

Chapter 16

The Expression of Faith, Joy, and Gratitude

The spiritual liberation offered in Shin teaching manifests itself in a deep level of joy and gratitude. Clearly, however, Shinshu is not in essence a sentimental faith whose appeal is to the emotions. There is a starkness about Shinran's thought. Things we normally might not perceive are illuminated by a new insight into ourselves and life as it is. However, this starkness does not mean Shinshu has no relation to sentiments, attitudes, and feelings. Sentimentalism merely reacts to conditions. Moralism is apt to be sterile and inhumane. Shinshu provides a balance between pure sentimentalism and rationalistic moralism through the deep feelings of joy and gratitude that are the accompaniment of faith, feelings that permeate the individual who has made the leap into spiritual freedom.

In understanding the joy and gratitude in Shinshu, it is important not to confuse these feelings with the situation in contemporary religion where, for many people, the criterion for the truth of a religious view that they hold is that it makes them happy. There is a happiness cult today that claims satisfaction and contentment as the primary qualities offered. We often hear it said, "It satisfied me," "I am happy." Now we would not say that such conditions, if they exist, are bad. It would be nice if all could be happy. However, if that happiness and satisfaction are at the expense of blinding oneself to the reality of suffering in the world and our own relation or complicity with it, then it cannot be a true value. It is egoistic.

Further, if the achievement of satisfaction and contentment depends on social relations, we may say that it is a social quality, but not truly religious. The inner qualities of religion must produce community and bring people together, but study of the great religious figures, particularly those that suffered persecution and isolation in exile or even death, shows that these qualities were founded in deep inner reality and were not dependent on external circumstances. Thus the qualities which express the deepest aspects of religious existence are not superficial qualities or values which can be induced through a variety of manipulations by religious leaders. Rather, they are states of being which arise from the individual's inner awareness of his true self and its relation to the Reality which undergirds all life.

In their deepest sense, the qualities of religious existence are existential and, if we use a rather technical term, we would say they are ontic — in that they reflect the nature of one's being. They reflect a deep transformation in the evaluation of life and meaning within the person and

are predicated on a commitment, a reorientation, essentially a conversion of the person, a process which Shinran speaks of as Turning through the Vows and which he describes as being accomplished by the transcendence of the “crosswise leap” (ocho). This is a technical term which Shinran employed from the Sutras to refer to the immediacy of the moment of faith. It may be compared to the sudden enlightenment that is emphasized in Zen tradition. It symbolizes the absolute Other Power basis of deliverance in Shin Buddhism.

We should understand, in relation to Shinran, that he underwent a decisive conversion to which he testifies in his reflection on his life with Honen. It appears in all the events that led up to his meeting with Honen. His later determination to withstand all criticism which his wife noted, and which he also asserted, indicate that transforming commitment whereby he stood on his own being. Despite the pressures and difficulties of his life, Shinran constantly expressed his joy and gratitude at the salvation offered to him through Amida Buddha. But in speaking thus of joy, we are not speaking of happiness! In the modern situation, happiness is defined as the absence of problems and difficulties. I know of no religion that speaks of happiness as the highest attainment of life, but many speak of joy, which is a quality that arises within the sufferings and problems of life. Joy is the perception of truth within the experience of ambiguity and doubt.

However, in the early Theravada Buddhist tradition, joy is merely a mental element which must ultimately be transcended. Such an orientation derives from the initial emphasis in early Buddhism that suffering results from our attachments through passion to the things of the world. All feelings and emotions or sentiments which reflect passion must be transcended and negated in order to be finally liberated.

Buddhaghosa (a 430 C.E. translator of Sri Lankan Buddhist texts to Pali) presents a detailed analysis of the forms of happiness in his “Vissudhi-magga” (IV-94-101). They are elements in stimulating the first jhana (meditation). As one proceeds through the various stages of meditation, Buddhaghosa points out “the bliss, in other words, the mental joy appears gross to him and in the fourth jhana they are all transcended.” (IV-181-189). It also is a quality which arises from cultivation of virtue as described by Buddhaghosa in the Path of Purity:

“Such virtues lead to non-remorse in the mind, to gladdening, to happiness, to tranquility, to joy, to repetition, to development, to cultivation, to embellishment, to the requisite (for concentration), to the equipment (of concentration), to fulfillment, to complete dispassion, to fading away, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana. [1]

In the fourth jhana, Buddhaghosa states:

“And at this point, ‘With the abandoning of pleasure and pain and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief he enters upon and dwells in the fourth jhana...’” [2]

Mahayana tradition took up the themes of earlier Buddhism, but drew out other nuances. All existence is seen to share the Buddha nature and at the heart of existence is the urge to compassion. All life is interdependent so that each assists the other in their growth and development.

