

Chapter 12

The Metaphysical Structure of Shinshu

In interpreting Shinran's thought thus far, we have emphasized his religious experience and its apparent intensity and decisiveness. We have tried to follow its consequences in his altered style of life and transformed religious thought, together with its implications for our own approach to life and daily affairs. We have been theological and abstract in tracing the configurations of his thought, but at the same time we have tried to keep constantly in mind that Shinran's thought is eminently practical and can provide a life orientation. As yet, however, we have said little of the philosophical foundations in Buddhist tradition from which Shinran drew. We did not mean to neglect that aspect. Rather, by placing it at this point in our exploration of Shin Buddhism and the nature and validity of the religious quest in our Mappo era, we wanted to suggest that Shinran had an experience which then sought philosophical understanding.

Shinran's religious experience loses intensity and drama when it is considered only as arising from contact with Buddhist teachings — for example, from the reading of a sutra or text. To the contrary, his thought gains in universal importance because it arose from a sensitized awareness of the true nature of man. Shinran did not merely contemplate ideas. Rather, he confronted himself and as a consequence, had to seek a new path.

Naturally, all aspects of his involvement in the Buddhism of his day stimulated him and ultimately shaped his understanding. The "Jinenhonisho" to which we will presently refer came from the latest period of his life. This suggests that his thought constantly took shape in the light of his continuing experience and problems. It is clear from the historical materials we possess that Shinran was not simply a religious pragmatist, unaware of the nature of the ideas that he proposed. His thought evidences a philosophical perspective, and he is particularly rooted in the nondual-voidness philosophy of Buddhism from which he developed an understanding of the concept of Reality that is of great significance both in theory and practice.

In emphasizing the philosophical quality of Shinran's thought we should understand in our day of social and cultural upheaval that unless people develop a philosophical perspective on existence, they will only be buffeted by the forces surging about them, unable to understand or effectively participate. Americans are not a notably philosophical people — they are more

pragmatic and interested only in results. They care less for the wider grounds of thought in religion than for the good feeling or consolation that may be gained from it.

In order to catch the flavor of Shinran's philosophical insight and perspective, I would like to focus briefly on the "Jinenhonisho" which he wrote in his 86th or 88th year. Though it is very brief, it is his most philosophical expression. Incisive with understanding, it came from long years of religious reflection.

"When we speak of 'Nature' (Jinen), the character Ji means 'naturally' by itself (Onozukara). It is not (the result of) an intention (self assertion or Hakarai) of the devotee. Nen is a word which means to 'cause to come about' (shikarashimu). Shikarashimu (also signifies that it) is not (due to any) effort (Hakarai) of the devotee. Since it is (the result of) the Vow of the Tathagata, we call it Honi i.e., truth. We say of Honi that it 'causes to come about' because it is the Vow of the Tathagata. Since the truth is the Vow of the Tathagata, we say generally that it is not (the result of) the effort of the devotee, and therefore, the power (virtue) of this Dharma is that it 'causes to be'. For the first time, there is nothing to be done by man. This is what we should understand as 'the reason which is beyond reason' (Mugi-no-Gi). Originally Jinen was a word meaning 'to cause to be.' We say Jinen when the devotee does not consider his goodness or evil, in accordance with the fact that Amida has vowed originally (that salvation was to be attained) not by the efforts of the devotee, but by being embraced and caused to rely on the Namu Amida Butsu (his name). In the Vow which we hear, it is vowed that he will cause us (to attain) the highest Buddhahood. 'Highest Buddhahood' signifies to abide in formlessness. Because we are without form, we say Jinen (Nature). When we indicate that there is a form, we do not speak of the highest Nirvana. We heard and learned for the first time that the one who makes known formlessness is called Amida. Amida is the means by which we are caused to know formlessness. After we understand this principle, we should not constantly discuss Jinen (Nature). If we constantly discuss it, the principle that 'what is beyond reason is reason' is made (to conform to) reason. This is the mystery of Buddha-wisdom." [1]

Although scholars have written much about the concept of jinenhoni and have analyzed the text written by Shinran in various ways, there has been little attempt to apply the concept concretely to contemporary life. As a Buddhist term, the idea was not original with Shinran, but he did open up some new possibilities in interpreting it that are relevant to our present considerations. In terms of the broader context, Shinran defines Nature (Jinen), emphasizing its dynamic aspect in the word shikarashimu, "to cause to be of itself." The term suggests an organic view of Nature as a living reality in contrast to a purely mechanical system as

represented either in the system of cause-effect of Buddhism or in the modern scientific system. Nature, as presented here, brings things into being spontaneously þ that is, of itself þ without intention or cause. It is the ultimate order, because it is not worked upon or affected by anything outside itself. This understanding of Nature contrasts somewhat with the nuance in the traditional Buddhist concept of Tathata, or “suchness.” Tathata is more static when it is defined as purity and tranquility.

