

Chapter 15

The Assurance of Fulfillment

Among the many contributions to religious understanding in Shinran's teachings, there is probably none more significant and important, in social as well as religious implications, as the idea of attaining the status of entry into the "company of the truly assured" at the moment of faith, in this life (Shojoju). It is a stunningly radical opening of the Pure Land gate not simply to those who qualify through precept, arduous practice, or merit transference, but to each and everyone who entrusts himself or herself singleheartedly in Amida's Vow to work ceaselessly to save all beings everywhere. Traditionally, in the ancient process of the pursuit of Buddhahood, the status of entry into the company of the truly assured came in the first stage of the Bodhisattva path.

In a comprehensive outline of this process, Dr. Suzuki indicates that in Mahayana Buddhism there are altogether 52 stages of discipline leading to Buddhahood. These steps are categorized into ten units of five aspects each, with the final two relating to supreme enlightenment. The commonly known ten stages of the Bodhisattva path is the fifth of these ten units and already presupposes great determination and training of the aspiring Bodhisattva. The first stage of this series of ten is called the stage of Joy and is marked by entry to the company of the truly assured. This stage is non-retrogressive. The Bodhisattva is so established in his faith that he will not fall back to the realm of delusion. This stage is described:

The first of the ten Bodhisattva stages (102), where one attains genuine insight into the Buddha-dharma, enters the great ocean of Buddha's Wisdom, benefits other fellow beings, and acquires for himself a great blissful joy. This stage is also known as "the stage of non-retrogression," for once entering it there is no falling back, and rebirth is assured. It is also the stage where, for Shinran, the attainment of faith in Amida's Original Prayer is realized. [1]

This stage originally related to highly developed devotees of Buddhist discipline, certainly not to common mortals involved in everyday activities in the world of delusion. When such a stage was promised to common mortals in the Pure Land Sutra, it was to be achieved in the Pure Land — beyond this life. In the "Larger Pure Land Sutra" Buddha related to Ananda:

"The Buddha said to Ananda: 'The beings who enjoy birth in his country all sit in the Right Established State. Why? Because in that Buddha country there are no persons wrongly or infirmly established.'" [2]

It was this doctrine, reinterpreted by Shinran, that brought the Pure Land even closer to the lives of ordinary people. For him, assurance of salvation was attained immediately at the moment of faith as a result of the embrace and non-rejection of Amida Buddha. It is this awareness that through Amida's Vow all beings are already saved. The absolute entrusting of mind and heart in the Other Power of the Vow is the essence of the faith which Shinran described as "diamond-like shinjin" when he stated:

"... We say that we abide in the rank of the company of the truly assured when we encounter the profound Vow of the gift of Amida's Other Power and our minds which rejoice at being given true faith are assured, and when, because we are accepted by him, we have the adamant mind." [3]

And he urged his disciples:

"You must all consider that your birth (into the Pure Land) is determined." [4]

It has been widely recognized in Pure Land tradition that the self-generated mind of sincerity, faith and desire for rebirth could waver. Honen tried to deal with this by focusing on the practice itself, and leaving the faith mind to rise naturally as a result. This, however, gave rise to other problems, for instance the problem as to how many will assure it — hence the discussion of one recitation versus many recitations. Shinran resolved these problems and reinforced the certainty of one's status in the present life by claiming that the experience of faith endows the person with equality to Maitreya, the future Buddha, and with Buddha himself:

"Now, the Larger Sutra speaks of the 'stage next to enlightenment, like that of Maitreya.' Since Maitreya is already close to Buddhahood, it is the custom of various schools to speak of him as Maitreya Buddha. Since the person counted among the truly settled is of the same stage as Maitreya, he is also said to be equal to Tathagatas. You should know that the person of true shinjin can be called equal to Tathagatas because, even though he himself is always impure and creating karmic evil, his heart and mind are already equal to Tathagatas." [5]

