

Chapter 13

The Traditional Structure of Shinran's Thought

Shinran rooted his teachings in the Pure Land tradition by tracing the lineage of his thought back through seven patriarchs, a system in which he paid special tribute to his immediate teacher Honen, to Shan-tao, and to Sakyamuni himself. The development of Mahayana tradition required that it justify itself over and against the Hinayana Buddhists who believed they had the original teachings of Buddhism. Thus, it is particularly in Mahayana that lineages of the transmission of the teaching were formed. In such a system of lineage, enlightenment is to be transferred as water, from cup to cup without losing a drop.

New aspects or interpretations (as was Shinran's) become possible through the view of this lineage as an evolution of doctrine and thought. Mechanisms for dealing with creative change, and progress in the teaching responding to the times, are not so clear in primitive Buddhism. In this sense, the Pure Land tradition appears to be more open, emphasizing that the teaching must correspond to both the person and the times (*jikisoo*). This sense of the reality of time and its relation to the development of the teaching is due in all probability to the Chinese sense of history, and was a conclusion derived from the observation of the inapplicability of the ideals of Buddhism for the masses in a time of disruption and in ages and places (such as China) long distant from the Buddha. The *hoben*, the means by which the Dharma is brought to all beings, was regarded by the Hinayanaists as a novelty introduced by the founders and developers of Mahayana. In addition, the Mahayanists also formulated an expansion in the number of previous Buddhas in an attempt to show that it was not the truth of Mahayana Buddhism that was a novelty, but that this truth had been given by all the Buddhas of the past, as well as it will be by future Buddhas. The means — *hoben* — of compassion was the Mahayana departure from Hinayana tradition.

Buddhism, wherever it appears, Mahayana or Hinayana, Southeast Asia, Japan or Hawaii, is highly traditional and this traditionalism is one of the factors that makes it difficult for Buddhism to change in the face of modern problems. Although this change factor is specifically a social-institutional question, it suggests a feature which needs to be explored further in relation to Shinran, his thought, and the institutions which have been built on increasingly rigid specifications of the structure of his symbolism, faith and tradition. Shinran's approach to the linkage of his thought in Buddhist tradition has much in common with other schools which have attempted to establish their basis in Buddhist history through a patriarchal

lineage. In the case of Zen, for example, twenty-eight patriarchs are cited from the passing of the flower of Mahakassapa to Bodhidharma. From Bodhidharma there were then counted a series of Chinese patriarchs, of which the most famous was Hui-neng, who is the sixth.

Shinran's perspective, however, has implications which go beyond previous teachers, to be a genuine leap forward to a new perception of truth. These implications are of importance and relevance for our own lives today. Shinran set forth his particular line of tradition in the famous "Shoshinge," (Hymn of True Faith), in the Practice volume of the "Kyogyoshinsho," and in his hymns composed in praise of the patriarchs in the "Kosowasan." The "Shoshinge" was later published separately by Rennyo and spread widely in Japan. Its publication popularized the tradition through its concentrated and clear outlining of the essentials of Shinshu.

When we compare the general idea of the development of Pure Land teaching as represented in Honen's "Senchaku-Nembutsushu," we see simply that the Pure Land critical classification of doctrine grew out of a series of distinctions, each provided by one of the teachers and brought to completion by Shan tao. In this tradition Nagarjuna reputedly distinguished two paths in Buddhism; the difficult and the easy. Vasubandhu contributed the principle of single-mindedness. T'an-luan made a distinction of self power and Other Power, while Tao-ch'ao introduced the terms Sage Path or Way of Saints and Pure Land Gate. Shan-tao brought the many threads of consideration together to formulate a system focusing on the practice of Nembutsu and the appropriate attitudes which should accompany it. He distinguished clearly the practices offered to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as mixed and as right practices those offered only to Amida Buddha. The recitation of Nembutsu became the right practice among all other right practices. Others were assisting practices. Then, with Honen, this right practice became the Senju or sole practice. The assisting practices were now excluded by Honen.

Through such an evolution, the principle of vocal recitation as the means for achieving rebirth and enlightenment in the Pure Land was reached. Such interpretations strengthened the impact of Pure Land thought on the masses, for this was considered as the way of easy practice which the non-scholar, the non-intellectual, the householder living the everyday life, could follow. The earlier understanding of Nembutsu had been that it was merely one possible way for people lacking the capacity for more profound discipline, but with Honen's affirmation of the practice as the only way, a fundamental change in the attitude towards Nembutsu practice occurred. It became absolute — the only way not just for inferior people, but for everyone.