The idea of Nature as the context, basis, and dynamic of man’s life in Shinran’s thought is supported in modern thought by studies in quantum mechanics and the newly awakened concern with ecology, which deals with the relations of humanity and its total environment. No small part of this interest arises from the problems of pollution and conservation that civilized people, in their self-assertion against reality, have themselves created. In the ecological relation, human beings are an integral part of the reality of Nature, and all Nature is integral to the life of sentient beings. The spiritual significance of this relationship is to develop an ethic in which people do not impose their will on the balance required to maintain life for all. We must survive, supporting our own existence, but not at the expense of everything else.

The generally objective scheme of Macro-Nature as presented by science assumes a system of cause and effect. In Shinran’s thought, the philosophical understanding of Nature is the basis of religious existence. So far as we are a part of that system, we have a fate. When Nature is viewed as external to ourselves, over and against us, it is Nature in its alienated state. In this context, we may feel oppressed by Nature. We may have to struggle against it, and may live with fear and anxiety in reaction to its irrational and erratic activities. Or (and this appears as the modern alternative) we may learn to manipulate it and subordinate it to human purposes, in which case it is we who become alienated.

The Nature that appears in Shinran’s thought is the process within which we live and which gives us life. When we subjectively become aware of Nature in its spiritual dimension, we find harmony for our existence and emancipation from the anxieties of finitude in a non-alienated Nature whose being is our being. Though we are not unaware of the erratic and dangerous aspects of Nature, spiritual meaning is drawn from its life-supporting and life-enhancing features.

Shinran did not simply consider the process of Nature in and for itself. Rather, we see in the text that he moves to a consideration of the activity of truth, Honi. He sees a parallel between the spontaneous activity of Nature and the process of deliverance in the Vow of Amida. By relating the process of Nature to Amida’s vows, Shinran established the certainty of faith on a

firm basis. The working of Amida's Vow, in Shinran's thought, is a mythical statement of the process of Nature.

This fundamental insight manifested by Shinran was not derived simply from sacred texts and traditions, but was, perhaps, grounded in tradition in the contemplation of Nature itself and the influence of the doctrine of Primordial Enlightenment of the Tendai sect.

The doctrine of Primordial Enlightenment is without beginning or end. It is based on chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra, the basic scripture of the Tendai sect which contrasts the Eternal Sakyamuni with the historical Sakyamuni who lived only 80 years. However, the truth cannot be limited to 80 years. The truth must be eternal. Shinran, having studied Tendai thought, reinterpreted the teaching to apply to Amida Buddha whose name means Eternal Life or Infinite Light. In consequence, for Shinran, Amida Buddha became the ground of reality and the source of deliverance. Amida Buddha is also the symbolization of the all-encompassing process of interdependence which sustains our lives. Shinran's understanding of the concepts of self-power and other power in Pure Land teaching has also been shaped by the perspective of Primordial Enlightenment.

As a consequence of the cosmic understanding of Amida, Shinran revealed the unreality of self-power attitudes and transcended the dichotomy of self-power versus Other-power. An implication of his insight is the fact that our very existence in the world becomes itself a testimony to Other-power. Whatever activities we may carry out in the world, are not done solely through ourselves, but there is an order of things that supports and, in a sense, works through us. The dichotomy of self-power and Other-power is a delusion, since our act is our act and is, at the same time, not our act. Self-power is the expression of alienated being. It is self-contradictory since it proposes to do away with delusion through a delusion. A consequence, then, of Shinran's view of nature is to provide a pervasive deep awareness of cosmic process as the foundation of religious faith.

It is most likely that Shinran focused his attention on this term, Jinen-Nature, as a result of his deepened understanding of human nature. He observed that because of his passions and the ignorance and delusion they create, human beings cannot on their own, overcome the fundamental alienation that separates them from reality. This being the case, the source of deliverance must be other than beings as such. The more sharply Shinran felt this alienation, the more he became aware of the power of reality that strives to overcome the alienation. Here we see a dialectic between the perception of imperfection and the perception of absolute compassion and purity to counter that imperfection. Only in knowing ourselves as we truly

are can we truly become aware that there is a power in the depth of reality that seeks to liberate us from our ego bondage and delusions. Penetrating that reality, Shinran came to realize that we are in reality, and reality is in us.

Deliverance can only be achieved on the basis of an identity between human beings and Buddha. The reason for this is that perfection could only be achieved by perfection. For beings to be able to become pure, they must have the potential of purity within them. This potential does not reside in the passion and ignorance that constitute experienced human existence. Beyond this there is a dialectic in which our passions and delusion make us think of Buddha as other than and outside ourselves, when in reality he is the ground and essence of our existence. The deliverance of Pure Land Buddhism is in coming to experience this non-duality. Here Shinran took very seriously, as the basis of his theory of salvation, the central Mahayana belief that all beings possess Buddha nature which is realized through faith. As a result of this view, Shinran overcame the tendency to a dualistic approach to Pure Land thought on the popular level.

