

## Chapter 23

### *Shin Buddhism in the Modern Ethical Context*

As we have noted earlier, worldwide social and intellectual problems have weakened the spiritual influence of major world religions. Everywhere secularization, modernization, industrialization have challenged traditional faiths to defend themselves on their own merits, that is, in terms of their ability to enhance the quality of modern life.

Within the modern context, the Pure Land tradition with its apparent other-worldliness has frequently provided critics of religion with a good example of the irrelevance of Buddhism. However, the struggles of Jodo Shinshu against the lords of medieval Japan show that such faith may not always be passive, weak in spirit, or incapable to taking a stand.

We must note also that early western students of Buddhism regarded it as an ethical religion. However, Buddhism is not essentially a prescriptive ethical system, binding on all society, though it has established precepts and disciplines as the basis for progress toward enlightenment.

Shinran also stands within the general Buddhist tradition in advocating ethical action as an aspect of spiritual or religious responsibility and responsiveness to the compassion one has experienced. Ethical activity is an aspect of the living out of faith. Consequently, Shinran does not lay down specific rules for behavior as a qualification for salvation or membership in the community.

A further observation is necessary in approaching this subject. In our contemporary situation it is common to hear people ask, what does your religion say about this or that problem? Religious people find it difficult to come up with specific and precise answers based on their tradition. We must understand, however, that all religious traditions, including Jodo Shinshu, originated in the pre-modern period where our social and technological problem could not be imagined or expected. The increasing scientific and secular complexity of modern life has raised issues of human worth, dignity and welfare as well as global environmental concerns.

While we cannot expect precise and uncompromising fixed answers to all problems, the spiritual traditions can assist in value formation and establishing priorities. Religious faith can offer perspectives and insight into the human condition that will enable people to approach problems more sensitively, openly and reciprocally. Truly religious persons will more share

insight rather than seek domination for their viewpoint, and they will be more cognizant of the broad range of individual needs and circumstances.

Shinran's understanding of the unconditional, all-inclusive vision of Amida's compassion as it illuminated his own passion-ridden ego provides a basis for the contribution of Shin Buddhism to the contemporary dialogue. As we Shin Buddhists combine a deep awareness of the working of the Vow in our own lives and a more competent grasp of the problems of our world through being intelligently informed, we can join with others in common struggle to secure the welfare of all beings. Despite our limited and seemingly petty individual efforts, we will perceive the Great Compassion at work in our world and lives, thereby gaining a deeper sense of life-meaning in an otherwise absurd world of despair. In such a context religious faith enables us to retain our sense of human worth, despite the dehumanization that challenges and undermines our most cherished values.

There are various issues which require attention in the discussion of Shin Buddhism in society. These include consideration of the social implications of Pure Land Buddhism, Shinran's self-understanding and religious orientation as the background for his ethical perspective and the concept of the two truths, absolute and conventional which developed in Shin Buddhism to correlate faith and social obligation.

### Social Implications of Pure Land Buddhism

Though Pure Land Buddhism is frequently criticized for its other worldly, social passivity, its teachings have implications which can be applied socially. The foundational story of the creation of the Pure Land by Dharmakara Bodhisattva narrated in the Larger Pure Land Sutra implies a judgment on the character of life in this world. The ancient king, surveying the mass of suffering in the world, renounces his throne to devote himself to establish an ideal world where all forms of suffering would be abolished.

What is socially significant in this story is that the king abdicates his throne and recognizes that political power alone is not sufficient to bring meaning and salvation to all beings. Through this story, the self-sacrificing altruism of Mahayana Buddhism is clearly depicted together with a social awareness that the highest endeavor is to establish ideal conditions for the happiness and welfare of all beings.

The Primal Vows which are an essential element of the story teach that salvation and the welfare of beings are not merely universal in scope but are indivisible. No one truly gains

liberation who does not work to share it with others. The story implies egalitarianism and universality which are fundamental for vital social concern.

The Pure Land, though beyond this world, recognizes the importance of the environment in fulfilling ideals. The Pure Land represents the ideal context for realizing enlightenment. The activities of the Bodhisattva in establishing ideal conditions for enlightenment provides a model for modern people to labor to improve society so that all people may have opportunity to realize their potentials. It could also be applied to ecological thinking, motivating efforts for a more healthy physical environment.

The Sutra itself shows great concern for moral conditions when it describes the effects of wickedness. It declares that with the help of Buddha, these evils are abandoned and people attain good.

In Japan, Honen established the Nembutsu as the sole practice leading to enlightenment because it did not require a person to be rich, educated, wise, well traveled, or well disciplined in religious practice or perfect in morality. Honen implicitly criticized the aristocratic elitism of Japanese society in his time. As a consequence, his teaching was repressed and his followers persecuted.