Shinran declared that, like the Bodhisattva Maitreya, believers in Amida Buddha are in a state of cause with respect to Buddhahood. That is, the cause is perfected presently, but its realization takes place inevitably in the future. Such a devotee of true faith (shinjin) has the relation to Buddha of a single son, a close friend, a true disciple, a person of superior virtue beyond description, as Shinran describes it:

“Hence it is that Sakyamuni rejoices in the person of shinjin, saying, ‘he is my true companion.’ This person of shinjin is the true disciple of the Buddha; he is the one who abides in right-mindedness. Since he has been grasped never to be abandoned, he is said to have attained the diamond-like heart. He is called ‘the best among the best,’ ‘the excellent person,’ ‘the wonderfully excellent person,’ ‘the finest of people,’ ‘the truly rare person.’ Such a person has become established in the stage of the truly settled and is declared, therefore, to be the equal of Maitreya Buddha. This means that since he has realized true shinjin, he will necessarily be born in the true and real Buddha Land. You should know that this shinjin is bestowed through the compassionate means of Sakyamuni, Amida, and all the Buddhas in the quarters.” [6]

There is a sense of communion or fellowship implied in these terms. That the person of faith is the dearest friend and true disciple, equal to Maitreya, expresses the revolutionary character of Shinran’s perspective, and it is enlightening to trace the connection of this aspect of his teaching to traditional Buddhist doctrine centering on the concept of the last thought at the moment of death.

With Shinran’s rejection of merit acquisition and his theory that the moment of faith denoted the conferring of an assured status for the future in the present life, he relieved the anxiety implicit in traditional thought, an anxiety that had led its representatives to undertake the constant recitation of Nembutsu — sometimes as many as 40,000 to 70,000 times a day. The number was related to the apprehensiveness associated with the last moment of life, and was an attempt to be sure that the thought of the Buddha was in one’s mind as one approached death. Since death is often unexpected and swift, the idea behind this practice was that this unceasing practice was a virtual insurance that whenever one did die, it would be with the pronouncing of the Nembutsu and would assure birth in the Pure Land accompanied by the Buddha (19th Vow).

We may observe the importance of the last thought at the moment of death from the early Indian “Upanishads” (“Chandogya III,” 14, 1; “Prasna,” III, 10) to modern expressions of Buddhism. In his “Man in the Universe,” Dr. W. Norman Brown emphasizes the importance of this concept in Indian thought:

“The most critical time in connection with desire is the hour of death. Whatever one fixes his mind on then is likely to determine his future state, for he is thought to fix his mind in his last moment on that which expresses his deepest desire. The Bhagavad Gita makes this point emphatically; whoever meditates on Me (Krishna) alone at the hour of his death, goes to My

(Krishna's) estate (BG 8.5, cf. 8.10; 8.13). There are many stories in Indian literature exploiting this motif. A small folktale expresses it succinctly. As a man lay dying, a friend plucked a rose and held it before his eyes, and the man fixed his gaze on it and, holding it so fixed, died. The friend then asked a holy man standing there what was the state in which his friend had been reborn. 'Let me show you,' answered the holy man. He took the rose, parted the petals, and saying, "There is your friend," pointed to a small insect lying in the rose's heart." [7]

It may be useful here to give some illustrative quotes which reveal the wide influence of this thought and to highlight the decisiveness of Shinran's interpretation which countered this long standing belief.

The "Bhagavad Gita," a major popular Indian religious text states:

"At the hour of death, when a man leaves his body, he must depart with his consciousness absorbed in me. Then he will be united with me. Be certain of that. Whatever a man remembers at the last, when he is leaving the body, will be realized by him in the hereafter; because that will be what his mind has most constantly dwelt on, during this life. Therefore you must remember me at all times and do your duty. If your mind and heart are set upon me constantly, you will come to me. Never doubt this.