Through its deeper perception of the relation of all beings, Mahayana opened new dimensions not evident in the earlier teachings. Early Theravada appears stark, somber, severe in its quest of enlightenment. Mahayana tradition had a laymen’s perspective with some awareness of the value of human relations. In this altered context, where devotees work for the salvation of their fellow beings, the sense of joy became a primary value. The Bodhisattva is depicted as entering the stage of Joy in the early stages of his career. There is no indication that he abandons that joy, but that in his deepening perception of suffering, his heart of compassion expands to include all within that joy. Har Dayal in his “The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature” (228-29) describes the quality of Sympathetic Joy (Mudita) as follows:

“Mudita (sympathetic joy). This word has been variously translated as ‘appreciation,’ ‘die Mitfreude,’ ‘satisfaction,’ ‘joy,’ ‘delightfulness,’ ‘happiness in the happiness of all,’ ‘das Freudgeschäftsgefühl,’ etc. E. Senart suggests that this may be a Prakrt form of *mruduta* (gentleness, softness). But this feeling is said to be directed towards virtuous and righteous persons (*punya-atmakasu*). Its chief characteristics are joy, faith, and freedom from despondency, craving, jealousy, insincerity and hostility. It is associated with the alertness of all the faculties.

The *Dasabhumika-Sutra* is said to have the most systematic presentation of the stages. The first stage here is also called joyful. According to the interpretation of the Mahayana *Sutra-lankara*, the term indicates that a bodhisattva feels keen delight (*moda*) when he knows that he will soon attain bodhi and promote the good of all beings. This stage is entered when the devotee attains the “thought of enlightenment.”

What is noticeable in these descriptions is that joy relates to the mission of the Bodhisattva and his awareness of the truth. It is the ground on which all his other activities and progress depends. In such a context, joy does not mean a superficial happiness in the absence of

problems, but is a stimulating and motivating factor for facing problems. Joy is the confidence of the Bodhisattva that he has entered into the truth.

The basis for Shinran's emphasis on the joyful elements in faith goes back to the passage on the fulfillment of the 18th Vow which sees both faith and joy as a result of Amida's transfer of merit:

"If all sentient beings, hearing the Name and having joy in Faith even once — through the Buddha's sincere endowment — desire to be born in His Land, they can instantaneously obtain Birth and dwell in the Non-Retrogressive State — excepted are those who have committed the five deadly sins and abused the Right Dharma." [5]

The simultaneity of faith and joy is also reflected in the term for faith: shingyo, which means "faith and joy" (Joyous faith). In this instance Shinran states:

"With regard to 'Shingyo,' 'shin' means true, real, sincere, full, utmost, accomplished, function, heavy, discerning, test, expounding, and loyal; 'gyo' means desire, aspiration, appreciation, rejoicing, delight, joy, gladness and happiness." [6]

In a wasan, Shinran exclaimed: "Birth is certainly determined." [7]

He notes elsewhere:

"Those who have received the True Practice and Faith have much joy in their minds; hence, this stage is called the stage of Joy." [8]

And, further:

"If ever Pure Faith is obtained, it will not be perverted or 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." [9]

In this identification Shinran reveals that Joy is not a purely sentimental reaction, for he declares:

"Shingyo is the mind full of truth and sincerity, the mind of utmost trust and reverence, the mind of clear perception (of Amida's salvation) and steadfastness, the mind of aspiration and appreciation, and the mind of joy and delight; hence, it is not mixed with doubt." [10]

The conversional, transforming aspect of the arising of faith and joy appears in the discussion of the One Mind where Shinran discusses the character of the Adamantine Mind and the principle of Crosswise transcendence, which all point back to Amida's gift:

"As I contemplate the True Serene Faith, there is one thought in the Serene Faith. 'One Thought' reveals the moment of the first thought of the awakened Serene Faith and it expresses the great and inconceivable Joyful Mind." [11]

He says:

"The One Mind is the true cause for (Birth in) the Pure Recompensed Land." [12]

And he identifies all these traits:

"The True One Mind is the Great Joyful Mind. The Great Joyful Mind is the True Faith. The True Faith is the Adamantine Mind. The Adamantine Mind is the Mind Aspiring for Buddhahood." [13]

Shinran roots the mental and spiritual quality of joy not merely in emotional response but in the very foundation of reality as the expression of Buddha's compassion in the roots of our being. This joy that was so much a part of Shinran's conception of faith was not a theoretical formulation, or a result of the relation of terms in a verbal statement of scripture. It was, rather, a joy of such deep and pervasive nature that the scriptural passages became a vehicle for him to articulate what he had experienced as an essential element of his own existence, and it was in this way that he declared:

"What a joy it is that I place my mind in the soil of the Buddha's Universal Vow and I let my thoughts flow into the sea of the Inconceivable Dharma. I deeply acknowledge the Tathagata's Compassion and sincerely appreciate the masters' benevolence in instructing me. As my joy increases my feeling of indebtedness grows deeper. Hereupon I have collected the essentials of the True Teaching and have gleaned the important passages of Pure Land Buddhism. I only think of the Buddha's deep Benevolence and do not care about people's abuse." [14]

For Shinran, this perception of joy and gratitude does not mean the reduction of tension in life resulting from an individual's awareness of one's own imperfection as a barrier to the goal of one's aspirations. It is a joy of an entirely different nature from the illusory ideal of perfect happiness often found in religious faith. Shinran acknowledges his deep awareness of his own imperfection, and the unbridgeable gap between his own self power — the human condition

— and the goal of becoming one with the Buddha mind of compassion, wisdom, and the indescribable light of enlightenment.

The Vow of Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, that his compassion embraces each and every one as he or she is, and that this compassion itself will become the vehicle to enlightenment for all beings, gives Shinran a faith that is, at the very moment of its experience in life, a salvation, an acceptance of the limits of one's human nature and the limitlessness of Amida's compassion which grasps never to abandon. It is this perception that is at the root of Shinran's gratitude and joy. Joy exists despite the imperfection one finds in himself. In his sensitivity to this experience of the range of suffering, disappointment, and self-deception in life, Shinran affirms: "Grieve not that ye lack wisdom bright! He is the torch for eternal gloom. Wail not for sins, for his bark will take ye across the flood of doom."

In a deep exclamation of his joy and gratitude, Shinran declares that he feels the work of Amida to have been done for himself alone. This should not be understood to have been said in a selfish way, but rather in relation to the acute personal sense of identity that comes with the awareness of being grasped by the compassion which lies behind the story of Amida. Shinran's is a joy and gratitude that penetrates his being, but at the same time, with existential honesty, he says of himself:

"Truly I know. Sad is it that I, Gutoku Ran, sunk in the vast sea of lust and lost in the great mountain of desire for fame and profit, do not rejoice in joining the group of the Rightly Established State, nor do I enjoy coming near to the True Enlightenment." [15]

In Chapter IX, "Tannisho," Yuienbo reports Shinran's sharing this feeling and empathizing with him when Yuienbo asks Shinran about his inability to rejoice at that which should fill him with joy. "Impossible is it to leave this old home of agitations where we have wandered aimlessly since beginningless aeons ago, nor do we long for the Buddha Land of peace which we have yet to experience — all due to blind passion so truly powerful and overwhelming. But no matter how reluctant we may be, when our life in this world ends, beyond our control, then for the first time we go to the land of fulfillment. And those who do not want to go immediately are the special concern of true compassion. For this very reason the vow of true compassion is completely dependable; and our birth in the Buddha Land is absolutely certain. If our hearts were filled with joy and happiness and we desired to go swiftly to the Buddha Land, we might be led to suspect that blind passion no longer existed."

To rephrase Shinran's perceptions into our contemporary mode of expression, we might say that in the midst of his own self-centered cravings, foolishness, and ignorance, in the face of the depth of unknown potential for evil in his conscious and unconscious minds, and in the environment of the disrupted and corrupt world of his time, Shinran discovered there was a joy in living which gave deep significance and meaning to his life. Within the depths of his own being was the fundamental life-promoting force which moves beyond our evils, beyond our incapacity for good or our unwillingness to do so, beyond our self-deception and arrogance.

As some psychologists suggest, there are those who are moved by the death wish and those by life. The people who are moved by wonder at the power of life place themselves at the disposal of life and dedicate themselves to enhancing the lives of others. Such persons, enhancing life, find their own lives fulfilled in the deep joy of living. It is this life affirmation, this absolute yielding of himself to the disposal of life of Amida, that is, the "heart of truth" in Shinran's thought, the "shinjin" that is the perception-altering moment of faith in Shin Buddhism. Of such is the element of joy and gratitude in Shinshu.