For Shinran, Pure Land teaching was presented as a matter of this world. Faith bestowed by Amida gives certainty of future enlightenment now. We are freed from anxieties toward the future. Shinran's understanding of the all-encompassing quality of Amida's compassion released people from superstitious folk religion. He shows great interest in justice when he criticizes the authorities for exiling Honen and his disciples, including Shinran as unjust and without proper investigation or due process. In his Wasan (hymns), he quotes Prince Shotoku's constitution which states that if there is no impartiality on the part of the officials, the complaints of the rich are resolved like throwing rocks into water, while for the poor it is like throwing water into a rock.

When we survey the Pure Land tradition, we see that it is inspired by an ever-expanding vision of Amida's compassion. It embodies a humane idealism which neither discriminates nor rejects any person. It aims to inspire everyone to seek the highest welfare of others as the goal of their own progress toward Buddhahood. Shinran caught the spirit of Pure Land teaching, and it inspired him in his mission to communicate Amida's compassion to the masses in Eastern Japan where he settled after exile.

## Shinran's Self Understanding

When we turn to Shinran's self-understanding and religious orientation, we can observe his deep personal involvement and awareness of the compassion of Amida. He declared that Amida's work of five kalpas was for him, Shinran, alone. Awareness of Amida's compassion grounded a strong self-concept and personality. On several occasions, he declared that no matter what others think or say of him, he will follow the truth he has received.

In the light of Amida's compassion, he could see through the facade of social life, and declared that all the world is a lie, a deception. Only the Nembutsu is the final truth. At the same time, he recognized his own limits in making judgments. He states that if I knew good as Amida knows good, then I would truly know good. If I knew evil as Amida knows evil, I would truly know evil.

Shinran writes:

"You should know that this shinjin (true faith) is bestowed through the compassionate means of Sakyamuni, Amida, and all the Buddhas in the quarters. Therefore, you should not disparage the teachings of other Buddhas or the people who perform good acts other than nembutsu. Neither should you despise those who scorn and slander people of nembutsu; rather you should have compassion and care for them ..." [1]

On a deeper level Shinran suggests that faith and recitation of Nembutsu work a transformation in the believer. As we have quoted above, the deepened awareness of self evil which comes through the knowledge of Amida's compassionate Vow causes one to stop the evils in which one may be engaged. The true mind of faith transforms the passions. In Letter 19, Shinran states:

"Signs of long years of saying the nembutsu and aspiring for birth can be seen in the change in the heart which had been bad and in the deep warmth for friends and fellow-practicers..." [2]

In general, as we survey the relation of ethics and faith in Shinran's letters and the "Tannisho," it is clear that Shinran urged ethical behavior. Such behavior is to be motivated by gratitude for the salvation one has received through the Vow and in repayment of the kindness of one's teachers and guides. Deep faith should bring about a transformation of character inspiring proper behavior.

It is observable that Shinran does not advocate a repressive ethic emphasizing abstention from any worldly activity simply because it is worldly. He is against calculating behavior that weighs odds and implies egocentrism. Rather, he seems to suggest an ethic of displacement in which contemplation of the Vow and the recitation of Nembutsu infuses an awareness of Amida's compassion within the consciousness. In this way the believer assimilates to the ideal of Amida, replacing negative forces by more positive ones within the personality. With proper associations within the community there would be positive reinforcement.

There are two other aspects of Shinran's thought which indicate that his ethical concern does not simply mean reinforcement of traditional ways. Particularly, Shinran appears to stress Buddhist principles of human relations rather than Confucian. In Chapter five of the "Tannisho," Shinran declares that he never said Nembutsu even once out of filial piety. For Shinran, Nembutsu has a deeper meaning than simply observing social obligation.

In Chapter six, Shinran declares that he does not even have a single disciple. As a teacher he viewed himself on the same level spiritually with his followers, since they all alike received faith through Amida's working. Even disagreements with the teacher and separation from him does not place the errant disciple in spiritual jeopardy. Shinran rejected authoritarian control over his disciples.

Shinran moves religion beyond formalism and status and sees it essentially as an altruistic endeavor. However, there could be a basis for self-righteousness if a person were to believe that he was doing good. Therefore, in order to avoid a competitive, self seeking under the cover of piety, Shinran advances a realistic understanding of the self and its devious manipulations. In his many confessions we glimpse the dialectic of the two types of deep faith which we mentioned earlier.

It should be noted that the emphasis on gratitude in Shinran's writings has its basis in the awareness of imperfection and defilement which reveals the impossibility of ever attaining the necessary purity for achieving enlightenment through one's own efforts.

The recognition of human limitation, as well as awareness of a deeper reality underlying our acts, is expressed in Chapter four of the "Tannisho" where Shinran describes two types of compassion. There is the compassion of the sages or saints, also a self power compassion, and the Pure Land compassion.

In this chapter Shinran recognizes that everyone has some aspiration to help others at some time. The problem in doing good is not so much in knowing the good, but in knowing how to do good. Shinran shows that when we act, as we must constantly do in the world, we must understand the true nature of those acts. Our human acts never measure up to the standard of Amida's perfect sincerity and truthfulness. However, we are not to give up doing good where we can, but recognize that the final outcome does not lie with us. Compassionate action joins with the compassionate heart of reality which we find in the depth of our own being. In effect, we must live and act in the world with hopes but no expectations. We must have commitments but no demands.

