

Chapter 14

Faith and Practice: Shinran's Perspective

The topic we are to address in this section is religious experience as a process of growth and development. I want to discuss this issue because people generally view religion as some thing fixed, static or rigid. In many cases in our society, a person's religious understanding and insight reflect what he or she had gained by adolescence when they probably stopped going to Sunday School. I have been in situations in the academic world where people with very mature views in education, etc. held rather childish views of religion. Their spiritual growth had stopped at some point in their life.

On the other hand, there are people who are anxious because there remains so much to learn and experience in religion. They doubt themselves. It appears an unending quest.

Consequently, as a teacher of religion, I am frequently confronted by childish complacency in religion or by a baffled uncertainty in the face of the depth of religion.

In my study of Shinran, it has been a matter of great interest that he experienced a process of growth and development in his religious experience. Shinran's life and faith were not static and closed. Rather, he moved through several phases of religious insight until he reached mature, confident faith.

This should not appear so striking to us because we know from ordinary life that we go through stages of physical and mental development. We pass from childhood to youth to adulthood, to old age and finally death. In most societies there are rites of passage which highlight these important stages of life. When it comes to religion, however, it becomes a problem to think in these terms because we have rather narrow views about what religion is.

If religion is about life, it will reflect the development of our life. As we mature in life, our religious understanding should also mature. Further, if we understand that religious faith is a process of growth, it will influence our approach to religious education. In our school system, we have graded material to accord with the intellectual development of the child. In a similar way, we must develop educational materials within our temples that harmonize with the intellectual and social levels of our people from childhood to the adult years.

When I began to study Shinran's thought in detail in the light of his own religious experience (so far as it could be determined or understood from his writings), I was greatly struck by his interpretation of the Original Vow of Amida. It appeared to me that the system he portrays has philosophical as well as religious significance and gives further evidence of Shinran as a creative religious thinker from whom we might all benefit.

In order to perceive the distinctive way in which he treated them, it is first essential to make some observations about the Vows which are given in the "Larger Pure Land Sutra." Though in other ancient texts the number varies, in that sutra they number 48 Vows and represent the fullest development of ancient Pure Land mythology. Each Vow has its own specific character of which the totality is intended to describe the ultimate possibilities of the character of the Pure Land, its beings, and the modes of gaining entrance there. The Bodhisattva selected for these the highest and best of all aspects of religious aspiration. Being thus a composite of all religious ideals for gaining entrance to the Pure Land, the Vows of the "Larger Pure Land Sutra" are not strictly organized nor do they have, as they are given, any implicit relation between them except as varied aspects of the goal of Pure Land.

The feature of the appearance of Buddha at the moment of death, the recitation of the name of Buddha and the aspect of faith and the number of recitations implied in the 19th, 20th, and 18th Vows were fused to provide the basis for popular Pure Land practice. In China, where it developed earlier, Pure Land teaching was widespread and during its long history it was mostly regarded as a subsidiary doctrine, a *hoben* — a teaching device to give hope to the suffering masses who could not carry out the rigorous practices of the monastic orders. Pure Land was thus a doctrine which all schools of Buddhism would teach.

Later, those exponents who began to look upon it as a more basic and central truth of Buddhism for the last age, formulated systems of distinctions such as easy path versus difficult, self-power- Other-Power, Pure Land gate versus Sage path, correct practice versus mixed practice. By the Kamakura period in Japan, the trend in Pure Land was gradually focusing on the centrality of the vocal Nembutsu as the main means of salvation for the last age. This tradition came to its logical conclusion when Honen taught the Senjaku-hongan Nembutsu or the Senju Nembutsu — the select and sole practice of Nembutsu as the way to birth in the Pure Land. From a doctrinal and practical point of view, Honen brought to final clarity the centrality of Nembutsu for ordinary people. However, he did not go beyond the traditional concepts in explaining and defending his position.

While we have frequently mentioned the impetus given to Shinran's thought through his own experience, coincidental and of equal importance with this as an impetus was the impact upon his thinking of recent developments in the understanding of Buddhism. In his 20 years on Mt. Hiei, Shinran studied in a Tendai background. According to the Tendai system, in the final stages of Buddha's teaching in the world, he would teach without hoben. He would give the direct truth without mediation.

