

# Chapter 1

## *Introduction: Personal Observations and Perspectives*

Most westerners are familiar with Zen Buddhism. Although D.T. Suzuki's writings popularized that order of Buddhist thought in America, Suzuki also had deep interest in Shin Buddhism and made significant contributions to its study. As you well know, Shin Buddhism is based on the teachings of Shinran (1173-1263), one of the Kamakura Buddhist leaders who brought new force and depth to Buddhism 800 years ago in Japan. The center from which this spiritual movement emanated was ancient Kyoto, and the monasteries on nearby Mt. Hiei.

At the age of 29, after 20 years of strenuous Tendai Buddhist practice and discipline, Shinran walked out of the monastic life and down into Kyoto, impelled by a sense of utter failure and a desperate urgency to find a meaning in his life with which he could come to terms with life itself, and with death. In the considerable number of his writings that have survived, Shinran speaks to modern man across the bridge of eight centuries. He speaks of the problem of alienation and the barricades of self-deception built by the ego, of fear and loneliness and anxieties. He speaks in a new dimension of good and evil and ourselves. His Shinshu teachings afford a fresh perspective of existential meaning and spiritual depth.

Jean Paul Sartre, the prophet of modern existentialism, ends in despair, accepting life as absurd. Shinran began with despair, accepted his own absurdity, and his own capacity for self-deception and evil. He found existential meaning and consequent spiritual breadth and depth in Amida Buddha. Amida (or Amitabha, Amitayus), is a symbol in the Pure Land Mahayana Buddhist tradition of the Buddha of limitless life and light who spiritually frees and affirms life as it is (without the ego barriers of self-deception) and embraces all life with universal compassion.

Generally speaking, I am a follower of the philosophy expressed in Herman Hesse's "Siddhartha." Ultimately, we all must learn for ourselves. Some people may help us along the way, but the task is really ours alone — as is also indicated in the stark existential perspective of Shinran, when he declared to his questioners: "It is up to you to decide." Buddhism has the ideal of the zenchishiki, the good friend who instructs, and it is as the good friend in this analysis of Shinran, Shinshu and the problems of contemporary life and religion, that I wish to pool my thoughts and experiences with those which you, the reader, bring to this study. I hope, in the following chapters, to think along with you concerning how we may understand

Shinshu's contribution to the modern world and, more specifically, how Shinran's interpretation of Buddhism can be made meaningful despite the centuries that intervene between our lives and his.

There is a difference in the way I, as a convert, approach Shinran. Some may have been raised in the Honganji (Shinshu) tradition since childhood, in Japan, in Hawaii, in Canada, on the U.S. Mainland or in South America. Converts such as myself now have Shinshu groups also in London, Berlin, Brussels, Salzburg, Budapest, Paris, in areas of Switzerland and in Poland.

In my case, I virtually stumbled on Shinran, as if by accident, while I was a deeply committed Christian of the fundamentalist type, and preparing to become a missionary in Japan. All my life I had considered Christianity the unique and only true religion. However, that understanding was shattered as the result of a chance situation in Tokyo during the occupation period following the end of World War II. I was then teaching English by preaching in a church. When I spoke of the Christian idea of Grace, the Christian minister interpreted this by referring to Amida. I had never heard of Amida, and I did not know sufficient Japanese to inquire. The minister could not speak enough English to clarify the comparison, or to explain the concept of Amida to me. I was shocked and asked him how anything else could be like Christianity, but I had to wait years to work out this problem. It later became the basis for my doctoral study of Shin Buddhism which was published in 1965 under the title "Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace." (Eventually, my inquiries into the teaching resulted in my personal commitment and the writing of this study.)

That initial meeting with Shinran in 1946 was also related to personal problems in my life. I was undergoing a developing sense of failure in my religious life and was really quite hypocritical. As a known Christian, indeed as a Christian theological student and, later, a Christian minister, I had to maintain a front with which I was increasingly disenchanted. It is a complicated story from my childhood, but traditional Christianity tends to inculcate guilt in various ways, despite the affirmation that one is saved and accepted by God. Consequently, an individual may form deep self-hatreds, while yet throwing himself or herself more deeply into religion. As I became more broadly educated in the post-war years, I had the opportunity to acquire a knowledge of the Japanese language, to study Shinran's writings in their original form and to come to know many devoted Shinshu people. In this process, I was able to formulate a more positive understanding of life than I had had previously. I thus became a convert to Shinran's teaching and this fact will, I feel, account for some differences in my

attitude and perspective, from the attitude and perspective of the Shin Buddhist who has inherited his faith as a result of family nurture.

