

Spiritual Transformation and the Meaning of Shin Buddhism

by Dr. Alfred Bloom, Emeritus Professor, University of Hawaii

This essay addresses an important feature of Buddhism, Jodo Shinshu or any religion of spiritual depth. That is, Buddhism is a transforming teaching. It transforms our understanding of ourselves, and our world. It gives rise to a broader and more inclusive perspective. It changes attitudes and intellectual horizons. Particularly it transforms our human relations and how we deal with people. Buddhism is not something to be merely believed like a set of doctrine and beliefs. It is not simply a ritual or a set of rules to follow. It is a spiritual force that works in our lives.

In early Buddhism there are stories of people who encountered the Buddha and suddenly attained the "spotless eye of truth." They came to realize the truth of Buddhism in their hearts and minds and became followers of Buddha. Enlightenment in principle means transformation, bodhi or awakening. We waken to the truth. We wake up from ignorance, delusions, greed, hatreds and prejudices. It means to go beyond the petty, superficial misunderstandings which cause us to discriminate against others. The awakening brought about in Buddhism helps us to deal with our anxieties and our unhappiness.

In Mahayana Buddhism, teachers spoke of the "transformation of consciousness." This term refers to a revolution in our consciousness that arises as we become aware of the truth. For instance, at some point in our lives we think that we are self-made, completely independent people and the source of our own success. When there is the transformation of consciousness, we see how others have contributed to our lives, making our success possible, the discipline of our parents, the guidance of our teachers, the support of our friends, as well as the opportunity granted by employers. I recall a story where a woodpecker was pecking away at a tree, when it suddenly fell over. The woodpecker thought he cut the tree down, when in reality, there was a woodsman cutting the tree at the base. Buddhist transformation awakens a deep awareness of our interdependence with all others, even the world of nature.

In Shinran's thought it is called "eshin" or "turning of the mind." It is *hirugaesu*, meaning "to change one's mind." This term is used in quotes of Shinran in the *Tannishō*. Shinran also speaks of the water of our ignorance and passions transformed into the water of the great treasure ocean... of the great wisdom-compassion of the Primal Vow. He states: "The ice of blind passions melts and becomes the water of virtues" (*Collected Works of Shinran, I, p. 42, #91.*).

Our spiritual corpses are transformed as they flow into the sea of the Vow.

*The ocean of the inconceivable Name does not hold unchanged
The corpses of the five grave offenses and slander of the dharma;
The myriad rivers of evil acts, on entering it,
Become one in taste with the ocean water of virtues.*

*Rivers of blind passions, on entering the ocean --
The great, compassionate Vow
Of unhindered light filling the ten quarters --
Become one in taste with that sea of wisdom. (Ibid., p.371, #41-42.)*

Spiritual transformation comes about as we hear of Amida's unconditional compassion expressed in the Vow which we encounter in the midst of our frustrations while trying to solve life's problems on our own. We have all encountered people who are in desperate

straits, needing help. Yet, they insistently refuse assistance, maintaining that they will solve their problem themselves. They end up generally making things worse for themselves and others. There needs to be a transformation of the mind to recognize the compassion that awaits to embrace them and their problems.

Shinran himself describes the process of transformation in the *Sangantennyu* or "Turning through the Three Vows," which he experienced when he moved in his process of attaining true entrusting in Amida's Vow. He moved from the struggle to gain enlightenment through his own power, practicing morality and meditation according to the Nineteenth Vow, through the stage of relying on a practice such as the reciting of the Nembutsu for merit, finally reaching true entrusting, attaining complete understanding of Amida Buddha's Vow, which opened his spiritual eye to the true source of our enlightenment or awakening. This process represents a life of spiritual growth, going beyond self-striving to awareness of Other-Power as the reality of interdependence.

A dramatic illustration of transformation can be found in the story of *Myōhōbō*, related in "The *Godensho*" biography of Shinran. According to this story, when Shinran moved into the area of Eastern Japan to share the Dharma of Other-Power after his release from exile from Kyoto, there was a Yamabushi or Mountain ascetic who opposed his teaching. The Yamabushi were very popular among the villages, because of their prayers for healing, and release from curses and demons. They underwent severe training in the rigorous environment of mountain tops to acquire their spiritual power through mortifying their bodies and trying to gain enlightenment. Demon possession and curses were widespread in Japanese society. The monk threatened to kill Shinran because the compassionate teaching of Amida drew people away from his magical practices...

Shinran's teaching of the unconditional compassion of Amida freed people from magical beliefs and fears of demons and curses. Trust in Amida's Vow is spiritually liberating. In *Tannishō*, Shinran declares that the Nembutsu is the single path free of hindrances. Those who walk this path of freedom are not threatened by demons or any opponents and there is no karmic retribution.

The Yamabushi, *Myōhōbō*, the name he acquired as a disciple of Shinran, plotted to ambush Shinran as he made his daily tour. However, though he waited for his prey, Shinran did not appear. Frustrated and impatient, he went to Shinran's residence to have it out with him. At the instant he met Shinran, all his hatred dissipated and he became one of Shinran's leading disciples.

We do not know exactly what happened, but perhaps Shinran, confident in his own faith, received the monk openly and with friendly compassion. Shinran certainly must have known who he was and was aware of his hatred and his motive for visiting. He would have recognized the distinctive dress of the monk. Secure in Amida's compassion, he conveyed it to *Myōhōbō* who was disarmed spiritually and transformed from an enemy to a friend.

In Shinran's letters, he received news of *Myōhōbō*'s death after an illness with sorrow and fond memory. He recalled the horrendous deeds that he had planned to do but then transformed to an important follower of Amida's Vow.

The transforming power of Amida's Vow still works today as the recitation of the Nembutsu. Shinran has noted that constant recitation of the Nembutsu mellows our minds, enveloping it in compassion. *Namu Amida Butsu* reveals to us the spiritual unity of our human aspirations for truth and fulfillment of life and the embrace of the Infinite which is the meaning of the name. Awareness of the embrace of the Infinite expands the horizons of life in this world through our human fellowship and in the life beyond when we become one with the saving reality that works for the awakening of all beings.