With Shinran, the focus of attention changed, partly due to his own intellectual capacity and the nature of his experience, and perhaps also from criticism arising from other schools. In traditional Buddhism, the basis of Buddhist practice was rooted in the aspiration for enlightenment; the arousing of a mind to seek bodhi, the bodhi-citta. The model was Gautama, who — before he left his father's palace — had become aroused to seek enlightenment through his observation of illness, old age, and death, the suffering of humankind, the reality from which his father had tried to shield him. The awareness that all this would in time, or perhaps at any moment with illness or death, happen to him too, spurred Gautama to leave home, leave his position in life, and as a wandering ascetic, to seek enlightenment. In many biographies of later famous Buddhist monks, similar conditions are depicted which led to their embarking on serious Buddhist practice. Such situations as were manifest in the pattern of Prince Siddhartha Gautama's decision become the turning point whereby the individual makes a decisive resolution to seek Buddhahood.

Later, in the development of Pure Land Buddhism, Shan tao correlated the practice of Nembutsu to the attitudes and motives validating that practice. He indicated that the principle of anjin, or faith, (literally, "quieting the heart") meant to have three minds: the sincere mind, the deep mind, and a mind desiring to be born in the Pure Land with transfer of merit to that end. In addition, Shan tao outlined a variety of attitudes relating to the way in which the various practices were to be carried out, so that while there was now a practice available to the common man to achieve rebirth, he had to have the appropriate spiritual or attitudinal motivation to be able to effectuate that Nembutsu.

With Honen, another shift took place. Whereas the various minds had to accompany the Nembutsu for Shan tao, for Honen they were not at all consciously necessary. Rather, they would arise naturally out of the constant practice of the Nembutsu. To many people of his time, Honen appeared to reject the basic Buddhist principle of bodhi-citta and those aspects which would maintain Nembutsu as a truly spiritual practice.

It is at this point that Shinran offered his contribution. From his own experience, he recognized with Honen that one cannot ever be sure that he is sincere, that he has sufficient faith or, as in the case with Yuienbo's lack of desire for Pure Land, [1] that one can really overcome his attachment to this world. Hence, to require these aspects of mind, even though the practice was simple and easy, was still to place considerable obstacles in front of the common man and shut him off from Amida's compassion and the assurance of salvation. Also perceived by Shinran was the fact that the foundation of Buddhism lies in a deep spiritual resolve and

motivation to attain rebirth or enlightenment. He synthesized his two insights by maintaining that in a mysterious way, through hearing Amida Buddha's name and becoming aware of his compassion, faith is aroused — a faith which is not based on human contrivance, but a faith which wells up because it is in fact a gift of Amida to the person. It is the transfer of his True Mind to the person; the process of which is the Buddha-nature which is in us, the potential to become Buddha with which each living being is endowed, being awakened within us.

Thus Shinran describes the mind which aspires for birth in the Pure Land not as a self-generated faith, but as a spontaneous faith, naturally arising in our minds. It is this which gives rise to the practice of Nembutsu as the response of gratitude for this gift of faith aroused in a spontaneous, natural way through Amida Buddha's compassion. Consequently, in the preface to his volume on Faith, Shinran writes:

“As I contemplate matters, I see that the acquirement of Serene Faith arises out of the Tathagata's Selected Vow, and that the awakening of True Mind is made possible by the compassionate, skillful means of the Great Sage.” [2]

Later, in discussing the issue of the three minds, Shinran notes that each of these minds itself, is a gift of Amida:

“The Tathagata endows His Sincere Mind to the sea of all the multitudinous beings filled with evil passions” [3]

“The essence of the Serene Faith is the Sincere Mind endowed by the Other Power.” [4]

And, finally, he writes:

“... The substance of the Desire for Birth is the True, Serene Faith. Indeed, this is not (the mind of) merit-transference with self-power as conceived by Mahayanist or Hinayanist, common men or sages, or meditative or non-meditative persons; hence. It is called '(the mind of) non-merit-transference.'” [5]

With the foundation of these thoughts as background, the question may arise, how does that faith, those minds, come to us? It is here that tradition functions in an extremely important way for Shinran and is also particularly relevant to contemporary discussion in religion. In trying to understand how faith may come to us, it is not by accident, I believe, that the “Shoshinge” — which reviews the progress of the Shinshu tradition in history — is placed at

the end of the volume on Practice in the “Kyogyoshinsho.” As is pointed out in the introduction to the translation of the text:

“The Shoshin-Ge is placed at the end of the chapter on Practice, and it serves as the hinge connecting the two chapters, i.e., between Practice and Faith. By these facts therefore, we can easily understand the important role played by this gatha.

