

A Critique of Jodo Shinshu

by Hisamatsu Shin'ichi; W.S. Yokoyama, trans.

(The following article is from a series of talks given by Hisamatsu Shin'ichi [1889-1980]. Hisamatsu is well known as a Zen thinker, but he also comes from a strong Jodo Shinshu background and so is able to discuss Shinshu thought sympathetically and at a sophisticated level. This talk, called "Jodoshinshu hihan," was originally published in Ningen no shin'jitsuzon [The true sense of being human] in 1951. Hisamatsu also deals with the problem of Jodo Shinshu in his Genso no ronri [The logic of the Return phase], written around the same time.)

Now, even in Buddhism we find this [problem] with regard to Jodo Shinshu. Though I'm not well versed in Shinshu, the way I see it, for so-called Jodo Shinshu to meet the demands of today's world, Amida cannot be something "out there," Amida has to be who I am. [The Shinshu term] genso, or Return phase [to this world], means presencing oneself (genjo) in the here and now, does it not? That presencing oneself is what I call zettai mu-teki shutai, "absolute Being mediated by Nothingness." When you read Shinshu's "Chapter on Realization" in the Kyogyoshinsho, you come across a passage that says, "It is through the dharmic Dharmakaya (hossho hosshin) [e.g., the One] that the upayanic Dharmakaya (hoben hosshin) [the Multiplicity] is born, it is through the upayanic Dharmakaya that the dharmic Dharmakaya appears [in this world]." This dharmic Dharmakaya is what I call "[the sense of] Being mediated by Nothingness."

It is in [the sense of] this Being mediated by Nothingness that one first crosses the threshold of the realm where one sports in the gardens and groves [of this world], thus enabling one to emerge at the Fifth Gate. This is to enter the Garden of Life and Death, where one can give free reins to one's powers of discrimination. To "give free reins" means that one enters [the Garden of] Life and Death yet is not sullied by it. In more ordinary terms, to enter Life and Death and not be sullied by it is the [sense of] Being transcending time and space alluded to in the [Shinshu] passage, "The Dharmakaya has neither color nor form." When we locate [that Dharmakaya] not "out there," but here, in who I am, this is [the experience of] ojo, or [spiritual] rebirth. It is this ultimate realization that Jodo Shinshu ought to direct us toward. Their so-called shojoju-i, or state of the truly settled, is not the ultimate realization. Shinshu's ultimate realization is what I call the [sense of] Being mediated by Nothingness.

As alluded to in the notion of muen no jihi, or unconditional compassion (or possibly "compassion mediated by Nothingness"), from early on it was clearly recognized that buddha and sentient beings are originally not separate, and this was a fundamental condition of great unconditional compassion (muen no daihi). Clear proof that all people are originally buddha is demonstrated in this ultimate realization, that is to say, there is no gradient of difference between buddha and ordinary person. Unless buddha transcends [express] outward [differences], how much less can it transcend more [subtle] inward ones. When we seek [to demonstrate that proof] in the here and now -- indeed, when I am the agent testifying to that truth -- that's what's known as ojo, or [spiritual] rebirth. When ojo is spoken of as something possible for all people to achieve, this is known as metsudo or nehan (nirvana), "the extinguishing of the flame." At times I speak of a metsudo-teki shutai or nehan-teki shutai, or [the sense of] "Being mediated by nirvana," but this [sense of] Being does not refer to I who am possessed of form, but rather to the formless I who am. That this is what I originally am is what Buddhism teaches.

In Christianity, this is never said. They will never [allow one to] say in Christianity that I am God. There's nothing one can do in Christianity other than to put one's belief in [a] God

["out there"]. Man so-called and God so-called are forever divided. This relation is an absolute one. Here, Christianity and Buddhism are very different. In Buddhism all sentient beings are originally buddha. This buddha so-called, then, is none other than ourselves. There is no buddha outside ourselves. This is to sport in the Garden of Life and Death and to play in the Grove of Afflictions. In the broadest of terms, this means that in who I am originally, there is no distinction between [my being] ordinary or [my being] holy.

Thus, while fully aware of the fact there's no difference in being ordinary or being buddha, for the time being I emerge in the midst [of a world] where such distinctions hold; this is unconditional compassion. And this is upaya. One has become what one originally was not, and through being lost in afflictions [one comes to realize] that what seems to be so is not so, and turning a new leaf is restored to one's original self; here we see [the working of] compassion. This working of compassion is genso, the Return phase. This Return phase is nothing less than the stirrings of what I call [the sense of] Being mediated by nirvana. It is for that who I am beyond time and beyond space to assume a form within time and space in order to emerge [in this world]. This "emerging" is [the working] of the wondrous functioning (myoyu). It is the working of the Return phase. It is in this sense of the Return phase that we first encounter what one might call the original mode of being human or the true mode of human being.