Generally, those who inherit a tradition accept the given religious institution as satisfactory and meaningful for their lives. An inherited tradition is like a pair of old and comfortable shoes. The religion is intertwined with family and social community and, as a result, there is usually less tendency to question or even to try to really understand what is given.

The convert, however, tends to focus on the vitalizing experience of the personal encounter with the teaching. It is not part of one's family or community. The individual must stand alone justifying to oneself the decisions that have been made. Consequently, one's interest lies more in the life and experience of the founder who originally set the teaching in motion, than in the institution which was founded to preserve that teaching. (Of course, without the institution the teaching might not be preserved.)

Converts are not necessarily anti-institutional, but the motivating force for their involvement with the institution derives from a deeply personal commitment made on the basis of the enlightenment given to the person by the teaching. Sometimes, there is a wide gap between the attitudes of the convert and the members born into the tradition. It is a crucial difference for a person such as myself, who has found a new truth, when confronted by a member who has inherited an old truth.

As a convert, I anticipate that members understand and take a stand on the basis of the teaching. Traditional devotees acknowledge and honor the teaching, but may not feel impelled to explore it more deeply. They tend to take for granted what excites the person such as myself in the discovery of Shinshu. As a convert, also, I place my focus on Shinran the person, the teacher, the Buddhist. As a result of my own study, I feel close to him in my imagination. I have sometimes tried to visualize what he must have been like in his manner of speech and attitudes. I feel close to him because he experienced a sense of personal failure and frustration which I, in my own way, have experienced. Just as he identified with Yuiembo (his disciple who wrote "Tannisho") I believe he would have identified with me in my plight. I feel close to him, because he was a convert in the deepest sense, in breaking with an age-old tradition of Buddhist discipline and thought in order to realize his own personal understanding of Buddhism. It is in this area of my interpretation that I experience some difficulty with traditional members of Shin Buddhism who believe that they give the essence of Shinran's view by declaring that he was merely a "faithful disciple of Honen." (Or are merely content

with the traditional round of observances and institutional activities, frequently unrelated to the study of the teachings.)

It is true that Shinran relied on Pure Land tradition and exalted his master Honen, but he was not at all a slave of that tradition. Rather, he was creative and independent in his use of tradition to point to deeper dimensions unexplored by earlier teachers. Guided by his own experience in religious endeavor and practice, and by Honen's teachings, he went on to forge a new tradition or, as Prof. Kenko Futaba has written, he opened new horizons in Buddhism.

Radical means going to the root. It also means redirecting insight. In both ways, Shinran was a radical in the deepest and best sense of the word. Yet, I have heard people in Honganji assert that there is nothing radical about Shinran. This view reveals itself in their understanding of the meaning of religious life when decisions have to be made concerning the future of the temple.

Some years ago, there was a Shinshu slogan in Hawaii, "Let us ask Shinran." I believe we should not be asking traditional questions in the hope of getting traditional answers. We must allow Shinran to speak for himself out of his life and the teaching which grew from it. Drawing on his spirit, we should attempt to open new horizons. Though slogans can generally be trite and empty, we could hope that the slogan for another year, "On this foundation ... a new dream," might in the future be nearer to a reality than what has been the case with slogans in the past.

In any case, trite or real, these slogans express the confidence that Shinran has something to say which is meaningful for our time. They also suggest that we are prepared to follow his lead. Shinran becomes the warrant or authority for the position we take in life. Further, when we focus on Shinran, it is not merely the words he spoke on which we focus, but on his whole life. In contemporary thought there has developed a great interest in the concept of story. Every life is a story. Our lives and actions tell a story of the values, convictions, and attitudes we have. The story is important because it involves a plot, a theme, or a direction which gives a sense of wholeness to life.

It is significant that myths which tell of the basic values of a community are in story form. Rather than our lives being merely a disjointed series of unrelated events, the story concept implies they are all related and hold together. Shinran's life is intermingled with legend. However, there are sufficient indications from the reality he expresses in his writings, that the theme of his life was the realization of compassion and a deep abiding concern for the masses

who, like himself, had no hope of achieving Buddhist ideals by following the traditional paths of discipline and purification. In this study, I shall approach Shinran's life as story from an existential perspective, that same perspective from which I view religion as a whole.

Existentialism is generally understood to focus on concrete individual existence. The concrete individual is faced with the daily necessity of deciding what is important for his or her life and what values are primary in making judgments affecting oneself and others. To live existentially is to develop an understanding of oneself as a center of value and a focus of reality which radiates out to others. We are limited, but there is a core of freedom which makes us human. Even in an extreme situation a person can choose one's attitude — can even choose death, an existential choice illuminated in Victor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning."

