshinsho," stated, "I am drowned in the sea of lust." The decisive events of Shinran's exile, marriage, family and his experience of ordinary lay life had great significance for Shinran's spiritual development. His comments and writings show that the crushing experience of his exile, though unjust and painful, permitted him to see more deeply into real life and spiritual truth. Shinran's accounts of his earlier experiences indicate that he was unusually sensitive to the events of his life, and his thought reflects his seriousness in trying to understand his life's meaning. Though he uses the term "Hisohizoku" only once himself to describe his condition, the association of the term Toku, "bald headed one," with this state, and his taking this as a title, is evidence that the phrase depicts his approach to life. From that point, he called himself Gutoku, a foolish, ignorant, bald headed person.

The phrase Hisohizoku, “neither priest nor layman,” suggests that there was no category by which to define his existence. All of us define ourselves by some categories which relate us to other beings. We are male or female, a citizen or foreigner, a teacher or student, a parent or child, a friend or enemy. It would be hard to conceive what we would be if we were neither one nor the other.

Though it may only be a conjecture, the phrase Hisohizoku seems to me to have the form of the double negation of Buddhist dialectic. It suggests that the meaning of existence does not derive from the labels applied by the world and society, but from the higher perspective of spiritual reality. It might, of course, be argued that Shinran’s terms are accidental. However, he did not say “I am both layman and priest” or “I am half priest and half layman” or “I am not a priest, but a layman.” Since he had felt strongly about the injustice of the state action in its persecution of his teacher, Honen, and in the state’s banishment of Honen and his followers, Shinran might just as well have said, “I am really a priest, despite your laws and punishment.” There were numerous possibilities for him in choosing terms to describe his condition, but he chose this particular form of statement, this particular phrase. His statement at once says nothing, since he had to be something and yet, on the other hand, it says a great deal, if we see it from the standpoint of the totality of his experience and thought.

Following the dialectic of “Neither Being nor Non-being,” Shinran in his new sense of himself as Hisohizoku abolishes all human distinctions as having no relevance to faith:

“As I contemplate the ocean-like Great Faith, I see that it does not choose between the noble and the man, the priest and the layman, nor does it discriminate between man and woman, old and young. The amount of sin committed is not questioned, and the length of practice is not discussed. It is neither ‘practice’ nor ‘good,’ neither ‘abrupt’ nor ‘gradual,’ neither ‘meditative’ nor ‘non-meditative,’ neither ‘right meditation’ nor ‘wrong meditation.’” [3]

Shinran’s banishment from society by a discriminating state opened the door to a new way of being in the world, to the awareness of an existential reality beyond the imposed and relative social categories of common life. Faith, truth, and meaning, from Shinran’s perspective, do not depend on social distinctions arising from our various accidental fortunes in the world. In the experience of exile, in the voiding of his life as he had known it for 35 years, Shinran’s teaching developed in close relation to the people of the eastern provinces. They were unlettered, hardworking people of the land. His teachings, developed through his experiences with them, are singular in not evidencing class implications, since faith is an universal gift.

In Shinshu, the believer's spiritual status is equal to that of Buddha. Neither social status, intellectual achievement, or spiritual virtue is the basis of religious community. Shinran declared: "I have not even one disciple." [4] All and each are disciples of Buddha alone. They are not Shinran's possession, Shinran's human relations were all horizontal, the level of equality. Shinran identified himself with his disciple's experiences as illustrated in the conversation between Shinran and Yuiembo in "Tannisho," chapter 9. He addressed his followers with honorific language, indicating great respect. Always, in every instance, Shinran stood with — not above — his followers.

To highlight the distinctiveness of Shinran's perspective more sharply, we should observe that the status and role of the layman has always been a problem in Buddhist history. Initially, a Buddhist was a homeless one, a Shukke. He had left home, following the example of Gautama, to seek enlightenment. Monks were the true Buddhists. Laymen could only gain merit through supporting them. In the course of time, there were tendencies to liberalization, and efforts to relax the rule. In Mahayana Buddhism, the layman achieved greater recognition. In the "Lotus Sutra," the naga girl becomes Buddha, while the layman Vimalakirti understands Buddhism better than monks. The "Nirvana Sutra" taught that all being without exception possess Buddha nature in contrast to the idea of *Ichchantika* which proposes there are people who are considered unsalvageable because of their lack of any seed of Buddha nature. Butchers, murderers, tanners, prostitutes were among those in this category of people in Buddhist teaching.

Until Shinran, Buddhism for the most part remained a two-level religion. There was a special way for monks and ways for the layperson with the status for the layperson generally lower. Such people had a long way to go through many rebirths to fulfill their spiritual potential. In Shinran's teaching, this second class status of the layperson was completely swept aside through the recognition that Amida's absolute compassion could not recognize such distinctions. All are recipients equally of Amida's non-discriminating light.

When we consider Shinran's deliberate use of *Gutoku*, it appears his was more than a casual acknowledgment of ignorance or humility. He indicates that he took on that term specifically in view of his experience of social rejection and punishment. He took society's rejection into himself, and made it the pointer for his own approach to life. Through society's rejection, he was freed from social expectation and role fulfillment. Being thus relieved of his imposed labels, he could find himself — he made his own label. He changed from an Other-directed person to an Inner-directed. Prof. Futaba in his "Shinran no Kenkyu" [5] has suggested that

monk meant for Shinran the official monk conforming to law and precept as laid down by the state. On the other hand, the concept of layperson which Shinran rejected may be reflected in the phrase where he calls upon the monks and laypeople of the age to take stock of themselves, in the “Kyogyoshinsho.” [6] Among those he calls upon in this passage are many laypeople who oppress and who have authority, or who strive for fame and status. In essence, in each category — monk and lay — there is some degree of power.