I think it possible for Shinshu to use the kind of approach I've just presented to explain matters. That Shinshu is a kind of Buddhism is [found] in the "Chapter on Realization" of the Kyogyoshinsho's explanation of the Gate to the realm where one sports in the gardens and groves [of this world] (onrin yuge chimon). This statement locates the ultimate mode of being human in the ordinary person's real mode of being. That we are originally participants of the Return phase (genso gyosha) is our real mode of being. And there's no buddha to speak of outside of this -- this is where we really get down to what Buddhism is all about (bukkyo no honshitsu).

On the other hand, [Shinshu's] so-called myokonin, or wonderful radiant people (once regarded as local saints in the feudal period), have yet to come up to snuff by this criterion, and this points out where the myokonin [model] falls short (fu'tettei-teki, or "doesn't penetrate far enough"). In Shinshu kyogi (doctrinal formulations), the so-called myokonin is given the status of shojou-i, or Rank of the truly settled, which means it has met certain criteria.

But if we ask whether that means a myokonin is a participant in the Stance of the return phase (genso-i), we are told this runs against the grain of doctrinal principles (shugi) in the Jodo Shinshu. But it is here, at this point where the myokonin meets its Waterloo (or more simply: where it runs into problems), that Jodo Shinshu stands in need of further development. In Jodo Shinshu, the plain truth is, in the present life everyone is of the Rank of the truly settled. The Rank of the truly settled is, rather, the Going phase (oso, or "going to the pure land").

Ordinarily, in Pure Land Buddhism, we have to wait until the moment of death (rinju) [for the confirmation of our birth in the pure land]. But Jodo Shinshu goes a step further and says there's no need to wait until the moment of death because our birth in the pure land (ojo) has already been settled. If that's the case, we can live out our present life not worrying about the future, we can live our everyday life unconcerned what the future holds. In that sense, the myokonin enjoys a kind of freedom. Rather than be a person who is always fretting, what if I fall into hell, or, maybe I can go to heaven, when our birth in the pure land is a certainty and we have nothing to lose, then we are free to live. Without a care in our hearts, we are free to live out our lives, as long as it lasts. And when it comes time for us to die, upon death we are born in the pure land where we will obtain the ultimate realization. But it is this "[getting our reward] after we die" clause -- that we cannot collect

on the ultimate realization until after we have passed from the present life -- that makes Jodo Shinshu hard for young people to swallow.

In Shinshu, however much faith people like us can muster up, it's never enough to convince us that our present life is in fact the Return phase. Plus, even if we say we've obtained faith, all this means is we've gotten to the Rank of the truly settled. Even if we talk about sokutoku ojo, or the immediate attaining of Birth, this does not mean that we have been Born, only that the condition for our impending Birth has been confirmed. This means the so-called myokonin are only at the Rank of the truly settled, not at the Stance of the return phase. This is the legacy of the Shinshu kyogi (doctrinal formulations) formulated in the medieval period. What Jodo Shinshu needs to do is to shuck off this dried husk in order for fresh new formulations to emerge.

By this I mean that ojo (Birth) and genso (the Return phase) have to be relocated on the center stage of our present life. People say they have been saved by Amida, but even if they have been, what this means is that they have realized the Return phase in their present life, that their sense of Being mediated by Nothingness has been activated in their present life. This is Buddhism's ultimate goal, and seen from the point of view of Buddhism, it is the true mode of being human. Further, this is not only the Buddhist perspective on what it means to be truly human; regardless of whether Buddhism sees it this way or not, it is the true mode of being human. This is what ought to be the true criterion for the myokonin. But Shinshu is unwilling to say it in those terms.

And so those who have shut themselves away in [the closet of] their old beliefs find themselves unable to abandon them. But for people nowadays such [outmoded] beliefs do not sit well with them, and they have trouble bringing themselves to admit [the truthfulness of such claims]. Even our being saved by Amida, where Jodo Shinshu speaks of o-gen eko, or the Turning over of merit of the going phase and the return phase, both the going phase and the return phase are [due to] a turning over of merit [to us] of one and the same buddha, Amida. This being the case, with regard to the Stance of the return phase, this would have to mean we are being saved by Amida. But, if we have attained nirvana, we ought to be [at one with] the dharmic Dharmakaya.

This should mean that at the Stance of the return phase, there ought to be no difference between Amida and who I am. And so it is rather nonsensical for me to be saying that, as I emerge from the Gate to the realm where I sport in the gardens and groves (e.g., as I return to this world), I then encounter an Amida who is an Other to who I am, and that I am saved by that Amida or that my life is being moved [in a certain direction] by that Amida.

That's why in the past several years I've been speaking on what I call the Two faces of the return phase (genso no nijusei, or "the double nature of genso") of Jodo Shinshu. By two faces I mean that, in Shinshu, the Return phase is doubled up on itself. This also is not supported doctrinally (kyogi-teki). Originally, the so-called dharmic Dharmakaya (hossho hosshin) emerged through the so-called upayanic Dharmakaya (hoben hosshin), the so-called dharmic Dharmakaya gave birth to the so-called upayanic Dharmakaya; this [describes] the Return phase. This is what I call zettai'mu-teki shutai no zettai'u-teki myoyu, or "the absolute Wondrous functioning mediated by Existence" of "the absolute Being mediated by Nothingness."