“Actually, the interpretation of ‘gyo’ (practice) and ‘shin’ (faith) and the relation between the two had been the central subjects of controversy among the disciples of Honen Shonin. Most of them failed to grasp the master’s true meaning of the Nembutsu and took the term ‘gyo’ to mean man’s oral utterance of the Nembutsu (Namu-Amida-Butsu). This interpretation, when combined with the idea of ‘self’ effort, tended toward the misunderstanding of the true spirit of salvation by Amida’s Power. Shinran, one of the disciples of Honen, made it clear that ‘gyo’ is not the practice based on man’s effort but the Buddha’s Work originating in his Vow.” [6]

This is to say, our Birth in the Pure Land is gained through His Work (i.e., the merits of Amida’s Name) given to us and not through our merit of practicing the Nembutsu. And ‘shin’ in Shinran’s interpretation refers to Amida’s mind given to us and not the faith which is based on man’s mental effort. Practice and Faith thus conceived by Shinran constitute the basic character of Shinshu doctrine. Historically, the practice of recitation of the Name-with-universal-meaning is based on the 17th Vow, which states:

“If, upon my attaining Buddhahood, all the innumerable Buddhas in the ten quarters were not approvingly to pronounce my Name, may I not attain the Supreme Enlightenment.” [7]

By viewing the historical appearance and development of the Pure Land tradition as virtually the fulfillment of this Vow, Pure Land becomes not simply a popular tradition which draws its justification from the fact that it suits popular temperament, but is given a foundation within the process of Amida’s Vows, as the manifestation of the evolution of Buddha’s universal compassion. Despite all differences among the various teachings in the Pure Land tradition, and regardless of the fact that the original texts do not specifically yield Shinran’s interpretation, in his understanding he maintained an essential unity among the Pure Land teachers by his representation of them as links in the historical realization of compassion.

In relation to this interpretation by Shinran, there are two features which require attention. The tradition must be viewed both in terms of its surface meaning, and of its inner meaning. In his discussion of the sutra, Shinran notes:

“Truly I know that this sutra has thus the implicit and explicit aspects. Herewith, I show whether the Three Minds in the two Sutras are the same or different; this is to be well discerned. The Larger Sutra and the Meditation Sutra are different in their explicit aspect, but they are the same in their implicit aspect.” [8]

Using principles which Prof. Bando describes in his “Zettai Kie no Hyogen” (pp. 253-58) as *kensho* — and *onmitsu* — Shinran thus reconciled the disparate aspects of the Pure Land tradition and created a unity. Shin tradition also developed the means to reconcile Shinran’s individual and creative approach to varying emphases in Pure Land teaching. This was the relationship between *dento*, or Tradition, and *kosho*, the individual insight which Shinran developed. On the surface, the tradition seems to contradict what Shinran teaches, but when explored deeply, in its implicit aspect, this is not the case.

In essence, the contribution of Shinran and the unifying tradition of Shin Buddhism, is a philosophy of history which attempts to recognize change while at the same time maintaining a fundamental unity to show that history is working out of the Buddha’s Vows, not merely a chance happening or something unreal, but a process with its roots in the absolute. This absolute is not disconnected from life, but manifests itself in the sphere of human existence as a moving force striving for deeper realization in persons and stimulating within them the spontaneous commitment of faith. History, for Shinran, is a spiritual process leading to enlightenment.

This perspective is important in the light of our earlier portrayal comparing Shinran’s response to history with that of other Kamakura Buddhists. Shinran lived history through. The basis for the acceptance of history, and of life as we encounter it, is the fact that it is embraced by Amida’s compassion. There is no need to leave the historical sphere of finite and daily existence to discover that compassion. Once our eyes have been opened to perceive it, it confronts us at every turn in our everyday lives. In the contemporary period, there is a struggle for people to discover the meaning of existence, and their own identity within historical existence. The mass, urban, technological society threatens to deprive us of our personal meaning through subjection to means and techniques which turn humans into objects to be disposed of at will by superior powers.

Shinran’s theory of the Vows and history, and his interpretation of Pure Land tradition, suggests that the meaning of existence is that we ourselves also become a channel whereby the compassion of Amida Buddha is present in history. In our time and at all times, we are the Buddhas praising the name in the Seventeenth Vow. Perhaps, through extending the meaning

of the term “praise,” we could include many forms of action in the world which are indeed manifestations and revelations of the compassion of Amida.

Shinran has thus taken up within his own context the profound problem of the emergence of the absolute in history, which at once raises the value of history, and makes the experience of the absolute a reality of history. This view which Shinran offers us heightens the importance of tradition, while at the same time keeps it open for further change. Truth is enmeshed in history, but it must also transcend it. If truth is merely a historical product, it loses its capacity to hold our conviction and maintain vitality in illuminating issues of concern to humanity. Therefore, it must represent and point to something which lies beyond our perceptible history which is subject to apparent cause and effect of the finite order. Without a root in the absolute, truth simply becomes relative. Change for the sake of change and novelty loses its meaning unless that change or innovation represents a deeper perception of a truth that has always been present in a tradition.