"Make a habit of practicing meditation, and do not let your mind become distracted. In this way you will come finally to the Lord, who is the light-giver, the highest of the high." [8]

This idea entered into Buddhism as an aspect of karma. It is known as Death-threshold Karma. Whatever "is remembered at the time of death; for when a man near death can remember (kamma), he is born according to that." [9] In his "History of Buddhist Thought," E. J. Thomas comments:

"It is a Buddhist doctrine that the next state of a being to be reborn is determined by the last wish. Buddhaghosa gives examples of it in discussing the Causal Formula. There is no necessary violation of the law of karma in this, for whatever that state is, the individual's karma will begin to take effect in it. Nor can an individual at the end of a life make an arbitrary wish. It is really determined by the life he has led, by the character which he has come to be. We find a parallel to this in the modern parable of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Dr. Jekyll did not wish to cease to be Mr. Hyde, and he wished to practice the life of a Mr. Hyde more than ever. What he did not wish was the unpleasant..." [10]

The concept was not meant to be arbitrary, yet since it is difficult to have an overview of the entire direction of one's life, one must counter the possibilities which may come to fruition at the time of death. The "Tibetan Book of the Dead" reveals the dangers inherent in this moment in the following way:

"The All Determining Influence of Thought

"(Instructions to the Officiant): Say that, for by such setting face-to-face, despite the previous non-liberation, liberation ought surely to be obtained here. Possibly, (however) liberation may not be obtained even after that setting face-to-face; and earnest and continued application as follows:

"O nobly born, thy immediate experiences will be of momentary joys followed by momentary sorrows, of great intensity, like the (taut and relaxed) mechanical actions of catapults. Be not in the least attached (to the joys) nor displeased (by the sorrows) of that. If thou art to be born on a higher plane, the vision of that higher plane will be dawning upon thee.

"Thy living relatives may — by way of dedication for the benefit of thee deceased — by sacrificing many animals, and performing religious ceremonies, and giving alms. Thou, because of thy vision not being purified, must be inclined to grow very angry at their actions and bring about, at this moment, thy birth in Hell: whatever those left behind may be doing, act thou so that no angry thought can arise in thee, and meditate upon love for them." [11]

The Tibetan approach to this problem as shown in its more lengthy discussion indicates an attempt to turn negative thought into positive influence at the time of death by recognizing its negativity and the effect it can have. However, a person in a state of suffering may hardly be expected to give such fine consideration to the nature of his thought:

"Such (thought) will not only be of no use to thee, but will do thee great harm. However incorrect the ritual and improper the conduct of the priests performing thy funeral rites, (think), What! mine own thoughts must be impure! How can it be possible that the words of the Buddha should be incorrect? It is like the reflections of blemishes on mine own face which I see in a mirror; mine own thoughts must (indeed) be impure. As for these (i.e., the priests), the Sangha is their body, the Dharma is their utterance, and in their mind they are the Buddha in reality; I will take refuge in them.

"Again, even if thou wert to be born in one of the miserable states, and the light of that miserable state shone upon thee, yet by thy successors and relatives performing white

religious rites unmixed with evil actions, and the abbots and learned priests devoting themselves, body, speech, and mind to the performance of the correct meritorious rituals, the delight from thy feeling greatly cheered at seeing them will, by its own virtue, so affect the psychological moment that, even though thou deservest a birth in the unhappy states, there will be brought about thy birth on a higher and happier plane. (Therefore) thou shouldst not create impious thoughts, but exercise pure affection and humble faith towards all impartially. This is highly important. Hence be extremely careful." [12]

This concept is still promoted among Buddhists in the present day as indicated in a pamphlet concerning death published by the Buddhist Publication Society in Ceylon. It states:

"This last thought series is most important since it fashions the nature of his next existence, just as the last thought before going to sleep can become the first thought on awakening. No extraneous or arbitrary power does this for him. He does this for himself unconsciously as it were. The most important act of his life it is, good or bad, that conditions the last thought moment of a life."

The pamphlet then continues:

"The idea of getting a dying man to offer clothes (Pansukula) to the Sangha or the idea of chanting sacred texts to him is in order to help him to obtain a good terminal thought for himself by way of Asanna Kamma or death-proximate Kamma, but the powerful force of inveterate habit can supervene and in spite of chantings by the most pious monks available, the memory of bad deeds repeatedly performed may surge up to his consciousness and become the terminal thought.

