

## Chapter 18

### *Nembutsu — Myokonin*

In order to strengthen a holistic understanding of the Nembutsu as a way of life, it is appropriate to again consult the history of Shin tradition and view in terms of their impact on our own attitudes towards existence, the remarkable group of Shin Buddhists who are called myokonin, or “wonderfully good people.”

Every existential faith produces an ideal type who embodies the true tendencies of a religion. In Christianity there is the saint, in Islam the Sufi mystic, in Judaism the hasid, in Taoism the sage, in Hinduism the acharya, mahatma, in Buddhism the arhat and bodhisattva, and in Buddhist history in Japan, the bosatsu and hijiri. If it is to have profound influence, religion must be expressed in personality, not merely in theory, as each of the foregoing — and, in Shin Buddhism, the myokonin — does.

In recent years myokonin have been brought to the forefront of Shinshu religious life, and considerations of its nature and meaning, by Dr. Daisetsu Suzuki, who gave us insight into their attitudes in such writings as “The Myokonin” and “Sayings of a Modern Tariki Mystic” in his “A Miscellany on Shin Buddhism,” his “Kono Mama (I am that I am) on Saichi” and “Translations from Saichi’s Journal” in “Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist.” In addition, several articles on the subject have appeared in the *American Buddhist*: “Portrait of a Myokonin, Genza” in October 1971; “Shoma of Sanuki Province,” by Rev. Jitsuen Kakehashi, in March 1972; and “Myokonin — an Aspect of Faith,” by Rev. Tsunoda, in November, 1972.

The term “myokonin” became more prominent in the Edo period (1600-1868) with the production of “Myokoninden” — a collection of biographies of myokonin based on the teachings of Shinran and Honen, which originated during the later years of the Tokugawa period. Stories of farmers, merchants, and samurai as myokonin and their unlettered, simple manifestation of faith were used to stimulate people to emulate their virtues. Politically, this was promoted to encourage in others the myokonin sense of acceptance and compliance. Many stories support the feudal order, and meet certain problems such as the rise of new religions, pursuit of worldly benefits among peasants, and unethical behavior in the Shin order. In our 20th century, D.T. Suzuki and Teramoto Eitatsu described the myokonin Saichi to show spiritual self-awareness. The contemporary biographies of myokonin like Saichi emphasize their inner religious consciousness. In the Shin tradition, there are two contending

views of their significance: the one that they are not typical of religious life and are heretical; the other that they are the elemental and pure expressions of Shinshu.

Through their self-introspection, the myokonin perceived within themselves the activity of the great life power based on Jinen honi, the “truth that becomes so by itself,” of which Shinran wrote in the last years of his life. According to Dr. Suzuki, the term “myoko” refers to the wondrous beauty of the lotus flower which became a symbol for spiritually developed human persons. Few comparable terms such as this are found in Buddhism, although Honen had said that faith could not be attained “unless one became like an unlettered nun,” (Amanyudo).

Undo Gido has analyzed the variety of types and three major forms of myokonin. In the form of religious consciousness they share internal joy and their joyful appearance is a form of external propagation. In their lifestyle, the myokonin may range from an egoless form, a wisdom form, a self-reflection form, to a unifying form. In personality, the myokonin may have a severe form, a gentle form, an argumentative form, or a wisdom (sagacious) form. In relation to the society of their times, myokonin have appeared in various stances. They appeared first within the Clan-Shogunate system, then at the end of the Shogunate and in the Restoration period, and next within the system of Imperial Absolutism of Meiji and Taisho. Today, they are to be discerned within modern democratic society. Such distinctions represent an attempt to see the myokonin in relation to their progressive or conservative ethical orientation resulting from their religious views. [1]

It remains a problem whether the myokonin’s characteristic passivity resulting from deep religious experience is simply compliance or a form of resistance. Social analysis does not determine this in the hundreds of individuals whose actions and attitudes speak eloquently of the potentialities in Shin faith to produce such “wonderfully good people.” As Rev. Tsunoda notes:

“In the lives of these people we find many such related incidents – in which the emotions are ranked as far superior to the intellect. Faith to them is how you feel in your heart and how that feeling is manifested outwardly — in acts of rejoicing, crying, laughing, etc.” [2]

While the myokonin may appear sentimental and emotional, what is at issue is the involvement of their whole being in their faith and how that faith flowed out when stimulated by the situation in which they found themselves.

They were also individuals who, standing in the stream of history and confronting the problems of their existence, achieved a deeper subjective awareness of the true nature of their lives. They fulfil the principle of Shinran and that of Kierkegaard: "Truth is subjectivity." This awareness permitted them to find meaning despite conditions in their lives and times of political powerlessness and economic poverty. Although they have been criticized for their social acquiescence and compliance to the demands of a despotic social order, it has been pointed out by some scholars that their compliance was not the unconscious subservience of the typical individual, but a compliance founded in a deeper perspective of their relations to reality. They conformed, but they were not slaves of the order. In fact, they had an inner autonomy that transcended the social order.