Basically, existentialism is the experience of liberation from the domination of circumstance, whether physical, social, moral or spiritual. Rather than experiencing oneself in a self-conscious manner, one becomes self-aware. I use the word self-conscious in the distinct sense of being dominated, controlled by external pressures, a condition whose external signs are embarrassment and shame. One may visualize oneself as a cog or tool or pawn of reality. It is a sense of powerlessness.

To become self-aware means to see oneself as an extension of reality into the world with the potential of joining with others to communicate and realize one's deepest ideals and aspirations. To live existentially or authentically is also to grasp clearly one's limitations, weaknesses, and imperfections. It involves the tension of realizing one's powers while yet knowing one's weaknesses, a tension Shinran acutely describes in "Tannisho," chapter 4, where he discusses the two types of compassion.

Shinran distinguishes self-powered compassion from that of Amida, the compassion of Other Power or Pure Land compassion. In "Tannisho," likewise, Shinran's existential awareness also appears in the discussion on karma with Yuiembo in chapter 13. Shinran's existential perspective, as it emerges in "Tannisho," helps us to understand the limitations of our lives while, at the same time, attunes us to a power (reality) which lifts our vision beyond those limitations. As I see it, the existential approach to religion involves a life strategy. It means to have a foothold, a standpoint, to take a stand within the stream of life. We may compare it with an individual crossing a stream, and seeking out the rocks on which he may place his foot to negotiate the swift current.

In Pure Land Buddhist tradition, the tradition of Honen and Shinran, the type of decision and resoluteness involved in authentic existence is indicated in Shan Tao's (Zendo) story of the White Path which is frequently told in our temples. The individual confronting the many challenges of existence must launch out with faith and decisiveness to tread the White Path, the thin line which always separates us from meaning or chaos.

In such a situation one takes responsibility for one's own existence. Whatever meaning there is in life and the world, for yourself and others, ultimately rests with you. This has been the Buddhist message from the beginning when, more than 2,500 years ago, Buddha urged his disciples to be lamps unto themselves, and not to take refuge in others. His was a call to self-responsibility, not selfishness.

The Pure Land tradition, including Shinran's teachings, is generally viewed as other-worldly and relating little to concerns of this life. Over the years, memorials and funerals became the main activities of the religious community. In Japan, it is today tagged as "Funeral Buddhism." However, close inspection of Shinran's teaching shows him to be more concerned with one's living in this world once faith is established and one's future destiny is secure. In order to uncover the essence of Shinran's teaching for our time, a considerable amount of the traditional perspective must be revised, and the misimpression of "Funeral Buddhism" discarded.

To understand Shinshu, to revise the traditional perspective of Shinran and comprehend its essential relevance to our time, I offer five points to consider in approaching the subject of religion, and of religious traditions. First, I am a believer in history. Everything must be seen in its relation to history and the context from which it emerges. Second, I am also a believer in concrete, personal existence as the central issue of religion and thought. Whatever abstract ideal or theory we accept must have its roots and relationship in our immediate experience of life. Third, I believe in metaphysical and philosophical thinking. Metaphysics attempts to clarify the mystery of existence. It is never complete, but open. Even though few questions have final solutions, it is necessary to question and explore. It has been said that the unexamined life is not worth living. Fourth, to me, religion means openness, sharing, compassion, love, justice, and community. To be open does not mean to be apathetic or uncritical. Sharing does not mean squandering. Compassion and love are not sentimental emotions, but fundamental life values. Justice is not legalism; community does not require conformity. Fifth, as I believe it was in the life of Shinran, tradition should be a stepping stone to deeper insight and experience, and not a barrier to growth. Tradition should not become

ingrown, but it should be out-growing as it correlates to the ongoing times. Although we modify a quote of Dr. Radhakrishnan concerning Hinduism, we should consider Buddhism in the following way: “Buddhism is a movement, not a position; a process, not a result; a growing...tradition, not a fixed revelation.” [1]

The method I employ in the process of studying religion, and the process I shall use in the following sessions on Shinshu, is to try to discover the principle of thought which lies behind an incident or teaching. This principle should then be considered in relation to the Buddhist tradition which lies in the background. The traditional Buddhist view may reinforce or contrast with the principle. We may then proceed, after placing it in its proper context, to relate it to the world of our experience. In relating the principle to our own time, we apply the principle of extension. This is the Buddhist idea of “egifueimon” which means not to be bound to the strict letter, or literal interpretation of Buddhism. Such a process of reinterpretation at work will be evident in our discussion of the concept of Nembutsu in later chapters.