In addition, Shinran, perhaps, learned the hongaku-hommon theory. This term refers to the Primordial Enlightenment and original teaching taught in the "Lotus Sutra," according to Tendai doctrine. It is the teaching of the Eternal Sakyamuni and regarded in Tendai as the final ultimate teaching of Buddha. All other teachings are approximations of truth or helps (hoben) to the truth.

Shinran absorbed this view and applied it to the interpretation of Amida Buddha and his Vows. For Shinran, the Pure Land teaching was not the highest teaching merely because of ease of practice or the degenerated last age, but because it represented the expression of the true mind of Amida who is ultimate reality. Against the background of the pluralism of his age, Shinran had to discover an absolute basis for Pure Land thought and faith. His own religious experience, the influence of Tendai thought and reflection on the Vows led him to the conclusion that Pure Land faith was designed to offer the profoundest and most certain assurance to the troubled humanity not only of his time, but of all time.

It is for this reason that Shinran's system of "turning through the three Vows" has religious and philosophical importance. As evidence that Shinran developed this theory on the basis of his awakened religious consciousness, we must observe that he presents a series of stages of which the first two are preliminary and instrumental for reaching the third. One must travel through the 19th Vow, which is characterized by emphasis on cultivating roots of virtue — presumably morality — and being granted a vision of Buddha at one's death moment. The 20th Vow appears to envisage the recitation of the name as well as moral cultivation and transferring the merit to bring birth in the Pure Land, while the 18th Vow speaks of the sincerity and faith, and ten thoughts (or recitations) which bring birth. If one were to believe that the Bodhisattva had foreseen this process which Shinran depicts, when he made his Vows, the order might have been 18 to 19 to 20 (See study helps). Rather, we go 19 to 20 to 18. This reordering suggests that Shinran's interpretation was not already implicit in the Vows themselves, but was brought to them by him. Previous thinkers only fused them all into a common religious view for which the Vows justified some element.

Shinran himself gives testimony that this understanding of the Vows represented his own experience. We cannot go into the detailed history as to what points in his life correspond to the individual stages. I would simply suggest that stages 1 and 2, the 19th and 20th Vows, possibly represent the totality of his experience on Mt. Hiei when he was engaged in moral cultivation as well as Nembutsu practice in the hall of Continuous Practice. After his momentous struggle for direction in the Rokkakudo, and his entrance into Honen's community, he appears to have experienced great relief and it seems this is the occasion when he felt buoyed along by the Sea of the Original Vow. The problem is that his theological and intellectual development did not cease. This initial moment of spiritual peace was further deepened so that he eventually went beyond his teacher in thought. Some scholars look for other times of conversion to match this post-Honen development in Shinran. From an experiential standpoint this is not necessary, for Shinran wrote concerning these events:

"I, Gutoku Ran, a disciple of Sakyamuni, through the Sastra-writers' expositions and the masters' exhortations, had forever left the temporary gate of the thousands of practices and various good deeds and departed from the teaching for the Birth under the Twin Sala Trees and, having converted to the True Gate of the roots of goodness and virtue, I raised the aspiration for the Incomprehensible Birth. However, I have now left the provisional True Gate and turned to the Sea of the Best Selected Vow: having abandoned at once the aspiration for the Incomprehensible Birth, I am now assured of attaining the Inconceivable Birth. What deep significance is there in the Vow of attaining the Ultimate Salvation!

"Now that I have entered the Sea of the Vow once and for all, I deeply acknowledge the Buddha's benevolence. In order to repay my indebtedness to his Utmost Virtue, I have gleaned the essential passages of the True Teaching and always utter with recollection the Sea of the Inconceivable Virtue. More and more do I appreciate it, and particularly do I receive it with gratitude." [1]

Shinran dated this experience of moving into the 18th Vow as 1201, when he was 29 years of age:

"I, Gutoku Shaku Shinran, abandoned the Sundry Acts and took refuge in the Original Vow in the Kanotonotori year of Kennin. In the Kinotono-ushi year of Genkyu, with the master's permission, I copied his Senjaku Shu. In the same year on the fourth day of the middle part of the early summer month, Master Genku kindly wrote with a brush the following words on my copy: the title inside the book – in kanji -SenchakuhonganNembutsushu, Namuamidabutsu,