The Buddhistic understanding of the fundamental identity between beings and Buddha, (ki-ho-ittai) the perception of which is enlightenment or deliverance, reveals a keen insight into the problem of alienation. Alienation implies a separation, an estrangement of being. If one assumes the finality of dualism as the basic structure of being in the sense of a chasm between God and humanity þ as in Christianity þ then alienation cannot be truly overcome since there is an alienation built into reality. It is noticeable in Christian theology, which maintains a discontinuity between God and humanity, that somewhere in the system it is necessary to posit some identity. Hence, God incarnates; he joins himself to humanity. Paul Tillich attempted to deal with this problem and spoke of God as the ground of being. Thus alienation is not ultimate and is overcome by a return to the prior and primal union with the source of our own being.

It was Shinran's heightened self-awareness which led him to perceive the unity necessary to deliverance more deeply — more intensely — so that within the "Jinenhonisho" there is the constant reminder that nothing comes about through man's hakarai, i.e., through his intention, calculation, assertion, or design. Neither Nature nor deliverance depends on us. This is an important idea since it indicates for Shinran that religion is beyond the legalism of good and evil or human manipulation. Deliverance does not depend on living up to an imposed system of prescribed acts. Also, religion is not to be manipulated for human ambition and desire. Pride, anxiety of imperfection, and self-aggrandizement are all rejected. Religion is not a tool.

Not only does deliverance not depend on human capacities or the lack of them, it does not depend on a person's steadiness or wavering. Amida's Vow achieves its goal without obstruction. By rooting deliverance in the process of reality itself, Shinran signifies that truth is beyond the mere opinion or constructions of men. Faith is not merely a person's view of things as a belief, but is itself reality, in which the symbol of Amida opens us to the vision of the Real itself.

Shinran's emphasis on the transcendental aspects of the process of Nature, which brings things about of itself, reflects the unconditioned aspect of Nature. Unconditional Nature limits man's addiction to theory and words, which lead to disputes. The process is a mystery. When it is once glimpsed, one should not press his words to try to analyze or describe it.

We would suggest also that in "Jinenhonisho," Shinran is showing that faith above all has to do with truth þ with reality in its deepest dimensions. Since that is its essence, the knowledge and realization of truth brings deliverance. However, one should seek truth before deliverance. Shinran was willing to risk himself in his perception of truth when he indicated that he did not know as a matter of intellectual certainty whether the Nembutsu was the seed for birth in the Pure Land or in Hell. But as Yuienbo tells us in "Tannisho," having grasped a truth that illuminated his life, Shinran would stand by it.

There are many in our day who regard religion simply as a means of becoming happy or satisfied, or of getting peace of mind. Satisfaction, happiness, peace of mind may well result from religion, and Shinran also speaks of joy and peace and tranquility; nevertheless, these results come about only because one believes that one has perceived the truth. If religion is not first and foremost a search for truth and its realization in life, then it is a vain, self-seeking activity. Hence Shinran titles the "Kyogyoshinsho" in its full name "Kenjodoshinjitsu kyogyo shomonrui" (An Anthology which manifests the True Teaching and Practice of the Pure Land [tradition].)

Some interpreters suggest that the view of Nature and deliverance that Shinran sets forth enables the individual to have joy and peace within tragedy and suffering. We may attain an inward freedom in the recognition that what confronts us is itself reality. With faith in the compassionate essence of reality, we may endure with a quiet peace the troubles and turmoil of life and is enabled to take life as it comes and to respond to events positively. If we do not have truth þ about reality, about man þ there is no way to establish value and dignity. If human life is understood only within the scheme of life established through modern secular studies and science, there is no indication of the value of human personality and life. Science

has not tended to make us more respectful and aware of the value of existence. Science claims to make no value judgments.

The conception of reality offered by Shinran establishes the value of the person, as of all life, in seeing that person as the object of the compassionate aspiration of reality itself. While this view is not itself scientifically demonstrable, nevertheless, it is evidenced as Shinran perceived, through the very way in which Nature supports our life and courses through our being. The meaning of life in this context is that our own being, despite our evils and, indeed, even because of our passion is itself the expression of that compassionate aspiration. Therefore, in everyday life, in our relations to other beings and persons, we should become for them the realization of that compassionate aspiration.

Shinran's religious thought and experience provide basic elements for the construction of a philosophy of existence that is applicable to contemporary problems. Despite the fact that he lived centuries ago, his human experience transcends time and focuses upon the universal problem of man. From within the broad perspective of Buddhist tradition, he offers insight into the fundamental nature of existence and the basis for human action and life in the world upon which all may draw.

Bibliography

Haguri: "Naturalness"

Bloom, Alfred: "Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace," pp. 43-44

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Notes

[1] Translation quoted from A. Bloom, "Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace," pp. 43-44