This so-called functioning is the upayanic Dharmakaya. We should note that [in this formulation] there ought to be no Amida existing outside of the upayanic Dharmakaya. But it is asserted that besides this so-called upayanic Dharmakaya there exists another Amida. Since the impetus behind the Return phase is Amida, this should mean [that Amida] is the

Reward-body. But, in Shinshu, there is that Amida, and in addition there is another Amida, an Amida that exists as an Absolute entity. When the Return phase is declared to be [the object of] the turning over of merit, this imputes the existence of another Amida besides the upayanic Dharmakaya of the Return phase. During the Return phase, though, other than that [Return phase] there ought to be no other Amida.

As to why there ought to be none during the Return phase, when one is Born (ojo) and realizes [the goal of] nirvana, at that point the difference between dharmic Dharmakaya and upayanic Dharmakaya is erased; everything has to become one single thing (e.g., the Oneness of dharmic reality). Thus after that who I am has become [one with] the dharmic Dharmakaya, the movement that informs that who I am has to be Amida. Seen from the eyes of those who have yet to realize the dharmic Dharmakaya, this so-called Amida [appears as a being that] extends to them a helping hand -- this is the upayanic Dharmakaya who works to bring those who have yet to realize the dharmic Dharmakaya to a point where they have the potential to realize it for themselves. In short, that is Amida. In that sense, this so-called Amida is an entity "out there" to those who have yet to realize the dharmic Dharmakaya. Here it is an Other, but this so-called Other is different from what Shinshu means by absolute Other. If in Shinshu this were [literally] an absolute Other, this would mean that [Shinshu] is no different from Christianity. That is, it would remain nothing but a medieval [system of religious belief].

But, as I often say, the bodhisattva of the Return phase works to bring those who have yet to awaken to a realization [of the truth]. However, the point where the difference between "the person working [to awaken others]" and "the person being worked on" disappears is where realization takes place. At the point of realization, there is no point of difference between savior and saved. This is how things have to be in this situation. That is, the so-called Return phase is something that is continuous from here to there. At that point, while what is "here" moves "there" in this [Return phase], what this has to mean is that, when we go hither, there is no directing [ourselves] toward some Other. In this place, we are originally and completely free.

What all this means might be best understood by the metaphor of swimming that I often employ. All of us learn to swim through swimming, and so what does this tell us about the problem at hand. When we first get in the water and are almost about to drown, someone comes along to help us. Either someone can save us by coming up to us and swimming alongside, or, instead of being rescued by someone else, we can be taught to swim by ourselves. Without counting on someone to rescue us, we learn to swim, and once we begin to do so, there is no longer any fear of drowning. And this is to truly swim. In terms of the reality we find ourselves, when we are freely living and dying, that is the true anjin, the state of [spiritual] repose [that Shinshu speaks of]. When I myself can swim freely about, that is the state of true spiritual repose.

And so with this kind of person, when we speak of someone being saved by another, this does not mean that someone from outside comes to extend a hand that we latch on to that saves us from drowning -- this being an imagery perhaps more appropriate to Christianity -- but rather, in Buddhism, even if there is no one to extend a hand for us to latch on to as such, [one creates a situation where] one learns by oneself how to swim, and this is the real way of being saved. This is true compassion. This is compassion at work. But Jodo Shinshu people regard Amida as the sole and absolute buddha, and so arrive at a mistaken conclusion in their usual orthodox understanding. They say that Dharmakara Bodhisattva (Hozo bosatsu) is what appears out of the dharmic Dharmakaya. Thus, [in their formulation,] Amida would be the bodhisattva of the Return phase. They seem to reach the conclusion that Dharmakara Bodhisattva must be understood as an Other. In Buddhism, all sentient beings are buddha. This is unlike Christianity which regards God alone as absolute. [In Buddhism all people] are truly equal (byodo).

In the religious life of Shinshu, there is a compelling need today to go full measure to the Stance of the return phase. A new mode of Shinshu shucking off the dry shell [of medieval doctrine] has to appear. This shucking off has to take place if Shinshu is to be restored to its original Buddhist form, that is, Shinshu has to reclaim its origins. While the way of religious life of the Return phase is our original way of being, that too points to the original way for Shinshu. I would further assert that Buddhism itself has its original mode in that sphere. In that place we find the single point to which all forms of Buddhism must return. By a single point of return, I do not mean that the different sects must reach a consensus as to what teachings to promote -- that would be only an outward sign of return. We have to return to the point of origin where there can be no point of difference among the various sects.

By shucking off the old, we can establish a guideline for all of Buddhism. By establishing a guideline I mean a guideline for us to assume that original [mode of being]. There is no other guideline than this. Those who work toward that end, set out to rebuild a world of reality. This is a world unlike the present one, that is, they will be constructing a pure land. Herein, a spectrum of events will be created. Today's science and fine arts and morality -- all of these modern pursuits -- will emerge, without one contradicting the other. All of these things, capturing the moment of that sense of Being mediated by Nothingness, will, expressive of who I am, issue forth.

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