Ojoshigo Nembutsuion and Shaku no Shakku. On the same day I borrowed the master's portrait and copied it." [2]

Shinran also testified to the deep relationship with Honen which developed in the few years they had together:

"In the same second year, on the ninth day of the latter part of the uru seventh month, he wrote the following words on it: If, after I have attained Buddhahood, the beings of the ten quarters who utter My Name, making even as few as ten utterances, should not be born, may I never attain Perfect Enlightenment. He is a present Buddha. It should be known that His Original Vow with the persistent desire (for salvation) is not in vain. Those sentient beings who utter the Nembutsu (with Faith) will unfailingly attain Birth. On the same day, he also wrote on the portrait my new name — Zenshin — to which my former name 'Shakku' was changed according to a revelation in a dream. The master was then seventy-three years old.

"The Senjaku Hongan Nembutsu Shu was compiled at the request of Zenjo Regent Tsukinowadono Kanazane (Ensho by his Buddhist name). The essentials of the True Teaching and the profound doctrine of the Nembutsu are contained in it. Those who read it can easily understand its purport. It is indeed an incomparable and supreme collection of fine passages, an unsurpassed and profound scripture. Out of thousands of persons who received his teachings, personally or otherwise, over many days and years, very few were allowed to read and copy the book. However, I was allowed to copy his book and his portrait. This is a benefit of the exclusive practice of the Right Act; this is a sure proof of my future attainment of Birth. With tears of sorrow and joy I have noted the above story." [3]

A footnote to the passage above suggests that going through the three Vows in such a manner as Shinran describes his own process does not mean that all individuals must undergo the same. It is here that a serious theological and religious problem of the relevance of a religious leader comes to the fore. If Shinran's experience is not archetypical for his followers, how can he be an example or meaningful to them? If his experience does not hold some clue for their lives, why would anyone revere him? If it would be meant that we should follow his pattern exactly, then we would all have to go to Hiei to practice for 20 years. Of course, that could not be the idea.

However, if we cannot trace somewhere in the depth of our being the surmounting of egoistic efforts and their frustration leading to a deep awareness and appreciation of the Original Vow, then religion would only become a matter of doctrinal assent to what somebody else had

experienced and taught. It would not be one's own. The religious crisis of our time has been the result of people merely holding up the beliefs of the past without identifying them in their own experience so that their inner truth becomes clear. Therefore, saints and sages are only a matter of the past for many people today.

Shinran perceived something more elemental in religious life. I know of only one other theory in Buddhism that remotely approaches his. It is Kukai's theory of 10 levels of religious consciousness by which he rates various teachings. He does not, however, spell out the way one grows through these stages to arrive at the truth. They have simply a doctrinal or logical order. Shinran's uniqueness is that he not only saw the theory of three vows as a means of distinguishing various tendencies of Buddhist teaching, but as a process of growth in religious insight and depth. It is for this reason that the two prior vows are hoben — instrumental in leading to the higher level. In their very natures, they both leave something unresolved, unfinished which urges the person to seek further.

According to the story in the "Larger Pure Land Sutra," of course, all the vows have been fulfilled. However, the incomplete aspect is involved with the nature of the effort being validated by the Vow or, in other words, how much cultivation of virtue would be required in order to assure that the Buddha would arrive with his host of bodhisattvas to accompany the individual to the Pure Land. It is this point of anxiety that led Shinran to reject the doctrine of meeting Buddha at death (raigo) or Last Thought (rinju Shonen). Something more, he felt, was needed in the way of assurance. In the 20th Vow, a similar situation presents itself. The Vow says that one may recite the name of Buddha and cultivate one's roots of virtue which are then transferred to bring about birth in the Pure Land. But how much will assure this? Is this not again dualistic, and the use of finite acts to build a bridge to infinity? So Shinran wrote:

"All the ocean-like multitudinous beings, since the beginningless Past, have been transmigrating in the sea of ignorance, drowning in the cycle of existences, bound to the cycle of sufferings, and having no pure, serene faith. They have, as a natural consequence, no true serene faith. Therefore, it is difficult to meet the highest virtue and difficult to receive the supreme, pure Faith. All the common and petty persons at all times constantly defile their good minds with greed and lust, and their anger and hatred constantly burn the treasures of Dharma. Even though they work and practice as busily as though they were sweeping fire off their heads, their practices are called poisoned and mixed good deeds and also called deluded and deceitful practices; hence, they are not called true acts. If one desires to be born in the