In the quest for truth, the deepest level of sentiment should be pursued. Religion is always more than emotion and feeling. It must be rooted in perception of truth. Shinran's thought eloquently reinforces that perspective. Because of Buddhism's rigor in discipline and its association with funerals and afterlife, it is rarely perceived as a religion of joyfulness. Many Christian religious groups try to discover the basis for celebrating life even within the midst of a dark world. Buddhism also has reason to celebrate life, and to affirm it with joy and gratitude at awakening to the sources of meaningful existence, the absolute certainty of our acceptance, just as we are, by that which we respond to and recognize as true, real, and sincere. The institutions of Shin Buddhism rarely provide ways to express this Buddhist joy, either in worship or in forms of social community. I believe this is an area that deserves exploration and study. Joy in living (or life affirmation) and gratitude even for the very simple fact we have been given the gift of life, establishes a foundation of ethical existence that, in Shinshu, goes beyond moralism and egoism to a profound existential and spiritual level. Like joy, gratitude gives structure to the Shin way of life.

The realization of joy which is grounded in Amida's unconditional embrace which never abandons us gives rise to the response of gratitude which establishes the foundation of Shin Buddhist ethical existence. Shinran's teaching rejects the traditional mainstays for controlling

behavior either through threats of punishment or lures of reward through performances of socially-approved actions.

When traditional behavior control mechanisms are removed, what style of life emerges for believers? The ordinary person generally conceives religion to be strictly moralistic, concerned only with doing good deeds and avoiding bad ones in order to win salvation. For such a person, religion is like a commercial transaction, based on fear. But with Shinran, all such appeals have been set aside. No transaction is urged or recommended. On the enormously difficult “easy path,” the only basis of religious action for Shinran is the expression of gratitude. He asserts:

“Only by constantly reciting the Tathagata’s name can we repay the grace of the Vow of great compassion.” [16]

And:

“Though our bodies are (ground) to powder.

The grace of the masters and teachers also we must repay,

Though our bones be crushed.” [17]

In a more personal and perhaps intimate way he declared:

“When I consider well the Vow upon which Amida thought for five aeons (I reflect) it was for me, Shinran, alone. O how grateful I am for the Original Vow which aspired to save one who possesses such evil karma.” [18]

As, at the end of the “Kyogyoshinsho,” he reflected on his faith and its source, he wrote:

“What a joy it is that I place my mind on the soil of the Buddha’s Universal Vow, and I let my thoughts float on the sea of the Inconceivable Dharma. I deeply acknowledge the Tathagata’s Compassion and I sincerely appreciate the Master’s benevolence. As my joy increases, my feeling of indebtedness grows deeper. [19]

Such was the centrality of the theme of gratitude in Shinran’s religious life, a theme stressed in succeeding teachers to the degree that it is still a centrality in Shinshu life. Of course, Shinshu is not unique in its expression of gratitude. Other and earlier Buddhist teachers stressed this element, and it was a major component in Confucian thought as well. The important new

aspect of this expression in the case of Shinshu is that for Shinran, gratitude becomes the central expression and indeed the main function of the religious life — displacing utilitarianism, magic, legalism, and the expectation of egoistic benefits from religion.

Shinran's stress on gratitude and its centrality and function, leads beyond the simple practice of recitation of the Name (Nembutsu) to affect other areas of life and become the basis of a quite new approach in ethical orientation and human relations. Shinran cautions his followers against defaming the gods and Buddhas from whom we have received benefits:

“Through the long ages we were exhorted to the Way by all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and we are now blessed with meeting the Vow of Amita Buddha. Should we forget all that we owe and speak ill of all Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, this will be to forget the great obligation.” [20]

For Shinran, the awareness of gratitude, our indebtedness to Buddha, directly affects our attitude to the world about us. Had he expressed himself in a specific detailing of rights to be cultivated and wrongs to be avoided, his system would have ended in the kind of legalism that he had escaped. He gives no clear definition of right and wrong. Rather, Shinran's ethical orientation aims instead at the formation of positive attitudes toward people and situations based on a deep sense of gratitude. This sense of gratitude is grounded in the awareness of one's own potential for evil and the boundlessness of Amida's compassion which embraces good and evil without discrimination.

This is not to say that Shinran's is an ethic that tolerates and condones bad acts, but neither does he condemn. Knowing one's human condition and the inescapable capacity for evil that is the karmic burden of all humanity, the gratitude that overwhelms the mind and heart at becoming aware of and embraced by Amida's Vow stimulates positive and affirming actions. In Shinshu, one stands in awe of oneself, and aware of one's capacity for anything programmed by one's karma, strives on the moral level to guide one's thoughts, words, and actions in a positive. Shinran asks his followers not to nourish hatred to those who oppose them but to have sympathy and compassion for them:

“Those who live in the Nembutsu should have pity on and sympathy with those who work out troubles.” [21]

And Shinran also wrote:

“Please always say the Nembutsu with the sincerest heart and pray, to the end of this life and to the extent of the life to come, for the good of all those who speak ill of the Nembutsu ... If

you but pray for the good of all those wrongly-led persons, telling them to enter the Way of the Vow of Amida Buddha, you will be repaying what you owe the Buddha.” [22]

Though history records that in one instance, in order to meet a severe problem in his fellowship, Shinran set down a list of ethical specifics, it would have been inconsistent of him to do so in his general approach to Buddhism since he maintained that passion-ridden beings are unable to keep any such precepts and regulations. Led by their karma, human beings fall into evil acts and understanding this, Shinran perceived that rules do not prevent evil. Using modern terms, we might say that Shinran desired to work at a deeper level of the psyche, advocating an ethic of transformation rather than the usual religious ethic of prescription and enforcement. Thus his was an inner rather than an external ethic, and the clue to this approach comes from Chapter VI, “Tannisho,” where Yuienbo takes up the problem of repentance for evil deeds. Repentance for evil deeds, as if our salvation depended on it, implies that only a good person can be saved. Rejecting this self-power view, Yuienbo writes:

“When our faith is firmly established, our Rebirth in the Pure Land is to be attained through the Wisdom of Amida — our own discretion can be of no avail whatsoever in this regard. By reason of the “nature” (of the Vow), a feeling of mildness and patience is naturally developed in our mind, when becoming conscious of our sins, since we rely devoutly on the power of the Vow. Casting aside all our own cleverness as to Rebirth, we have to remember the great Blessing of Amida Buddha with piety and thankfulness. And then naturally we shall come to recite the Nembutsu — this also due to the “Nature” (of the Vow). By this Naturalness it is meant that the Vow works itself in our mind, unbiased by our idea or discretion... [23]

Here we may note that a by-product of the experience of Nembutsu is mildness and patience, and that the Nembutsu works in our minds in an unbiased, undiscriminating, spontaneous way, without design or calculation on our part. Yuienbo describes the Shin Buddhist ethic of transformation, the process of acceptance of one’s limited self-awareness of sin, and an assimilation to a positive ideal (Amida’s Compassion) which constantly places itself before our consciousness. This approach has profound psychological and religious significance, suggested by methods of behavior modification:

The therapist can intervene most effectively by concentrating on what the client wants to establish, rather than on what he must eliminate, by looking at the positive rather than the negative.²⁴

While there is a difference between a therapeutical mental health situation and a religious approach, there are similarities in enabling the individual to surmount his limitations to reach a deeper satisfaction with himself and life, a depth which can be the basis for inner strength and positive human relations. What is needed for youth and society today is not a society of repression or law and order, but a society with positive ideals in the process of fulfillment, a process which offers its participants a deep sense of life affirmation and worthwhileness. It is such a process that is Shin Buddhism.

Shinran's concepts of Joy and Gratitude lay the basis for a true Buddhist ego-less existence. Buddhism has had as its goal the experience of non-ego, a state in which we reflect on the nature of things seen not as our delusory senses wish to perceive them, but as they really are. To reach this goal, Buddhism had long pursued the self-power path of sages, as Shinran called it. (A label which had in it no aura of condemnation or discrimination but simply an acknowledgement that this way, which may have worked for others, was a way along which he had encountered absolute failure). The Buddhist tradition has a long history of attempts to purify the passions and meditate on the Void in order to realize for oneself the emptiness of things and self. Shinran perceived that this was not the true way because, paradoxically, the attempt to obliterate the ego and reduce it to nothing ends by increasing and strengthening it. In the self-power approach, the ego becomes more subtle in its pursuit of fame and power. It is a psychological fact that the more one tries to not do something, the more likely one is to do it.

Shinran recognized the reality and strength of ego, but in recognizing the power of compassion to embrace such ego, or in other words, by acknowledging the absolute bondage of himself to his human condition, and becoming aware of his own helplessness in effecting the goal he sought, limitless spiritual freedom became his. Moreover, the transformation of faith in the Other Power of the Vow replaced the illusion of ego-power with a sense of gratitude which opens oneself to perception not only of debt to Buddha but to all who support one's life. In this way, in Shin Buddhism, the theory of interdependence transforms from an abstraction to the experience of gratitude as the basic mode of our existence. Shinran was a realist who showed subtlety in his view, attempting to rule out of religious life any competitive element that would give us a chance to measure our goodness against others. The religious community of Shinshu is one linked in a deep way by their sharing of an individual commitment to this process, to the Nembutsu as total existence, to Other Power as the vehicle that takes us beyond the limits of our greedy, ignorant, grasping, and foolish selves into the embrace of Reality — not as we like to see it, but as it is.

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Notes

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