The term Gutoku may well symbolize Shinran’s decision to accept powerlessness as the basis of his life, and in that fashion to achieve true power. Though seemingly ineffectual and inconsequential to society in his powerlessness, it was this very fact that gave him power and influence with the also powerless common people. Knowing powerlessness himself, knowing the drive of passion, he could share their experience and bring them hope from his own resource of faith and compassion. It was this that gave rise to the community of comrades in the Dharma, and this that still holds potential for Shin Buddhism in the world today.

The question may be raised whether we have not read too much into these terms. However, we must assume that when Shinran specifically calls attention to them, and the tradition has reiterated them, there must have been a significance beyond their ordinary meaning. As an example, we could cite the thought of Motoori Morinaga, a national learning scholar of the last 18th century in Japan, who seriously criticized Buddhism. He wrote:

“But the human sentiment of monks does not differ from that of laymen simply because they have become monks; for monks are neither all incarnations of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, nor can they, short of achieving enlightenment, rid themselves completely of the defilement of worldly life.” [7]

In this passage, Morinaga indicates there is no essential difference between monks and laypersons. He eventually concludes that monks are not sincere in repressing their human feelings. Shinran must have meant this and more when he rejected the distinction of monk and layperson.

That the term Gutoku points to some awareness deeper than formal humility is perhaps suggested by the passage in the “Tannisho” where Yuienbo quotes Shinran as contrasting the self-power compassion with the Other-power or Pure Land Compassion. That passage reflects the sense of human limitation which attends all our efforts, the sense of human limitation making it impossible to do all that we would aspire to do. Is this not a direct reading of the Gutoku experience? When we have set out to contrive to fulfill our goals, thinking that we will



do it, we always fall short. Gutoku then is a reminder of our shortcomings and powerlessness, our weakness and ineffectuality, but it also directs us beyond ourselves to the ultimate source and fulfillment of compassionate aspiration. It is a sign of hope rather than despair when it shapes our attitudes to self and others.

Much of the foregoing is abstract and dialectical, but serious religious thinking is always that way when dealing with issues of the deepest realities. The questions go beyond words and concepts. The answers find only stumbling expression. For many people, there is one question always raised: Is it practical? I believe it is. Here we must not confuse the context of what we are saying. To a self-conscious person, dominated by external standards in defining his life, the Gutoku experience may merely reinforce the sense of inferiority and negativity one carries within himself or herself. To the self-aware person, whose inner life has been aroused through a deep impulse of faith, and who sees through the domination of external circumstances, the Gutoku experience is one of self-understanding which permits hope but limits expectation; which reduces arrogance and insistence; which is open and sharing. Gutoku experienced in this way is the basis of true egolessness — the age long ideal of Buddhism from its beginning in India. It is the true Middle Path which by accepting the ego as it is with its sensed limitations, becomes actual egolessness. It is the bondage that, acknowledged, results in a freedom that can indeed be defined as salvation — having been saved from oneself.

There will be much contemporary resistance to this type of perspective which focuses on the weakness and limitations we have in modern America. Several years ago in Japan, there was a controversy in the Diet [Japanese National Assembly] when one leader said Japan must be *Jiriki* (self power) and not *Tariki* (other power). *Tariki*, said the proponents of self power, is a sign of weakness. In America likewise, we have strong emphasis on individual initiative and power. The modern American man or woman is supposed to have self-confidence, and minimize his or her weaknesses. It takes considerable insight to recognize that in weakness there may be strength. Lao-tzu pointed out that water, as the softest and weakest element, was also the strongest. Similarly, we are all aware of the comparison of the mighty oak which is blown over by the wind, while the supple young tree or grass merely sways in the wind. When we come to understand the power that lies in weakness, we can become truly self-aware persons for whom the Gutoku experience of Shinran provides an inspiring model.

*Hisohizoku-Gutoku* points to the core of Shinran's way of life where, through transcending categories, we become free to allow true compassion to flow into the world. For Shinran, the basis of human existence is this transcendence and in this context, the Shinshu life is a life of

gratitude where religion is not an exercise and effort in achievement, but a recognition of blessing received and obligation accepted.

## **Bibliography**

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Unno, Taitetsu: "Tannisho: A Shin Buddhist Classic"

## **Notes**

[1] "Kyogyoshinsho," Ryukoku Translation Series Sono Montei, pp 32-35, 58-61

[2] Easy practice correlates to Difficult practice. These terms are used in Pure Land teaching to distinguish the variety of disciplines in general Buddhism, such as meditation, precepts and austerities, from the practice of reciting Nembutsu. They contrast the more available way to rebirth and enlightenment for laypeople and the monastic way open to the more religiously adept people. The distinction is attributed to Nagarjuna's teaching presented in the section on Easy Practice in his reputed commentary to a portion of the "Avatamsaka Sutra."

[3] "Kyogyoshinsho," Ryukoku Translation Series V, p. 113

[4] "Tannisho," p. 6

[5] Kenko Futaba, "Shinran no Kenkyu," p. 124

[6] "Kyogyoshinsho," Ryukoku Translation Series, p. 202

[7] Wm. Theodore DeBary, "Sources of Japanese Tradition," p. 539