According to Dr. Suzuki, the myokonin do not allow abstract theory and cares in the mind to obstruct faith, and they rely on the Other Power which flows in despite the existence of "84,000" passions. Saichi declares:

"I may be in possession of 84,000 evil passions,

And Amida too is 84,000 –

This is the meaning of oneness of Namu-amida-butsu." [3]

Myokonin tend to have no social status. They appear in villages, in market places, in a variety of occupations. Since Pure Land Buddhism, including Shinshu, was persecuted in the post Kamakura period in Japan, they tended to adopt a passive attitude. This tendency gained strength from the idea of being a defiled person of the last age, inferior and low in potential. The attitudes which they expressed were Arigatai — thankfulness, Mottainai — unworthiness, and katejikenai — gratitude. Such attitudes, under social or political stress, were generally non-resistant and harmless.

Most characteristic of the myokonin is their attitude of absolute acceptance despite any evil or danger, and their ability within such difficult, threatening circumstances, to express joy and gratitude. Such was possible because of the unification in their person of the Shinshu experience of faith — the simultaneity and spontaneity of gratitude and repentance. There was an inner trans-ethical conversion that realized the unity of Buddha and being (Ki-ho-ittai). The awareness of this transforming, permeating sense of oneness and interdependence as expressed in the Nembutsu is indicated in their free and uninhibited life attitude — an attitude that goes beyond social compliance and social ethic, that roots in Nature — Jinen. There

develops in these myokonin an inner autonomy resulting from the self-denial which opens them to the relation with the absolute dharma. The theological bases of their religious outlook consist of the principles of the Unity of Buddha and Beings (Bonbutsuittai, Kihoittai) and the concept of Jinenhoni, naturalness, stressed by Shinran (truth becoming so by itself). The subtle non-dual-duality of their Shin consciousness is succinctly expressed by Saichi:

“How wretched!

What is it that makes up my heart?

It is no other than my own filled with infinitude of guilt,

Into which the two syllables na-mu have come,

And by these syllables infinitude of guilt is borne,

It is Amida who bears infinitude of guilt.

The oneness of the ki and the ho –

‘Namu-amida-butsu!’” [4]

In more emotional terms, Saichi exclaims:

“My joy!

How beyond thought!

Self and Amida and the Namu-Amida-Butsu.

How fine!

The whole world and vastness of space is Buddha!

And I am in it –

‘Namu-amida-butsu!’” [5]

“My heart and Oya-sama –

We have just one heart

Of Namu-amida-butsu" [6]

While contemporary critics may view these characteristics as socially irrelevant because of the conformity they produce, as we consider the models we need for dealing with our modern problems, we must not overlook the religious basis of the myokonin and its relation to their lives. Suzuki asks whether, granted that such attitudes are good for individual existence, are they good for collective life? Passivity, to a robber, also has social implications. A society is made of individuals, but we must strive to produce people who do not become robbers and for this kind of development, the Pure Land understanding of life needs cultivation. The importance of such an understanding embodied in the myokonin yields the meaning of Tariki — Other Power — as the foundation of social life as well as for the individual lives which make up society. The myokonin, like Shinran, express a deep sense of personal imperfection and sinfulness. Mrs. Mori, a myokonin, conveys this:

"Though in parental relationship with Amida,

I cannot help from time to time

Being bothered with evil thought.

How shameful indeed! Namu-amida-butsu!

How hard I try not to cherish them!"

"Looking at my evil self

I realize what a deplorable thing it is.

Truly an old hag, this disgusting ego!

But she is ever with Oya who refused to part with her.

How grateful indeed! Namu-amida-butsu!" [7]

As it had earlier for Shinran, this deep awareness of their own limitations and weakness — forced upon them through the complexities of their lives — became the revelation of the abiding compassion of the Buddha to myokonin like Saichi and Mrs. Mori. They believed that this awareness was itself the illumination of Amida's light and the guarantee of their ultimate attainment. In that confidence, fears and anxieties for the outcome of their lives melted away,

and they gave themselves over to joy and praise and even an intimacy with the Buddha, whom they regarded as Oya-sama (parent).

Saichi expressed the parental sense of Amida which Oya-sama indicates:

“Amida is my Oya-sama,

I am child of Amida;

Let me rejoice in Oya-sama,

in ‘Namu-amida-butsu,’

The ‘Namu-amida-butsu’ belongs to child as well as to Oya-sama;

By this is known the mutual relationship (between Three and me).” [8]

We should not miss the importance of their sense of personal evilness for it marks as much a comment and judgment on their age as it does an indication of their own inner life. As with Shinran, they internalized the corruption of their age and understood their own complicity in that corruption. Thus despite their apparent compliance to contemporary social demand, they point to a deeper level for judging and relating to life and those about them. Despite the unity of this world and the Pure Land experienced by the myokonin, they did recognize its evils:

“How dreadful!

This world known as shaba

Is where we endlessly commit all kinds of karma.

How thankful!