"The reverse can also occur. If the last few acts and thoughts of a person about to die are powerfully bad, however good he may have been earlier, then his terminal thought may be so powerfully bad that it may prevent the habitually good thought from surging up to his consciousness, as is said to have happened in the case of Queen Mallika, the wife of King Pasenadi of Kosala ... She lived a life full of good deeds, but at the dying moment what came to her mind was the thought of a solitary bad deed done. As a result, she was born in a state of misery where she suffered, but it was for only seven days. The effects of good Kamma was suspended only temporarily." [13]

This tradition played an important role in the development of Pure Land thought. It figures in the 19th Vow, where the cultivation of virtue is in view of the appearance of the Buddha to

welcome the devotee into the Pure Land, and in the "Meditation Sutra," vicarious recitation of Nembutsu is offered as a means to aid the dying person in his last moment:

"Some good friends will then say to him (at his last moment), 'Even if thou canst not exercise the remembrance of the Buddha, thou may'st, at least, utter the name, Buddha Amitayus.' Let him do so serenely with his voice uninterrupted, let him be continually thinking of the Buddha until he has completed ten times the thought, repeating (the formula) 'Adoration to Buddha Amitayus.' On the strength of (his merit of) uttering Buddha's name he will during every repetition expiate the sins which involve him in births and deaths during a eighty millions of kalpas." [14]

Concerning this teaching, Honen gave one of the strongest statements:

"May it be that when you come down to the closing scene of life you shall, with a composed mind, look into the face of Amida Buddha, call upon his name with your lips, and in your heart be able to await with confidence the welcome to be extended to you by his holy retinue. Even though through the days and years of life, you have piled up much merit by the practice of the Nembutsu, if at the time of death you come under the spell of some evil, and at the end give way to an evil heart, and lose the power of faith in and practice of the Nembutsu, it means that you lose that birth into the Pure Land immediately after death. And though, you may have one or two or three or even four lives after this, or no matter how many times you experience birth and death hereafter, you are cut off from the possibility of salvation. Surely this is indeed a most terrible thing to contemplate, and on which no words can describe. This is why Zendo so tenderly urged us to pray thus: 'May we, the disciples of the Buddha, when we come to die, suffer no mental perversion, nor come under the spell of any hallucination, nor lose the consciousness of the truth, but, free from agony of mind and body, may we in peace of mind, like those in an ecstasy, have that holy retinue of Amida come to meet us, and, embarking safely on the ship of his Original Vow, may we have our birth into Amida Buddha's Pure Land, and sit upon the lotus of the first rank.'" From this it is clearer still that we should pray for a composed mind when death comes. There are some men who say that people who pray for a composed mind at the hour of death, do not really put their trust in Amida's Original Vow, but stop and think how superior they must be to the great Zendo himself! What a base and dreadful thing for a man to say!" [15]

Other passages from Honen, following the prescription of the "Meditation Sutra," imply that devotees of Nembutsu will be met at their deathbed by Amida regardless of the presence of a religious advisor. Here, devotees of Nembutsu are given some advantage over those who did

not believe, and yet some others may gain rebirth through the help of an advisor. In another passage, the problem of mental suffering at the last moment is taken up. Honen states:

“And yet even though he becomes insensible through his agony when he comes to draw his last breath he is, by the power of the Amida Buddha, kept in his right mind and attains Ojo. The moment of death is no longer than the time it would take to cut a hair, and bystanders are unable to tell the exact frame of mind he is in, but it is known to the Buddha and to the dying man himself...” [16]

In Buddhist, as in Indian, tradition the last moment of life was a problem rooted in the concept of karma and religious practice. It is against this background that Shinran’s assertions of the moment of faith placing the believer in the company of the truly assured, takes on momentous importance. In his development of and radical contributions to Pure Land thought, he pitted himself against the whole of Buddhist tradition in this area. Shinran’s conviction was that the basis of salvation for each and every person without discrimination lies in the work of Amida Buddha (with salvation being assured through faith in his work). He strongly urged those of his followers who had true faith not to be concerned with the last moment before death. He challenged tradition, saying:

“There is nothing I can do about your fellow-practicers, who say that they await the moment of death. The person whose shinjin has become true and real — this being the benefit of the Vow — has been grasped, never to be abandoned; hence he does not depend on Amida’s coming at the moment of death. The person whose shinjin has not yet become settled awaits the moment of death in anticipation of Amida’s coming.” [17]

And also:

“The idea of Amida’s coming at the moment of death is for those who seek to gain birth in the Buddha Land by doing religious practices for they are practicers of self-power. The moment of death is of central concern for such people, for they have not yet attained true shinjin. We may also speak of Amida’s coming at the moment of death in the case of the person who, though he has committed the ten transgressions and the five grave offenses throughout his life, encounters a teacher in the hour of death and is led at the very end to utter the Nembutsu.

“The person who lives true shinjin, however, abides in the stage of the truly settled, for he has already been grasped, never to be abandoned. There is no need to wait in anticipation for the moment of death, no need to rely on Amida’s coming. At the time shinjin becomes settled,

birth too becomes settled; there is no need for the deathbed rites that prepare one for Amida's coming." [18]

Since Amida's infinite work provided the basis for the infinite result in salvation, all anxiety could thus be dispelled about the state of one's final moment of life and the apprehension that one might die having not pronounced the Nembutsu with his final breath. For Shinran, salvation does not depend at all on our own efforts. Rather, the moment of faith bestowed by Amida became central in shaping a whole new perspective on the nature of religious existence. Not among the least of the benefits of this perspective was the release of the follower of Shinran's thought from magical superstitions concerning the dead, and, in general, from the principles of magic. Many scholars have called attention to the fact that Shinran placed no emphasis on the use of religion as a tool for securing life. In fact, as is evident from the "Kyogyoshinsho," Shinran describes in spiritual rather than material terms the 10 benefits for those having true faith in this life:

What are the 10 (benefits)? They are (1) the benefit of being protected by unseen divine beings, (2) the benefit of being possessed of the supreme virtue, (3) the benefit of having evil turned into good, (4) the benefit of being protected by all the Buddhas, (5) the benefit of being praised by all the Buddhas, (6) the benefit of being always protected by the Buddha's Spiritual Light, (7) the benefit of having much joy in mind, (8) the benefit of acknowledging His Benevolence and repaying it, (9) the benefit of always practicing the Great Compassion, and (10) the benefit of entering the Group of the Rightly Established State. [19]

In this passage, the high degree of spirituality of gain from religion should be carefully noted and compared with the promise of worldly benefits as promised in other Buddhist texts. Religious existence for Shinran is itself involved in expressing compassion, and is thus a benefit — that is, religious life is an end in itself, and not merely a tool for gaining other particular ends. It is for this reason that magic has no place in Shinshu.

We should point out, however, that Shinran wrote a series of poems designated "Hymns on the Benefits in the Present Life." They are found in the "Collection of Pure Land Hymns." Shinran speaks more directly in this context of worldly protection afforded to the Nembutsu devotee based on the respect given the devotee by all spiritual beings and powers as a result of the person's faith. It is clear that Shinran is aware that many physical and spiritual problems confront people and they need assurance that the powers of the cosmos care and support the person of faith. Later teachers of Shinshu also rejected emphasis on benefits as a primary purpose or function of religious faith. At best, such benefits are a by-product of faith and not to

be sought or used as a proof of faith. Despite Shinran's awareness of such needs and the protection given as a result of faith, he avoided any suggestion that religious faith depended on such phenomena.

With this aspect of Shinran's teaching we have the clearest evidence for the change in religious style and emphasis which he brought to Buddhism. Though it is sometimes difficult to see through the network of traditional religious symbols which he employed to advocate his views, his contribution was not only religious but social as well. Understanding this, we can see that it was probably no accident the forces of Mount Hiei (the stronghold of Buddhist tradition) urged the government to prohibit the heresy of the "infinite light" promoted by Pure Land Buddhists. Muryokobutsu — the symbol of Infinite Light — highlighted the egalitarian and liberating teaching of Pure Land, such as was given by Shinran. The concern of the Buddhist establishment of Hiei was that being embraced in Amida's light meant to be free from all anxieties and from the religious bondage which manifested itself in the great temples and services. Translating the meaning of Shinran's doctrine to religious principle, we can observe the challenge it places before all forms of religion based in moralism of spiritual achievement.