By extension we mean to apply a teaching to an area that has not previously been considered as relating to that teaching. To do this, it is important to maintain the consistency of a tradition within itself. In this, the concept of hon'i, or original intent, is implicit. Despite differences between himself and earlier Pure Land Tradition, Shinran is thought to maintain the original intention or idea of universal salvation of that tradition. Shinran's reformulation of Pure Land teaching beyond his predecessors is also represented in the distinction of Tradition (dento) and Personal Insight (kosho).

Pure Land teaching has traditionally been viewed as an individualistic religion of salvation in another world. It was originally promoted, however, as a teaching which was correlated to the times and to the nature of being (jikiso). This original intent was carried out by Shinran. Similarly in our day, we may apply the teaching socially, as well as individually, in order to correlate it to the demands of our own age. As Shinran did in his lifetime, we may analyze it for its guidance in issues of present-day life.

It has always been a principle of Buddhism that the Dharma — the body of the teachings that is viewed as the vehicle of insight into the truth — corresponds to the needs of beings. This is the principle behind the compassionate doctrine and method of hoben, or upaya, the device of tactfulness or — as it has sometimes been paradoxically described — the lie that tells the truth.

The necessity for religion to be relevant to human needs and concerns is not a new emphasis in Buddhism, but in countering the tendency of institutionalization to divorce itself from

existential relevance, this Buddhist principle should be recovered as a way to face problems, rather than avoid them.

Buddhism's comprehensive approach to existence is symbolized in the concept of 84,000 dharmas. This enormous figure is meant to show that every possibility of human perspective is already a part of Buddhism. No idea is to be rejected, so far as it is true, merely because it may not have been taught earlier. This is a criticism Mahayana Buddhism had to face in stories of conflict with conservative monks in the "Lotus Sutra." Confucius also was described as a person who knew how to bring the new out of the old. This is the role of the teacher. He does not wipe out the past and make his own system. Instead, he contemplates the resources of the past and brings to light new approaches and perspectives. This to me is what Shinran accomplished. I, of course, am not Buddha or Confucius or Shinran, but my task is the same. We must canvass the possibilities and we must seek out the new way.

Religion must be involved with contemporary human problems, but in canvassing the past to seek new ways for the present, we cannot expect religion to give detailed solutions to the many issues that confront us. Some people reject religion because they do not find the answers they desire there. But, to me, what religion provides is an angle of view, basic principles and values, as well as an understanding of human nature and relationships which can contribute to our contemporary considerations. Religion conditions our attitudes and relations to people, which may make solutions to particular problems more easily achieved. It is all this, in Shinran's teachings and in his life story that open horizons of existential relevance to our modern world. Shinshu gives us a point to stand on that is a dynamic process, a movement, not a static position in Buddhism. Rather it is a tradition that continues to evolve and grow, to attract people such as myself. Before we explore Shinshu's relevance more deeply, there is the question of just what is the contemporary religious situation of the world in which you and I live.

## **Bibliography**

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## Study Help

Two Rivers and the White Path ...

The parable of "Two Rivers and the White Path" depicts the process by which one is received into the Pure Land of Amida Buddha.

A traveler, who was heading west to meet an old friend, came upon two rivers, a river of fire and a river of water.

They were very deep and dangerous and it seemed impossible to cross them. Then he found a white path between them, but the path was narrow and it was alternately covered by burning flames and splashing water.

He was at a loss, and it was worse since wild animals and robbers were drawing close to him. He was driven to the point where there was no choice but to walk through the white path.

When he was about to proceed, he heard a voice from behind, "Do not fear. Go ahead!" Then, there was another voice from beyond the path, "Cross the path for your life!" He also heard the voice of robbers, "Do not go. It is too dangerous. Remain and be our ally!"

He was confused. Then, he again heard a voice from beyond the path, "Do not be afraid! Believe me. I will protect you from falling into the rivers."

Encouraged and guided by the unknown voices, he crossed the path over flames and splashing water. By the skin of his teeth, he not only escaped death but also realized his wish to be reunited with his old friend.

The voice from behind was Shakyamuni Buddha's encouragement and the one from beyond the path was Amida Buddha's guidance. The White Path symbolizes faith or belief.

(Rev. K. Urakami, "Selected Sayings of St. Honen," pp. 100-104)

## Notes

[1] John Cogley, "Religion in a Secular Age," p.43.