In the evolution of Pure Land thought, there was a broadening and a deepening as it became more universal and spiritual in approach to religious action and life, a development brought to its peak by Shinran. Without the background of the existing tradition (in his Kamakura period), his own awareness and process of thought would not have been stimulated to look deeper. If he had ignored tradition, and merely created his interpretation alone, it could hardly have attracted attention.

Shinran is often depicted as a radical, and a radical in the truest sense of the word is one who goes to the roots. He was not a radical as the word is used negatively in our own day, to label someone who seems to cut things off at the root, rather than cultivate those roots. In his challenge to the Buddhist tradition, Shinran rooted his views in that tradition, thus, his having removed Pure Land thought from the sphere of simple hoben, made it universal in time and space. For Shinran, though the Pure Land teaching was devised for people in the last age of the Dharma, it was applicable beyond that framework, and so he points out:

“How sad it is that the common and ignorant men with defilement and hindrances, from beginningless time up to the present, have had no opportunity for deliverance because of their inclination to perform Auxiliary Acts and the Right Act indiscriminantly and practice the meditative and non-meditative good. When we reflect upon our cyclic transmigration, we find it difficult, even in the passage of infinite kalpas, to turn to the Buddha’s Vow-Power for refuge and enter the Sea of Great Faith. We should indeed lament it and deeply deplore it. As sages of Mahayana and Hinayana and all the good men make (the utterance of) the Blessed Name of

the Original Vow their own good, they cannot attain Faith or believe in the Buddha's Wisdom. As they are ignorant of the Buddha's purport of establishing the cause (for Birth), they cannot enter the Recompensed Land." [9]

Later, Shinran indicates that the practice of the Path of the Sages cannot apply to the decadent age, while the Pure Land Gate applies to any age:

"Indeed, we know that the various teachings of the Path of Sages are practicable for the Buddha's time and the Age of Right Dharma and not for the Ages of Semblance Dharma, Decadent Dharma and Extinct Dharma. The time for those teachings has already passed and they do not agree with the capacities of sentient beings. Whereas, the True Teaching of the Pure Land compassionately leads to the Way the defiled and evil multitudes in the Ages of Semblance Dharma, Decadent Dharma and Extinct Dharma, as well as those in the Buddha's time and the Age of Right Dharma." [10]

Shinran has thus reversed the usual understanding of Buddhist practice. While other traditions of Buddhism regard the ancient practice of meditation as in the case of Dogen applicable in any age, the Pure Land doctrine was a teaching primarily for weak persons of the last age. Shinran, however, sees that in actuality other practices are merely preparatory to entering the Pure Land Gate, as the failure to gain enlightenment through any of these other practices becomes realized. The Pure Land way is thus the supreme teaching for all time, in his view.

We may suggest here that this approach is sound in terms of Buddhist symbolism, since it is hardly likely that human nature changed significantly in the few thousand years of Buddhist history to justify the alteration of Buddhist practice in the way Honen did. Shinran was more perceptive perhaps than his teacher in realizing that the human problem is universal in time and space. Egoism and pride infect people in every age and distort their religious endeavors. For Shinran, Pure Land teaching correlates to the perennial human problem, and not merely to the changes of history. In this way the teaching became more absolute as "the" Truth rather than "a" Truth or, more properly, as "the" Gate rather than "a" Gate, to the Truth.

Shinran's creative treatment of tradition further suggests the deep existential roots of his experience and thought. As he grappled with his own personal problems and came to understand realistically and truthfully his own condition, he saw more keenly into the implications of Pure Land thought and through his existential insights, established the tradition on a sounder spiritual and philosophical basis. In terms of past developments of Pure Land, he gave an answer to the numerous problems that had faced believers. Unfortunately, he

was extraordinarily subtle in doing this, so that in the course of history, the real meaning of his thought has never worked the reformation of which it was and is capable.

Bibliography

Bloom, Alfred: "Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace," pp. 7-25

Bloom, Alfred: "Shoshinge: The Heart of Shin Buddhism"

Ryukoku University Translation Series: "Shoshinge"

Shigefuji, Shinei: "Nembutsu in Shinran and His Teachers: A Comparison"

Notes

[1] "Tannisho" 9

[2] Ryukoku Translation Series, "Kyogyoshinsho," p. 84

[3] Ibid., p. 10

[4] Ibid., p. 106

[5] Ibid., p. 109

[6] Ryukoku Translation Series, "Shoshinge," p. 6

[7] Translated by D.T. Suzuki, "Collected Works on Shin Buddhism," p. 338

[8] Ryukoku Translation Series, "Kyogyoshinsho," p. 173, also pp. 169, 167, 190-91

[9] Ibid., p. 196

[10] Ibid., p. 198