All this is turned into (the work of)

the Pure Land — Unintermittently!” [9]

Perhaps the best way to approach the unique perspective of the myokonin is to give a few examples of the type of response they might make to situations. Shoma of Sanuki manifests the type of intimacy the myokonin felt with Buddha. On one occasion, when he went to the temple, he decided to take a nap and so he fell asleep before the altar of Amida. When worshippers came in they scolded him, declaring he was disrespectful. Shoma retorted, “You

are the ones who should be ashamed. I am in my father's home and when I am with my father, isn't it only natural that I relax? You are the ones who are acting as strangers to Amida."

Numerous such tales are told of Shoma, who is said to have resembled a modern hippie, since he worked at odd jobs and was itinerant. His intelligence is attested by the fact that he memorized the Shoshinge of Shinran and the Gobunsho of Rennyo. He detested superficial religion, the memorization of texts without comprehension of them. Among the most striking of Shoma's encounters is the time he worked in a bathhouse and was called upon to wash a magistrate's back. While doing so, Shoma commented, "Taking (from others) to eat, you've gotten fat." He slapped the magistrate on the back and added, "Don't forget your indebtedness!" Everyone thought Shoma would receive severe punishment because samurai could kill members of the lower class without penalty. Later the magistrate summoned Shoma, whom the village leader advised to offer a strong apology in order to save his life. However, rather than exacting retribution by taking Shoma's life, the magistrate said to the myokonin, "You're honest. Now leave." So, in his own way, Shoma commented on the character of life in the Japan of his time through his own direct and free expression.

An interesting comment on religion comes from another story of Shoma. On one occasion Shoma was assistant in a temple. He had to carry in the sutras for a service sponsored by a rich supporter. When they were entering the house, the priest told Shoma, "You enter from the kitchen entrance." Shoma replied, "That's where you should enter." In this instance, Shoma was remarking on the assumption of status of the priest merely because he wore the kesa, while Shoma, even though carrying the sacred books themselves, was regarded as a lower person. It was Shoma's way of noting that all are equal before the Buddha. This went even to the point of bowing to a dog. When questioned on that occasion by a priest, Shoma replied they, too, were objects of Amida's Vow.

The myokonin, Genza, expresses the seriousness of faith in his custom of helping people to attain serene faith. Though of advanced age, he would go out on cold mornings against the advice of his family. He would reply to their admonitions:

"I fully appreciate your worry over me, but I must remind you that I am going over for the most important matter in life. Most things you can do-over or make-up in this world, but this matter of life and death is just one chance, and when this is misunderstood, then everything is lost for the poor fellow." [10]

Genza even injected humor into his situation. When a friend commented how difficult it must be to hurry so with his bent back, he replied, "No, no bother about walking, because as you can see, my head is already going ahead of me and the only thing to do now is to see that my legs would go forward in time to keep me from falling head-on."

Then there is the instance of Seikuro, who was a very diligent farmer and never missed giving the tribute which officials demanded, though other farmers fled. In recognition of his dutiful attitude towards the government, Seikuro received exemption from the annual tribute and the privilege to take firewood from the manorial hills. He also was put in charge of the lands. However, he refused on the basis it would interfere with his religious life. This is an example that despite compliance with the social order, the myokonin was not its slave and retained his own existence. In all these instances, the myokonin not only exemplified a wondrously good person, but also one embraced by the mystery of goodness, the fully harmonized person in life. His faith is his being. His being is faith. They represent the ideal of every age where people confront gaps in their lives: contradictions between the inner and outer, and the higher and lower in their being.

Strength of commitment is manifested among other myokonin such as the case of one Ryoken, a follower of Rennyo. When there was a temple fire, he rushed in to save the volume on Realization of the "Kyogyoshinsho" which had been forgotten. In so doing, he died from the flames, but the book was preserved. In another instance there was Araki Mataroku, a samurai. He constantly recited the Nembutsu and received the ridicule of his fellows. When he was counseled to stop, he pleaded that it came naturally to him and he could not stop. He made a poem to the effect that though he endures people speaking of the Nembutsu he voices and strives for prudence toward their criticism, for himself already his own ragged Nembutsu is unbearable, as the rising fire is too much for the water. On hearing this, his critics so admired his sincerity that they stopped their ridicule.

These few examples reveal something of the inner resolve of the myokonin, a state of mind and heart which formed the basis of their religious existence. Despite various criticisms and variation in attitude and action among the myokonin, they point the way whereby an individual may take a stand in history based on his or her own felt perception of the ultimate truth of life and the world. It is no exaggeration to say that the myokonin as spiritual exemplar represent very significant expressions of faith. They are the mirror in which Shinshu sees in concrete form the working of Amida's compassion, the absolute reliance of Amida's Vow.



## **Bibliography**

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## **Notes**

[1] Shukyo Kenkyu, March 1968

[2] American Buddhist, Nov. 1972, p. 3

3 D.T. Suzuki, "Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist," p. 185

[4] Ibid., p. 188

[5] Ibid., p. 177

[6] Ibid., p. 178

[7] D.T. Suzuki, "Miscellany on Shin Buddhism," pp. 73-74

[8] D.T. Suzuki, "Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist," p. 179

[9] Ibid., p. 196

[10] "Portrait of a Myokonin — Genza," American Buddhist, October, 1971.