Reform movements such as that of Shinran's break through the bonds of such mundane and communal religious perspectives by offering the individual a secure spiritual status that is independent of his social or political one. Such movements reject moralism and its accompanying external standards of religiosity. They lay the groundwork for a true equality for all persons by regarding all socially enforced standards as insignificant for religious evaluation. Buddha did this 2,600 years ago when he rejected the caste system in his order. Frequently, such movements become subversive, anti-social and are persecuted once their political implications become clear to the establishment, and yet — once the reform has become popular enough, and begins to institutionalize, the reform itself becomes established and social and political halts develop in its tradition.

The peace of mind which reform religion offers is not a cheap or superficial tranquility resulting from becoming blind to the problem of human suffering — it is not merely psychological tranquility — but an ontological, deep perception that one is in harmony with reality and that one is accepted, no matter what problem may arise. Thus Shinran exclaimed:

"I only think of the Buddha's deep Benevolence, and do not care about people's abuse." [20]

It is this deep tranquility which permits a person to take his stand and not fear the opposition which may arise when he presents the truth. It is self-awareness versus the self-consciousness to which we earlier referred. The tranquility of peace arising from true faith is a confidence in the essential worth and meaning of life despite all the evidence to the contrary. This is minority faith; not the easy faith of the majority which runs on conformity and custom.

Reform religion takes traditional religion out of the quantitative, futuristic, formal, external realm and seeks the qualitative, present, spiritual dimension of faith. Quantitative religion provides a basis for competition and pride reinforcing egoism. In his qualitative emphasis on religion, Shinran points out that practices employed to induce egolessness are in essence self-contradictory, since one knows he is trying to be better than others, which is inflating the ego in the process of deflating it. Shinran quotes Shan-tao:

“Indeed I realize that those who perform the Exclusive Practice with Mixed Minds do not attain the Great Joy. Hence, the master says: ‘These people do not feel grateful for the Buddha’s Benevolence. For, even when they practice, they are haughty and disdainful and their practices are always accompanied by the desire for fame and wealth; being naturally covered by self-attachment, they do not associate with fellow-believer and good teachers; they fondly approach various worldly matters, creating thereby, hindrances to their own and other’ performances of the Right Practice for Birth.’” [21]

Whenever religion places great emphasis on the future, the meaning of the present is reduced. Since no one can know the future, we are particularly vulnerable. Our anxiety manifests itself in a perennial interest in divination, seeking spirits, or astrology, and — in our modern life — this anxiety is also manifested through insurance salesmen trading on anxiety about the future.

Shinran’s rejection of the Last Moment Theory, and his establishment of the presentness of the Assured State, invests the moment of the present with its own meaning, independent of the guarantees of social and religious exploitation on any basis, and it is this which makes his a religion of true freedom, freeing the individual to develop his own inner potential in harmony with the compassion which freed him. Meaning comes not through the anxious pursuit of salvation or the subjection to the religious emphases of an institution, but through responding to compassion and embodying it. It is this spiritual freedom that is the still radical and life-revolutionizing message of Shinran’s thought to the alienated, anxious men and women of today.

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Notes

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[7] W. Norman Brown, "Man in the Universe," p. 85

[8] Prabhānanda and Isherwood, "Song of God," 75, Ch. VIII

[9] Buddhaghosha, "Faith of Purification", XIX, 16 p. 698

[10] E.J. Thomas, "History of Buddhist Thought," p. 112

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[18] Ibid., pp. 19-20

[19] Ryukoku Translation Series, Vol. V, "Kyogyoshinsho," p. 121

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[21] Ibid., p. 195