Shinran's awareness of the ultimacy in Amida's compassion expressed through the Nembutsu and in his own life determined his approach to ethical issues. It also inspired a deep sense of mission as indicated in his visionary experience in the Rokkakudo temple. In this vision, the Bodhisattva Kannon appeared in the form of a monk. He promised to be Shinran's helpmate in the work of embellishing the world by taking the form of a woman. The vision points towards Shinran's marriage and his effort to reach the masses. To embellish the world refers to the qualities of the Pure Land which the Bodhisattva realizes through his vows. Shinran aimed, in a sense, to bring the Pure Land into this world through establishing a community of faith motivated by the compassion of Amida which originally created the Pure Land.

Shinran's teaching offers a perspective of cosmic meaning and humble human relations and actions. Shinran's self concept and religious orientation rejects legalism and communal modes of social control. Rather, he has established a spiritual standpoint whereby the person seeks the highest welfare of those about him. He does not begin with abstract rules and commands applied without compromise. Shinran's approach encourages a flexibility and openness to life's situation and problems based in the awareness of Compassion and the use of reason to discover alternatives for the greater good.

### Faith and Social Obligation

In the course of Shinshu history, there was constant need to correlate the aspect of faith with social obligations. Shinran's teaching was something misinterpreted by his followers to mean that one could do as one pleased because Amida will save in any case. Some followers acted in unethical ways, claiming such deeds had no effect on salvation. Opponents of Pure Land teaching charged that it was an anti-social and subversive teaching.

Shinran struggled with this problem frequently in his letter. In Goshosokushu 4, Shinran cautions his followers about forgetting the gratitude they owe to the many deities and Buddhas or Bodhisattvas who aided them in many lives until they could encounter Amida Buddha's Vow. They are to be compassionate toward those who obstruct the Nembutsu teaching and say Nembutsu on their behalf quietly. They are to act responsibly and avoid antinomian behavior which would bring blame on their teachers and become the excuse for persecution by officials. In any case, the Nembutsu followers are never to retaliate against their opponents, but pray for their eventual salvation.

Shinran never fully resolved this problem. The issue appears in the "Tannisho" and forms the background for discussion of Karma in "Tannisho," Chapter 13. Later successors also undertook to define the relation of faith and social practice in the concept of two truths p absolute and conventional.

According to this principle, there are two aspects to our lives. Faith, the sphere of absolute truth, represents the way to rebirth in the Pure Land. Conventional, secular or worldly truth represents the requirements for living in society. As these areas of religious concern were viewed till modern times, the aspect of absolute truth focuses on nurturing faith in one's mind, awaiting rebirth in the Pure Land. This understanding reinforced the Other-Worldly character of Pure Land teaching. Worldly truth was defined chiefly by Confucian ethical philosophy, centering on filial piety and loyalty to one's lord or the five constants or virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety knowledge and faithfulness.

In the course of Shin Buddhist history a variety of interpretations of the relation of the religious and secular spheres of life emerged. Kakunyo, the third abbot exhorted followers to store up faith inwardly, while externally observing the principles of Confucian ethic. His son Zonkaku compared the two dimensions to the two wings of a bird or wheels of a cart. Both aspects are mutually dependent on each other. The eighth abbot Rennyō at times asserted the priority of the secular law or Confucian ethic and at others the priority of the Buddhadharma.

In the course of Shin history into modern times, a variety of interpretations of the relationship of the two truths emerged. Generally there are five possibilities. These are:

- (1) the religious and secular truth are one truth
- (2) they are parallel truths
- (3) they are mutually related

(4) religious truth influences the secular

(5) the secular truth is upaya or compassionate means

Each of these relationships represents an effort to clarify how a person of faith is to live in society, and in this case, Japanese society which had many problems in opening itself to the modern world. Prof. Takamaro Shigaraki critiques all the alternatives as leading to the subservience of Buddhism to the social order. They all assume Confucian morality as the basic ethical system, whereas Shinran did not regard the value system of society as ultimate or absolute. For Shinran, the world is a lie and deceptive. Thus in the "Kyogyoshinsho," Shinran quotes a sutra which declares that the monk (for him, the person of faith) does not bow before the King, or to his parents nor serve the six closely related persons such as mother, father, elder, younger brothers, elder or younger sister.

As Shinran has shown us there is only one absolute þ the compassion of Amida which transcends our limited human judgments of good and evil. Shinran relativizes our egoistic claims, as well as all worldly value systems. While we may not find specific answers to contemporary problems in his writings þ or in Buddhism as a whole, he provides us with an understanding of ourselves and the world which can enable us to work toward more compassionate, humane solutions in concert with those who also strive for the highest good.

### **Bibliography**

Honganji International Center: "Shinran in the Contemporary World"

Notes

[1] Y. Ueda, trans., "Letters of Shinran," p. 25.

[2] Ibid., p. 58.