Land of Infinite Light with these deluded and poisoned good acts, he cannot possibly attain it.” [4]

Shinran saw that it was the 18th Vow, read according to his own interpretation, that solved the problem. Here it is not merely a person taking up a practice, but with the mind of deep and sincere faith given by Buddha that rebirth is assured. Thus Shinran wrote further in the *Kyogyoshinsho*:

“ ... The Tathagata endows His Sincere Mind to the sea of all the multitudinous beings filled with evil passions, evil acts, and perverted knowledge. The Sincere Mind is the true mind, endowed by Him to benefit the beings; hence it is not mixed with doubt. The substance of this Sincere Mind is the blessed Name of the supreme virtue.” [5]

And in the following statement, he indicates the centrality of faith thus:

“ ... The True Faith is necessarily accompanied by (the utterance of) the Name. (The utterance of) the Name is not always accompanied by the Faith endowed by the Vow-Power.” [6]

And:

“However, for the eternally drowned common and ignorant men and the transmigrating multitudes, the Highest, Excellent Fruition is not difficult to attain. But the True Serene Faith is very difficult to gain. Why is it so? Because it is attained through the endowment of the Tathagata’s power and through the Power of the Universal Wisdom of the Great Compassionate One. If ever the Pure Faith is obtained, it will not be perverted or in vain. Hence, the sentient beings with extremely deep and heavy sins attain the Great Joy and receive the great love of all the Holy Ones.” [7]

We can understand Shinran’s exhilaration as he contemplated the meaning of the 18th Vow for himself, because now salvation does not rest on accidental circumstances of intellectual and spiritual ability, economic resources, or specific religious practices which can become a source of pride. He wrote:

“As I contemplate the ocean-like Great Faith, I see that it does not choose between the noble and the mean, 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,’ neither

‘contemplative’ nor ‘non-contemplative,’ neither ‘while living’ nor ‘at the end of life,’ neither ‘many utterances’ nor ‘one thought’. Faith is the inconceivable, indescribable, and ineffable Serene Faith. It is like the agada which destroys all poisons. The medicine of the Tathagata’s Vow destroys the poisons of wisdom and ignorance.” [8]

In assessing the religious and historical importance of this process of turning through the three vows (sangantennyu) outlined by Shinran, it becomes evident that Shinran deepened the symbolic meaning of the Original Vows by relating them directly to his own experience. The traditional distinction of self-power versus Other-Power attained deeper significance when he viewed the self-power aspect as a stage of development in the emerging awareness of Other-Power in an individual. In that sense, Other-Power is a more inclusive process enveloping self-power. There is no longer a dualism. One is a stage towards, and a part of, the other. In this way, Shinran brought hope for religious existence to limited, weak individuals by viewing all imperfections, sins, and shortcomings in the light of the higher process in which Amida works for the salvation of all beings. Destructive guilt, or resignation in the face of personal weakness were no longer barriers to a joyful religious life.

Shinran declared that for the Nembutsu there was no superior good, nor any obstructing evil.

More reflection and interpretation of Shinran’s philosophy is required in order to heighten the symbolic character of these stages on life’s way. Further, the theory is indicative of Shinran’s philosophic depth in using his experience to clarify the centrality and reality of faith in Pure Land Buddhism, a focus and centrality that can speak clearly and with force to the questing, alienated, despairing people in the modern secular, scientific, and technological world which underestimates the importance or validity of a religious existence. It offers a wholeness, a centerpoint for inner strength and spiritual awareness to counter the unbearable, meaningless, loneliness that characterizes much of contemporary life.

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Notes

[1] Ryukoku Translation Series, "Kyogyoshinsho," pp. 197-98

[2] Ibid., p. 208

[3] Ibid., pp 209-10

[4] Ibid., p. 107

[5] Ibid., p. 105

[6] Ibid., p. 112

[7] Ibid., p. 89

[8] Ibid., pp. 113-14