

Chapter 19

The Ultimate End of Faith (Part 1)

The debacle of Jonestown and the Peoples Temple adherents in Guyana in the winter of 1978 (and now such movements as Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo in Japan) expressed an ultimate in blind faith, and has given rise to serious reflection on the nature of religion and religious commitment. From a Buddhist perspective, one of the most striking aspects of that tragedy was the virtual absolute rule of Jim Jones and the blind devotion of his followers. The history of religion evidences frequent confusion of faith and fanaticism. Unquestioning obedience often becomes a requirement of that faith. The history of Buddhist teaching reveals an awareness of the deceptions and delusions involved in religion itself. Buddhism is critical of anything that would substitute for the truth. The principle of Emptiness itself must be emptied. Dogen Zenji declared that Buddhism means to transcend Buddhism, that Buddhism questions all dogmatic, religious assertions however pious or appealing as a sign of our inveterate egoism. For the Buddhist, the issue is not how religious one may be, but whether the ego is transcended.

In Pure Land Buddhism, some believers regard the Pure Land as an other-worldly, naive heaven, but as seen in our early discussion of myth as truth, the Pure Land as a symbol has a spiritual dimension, and expresses the ideal of ego-transcendence. Religious faith also must provide a sense of hope and final fulfillment of its ideals. For Shinran, the Pure Land was specifically identified with Nirvana — not merely as a secondary launching platform for the attainment of Nirvana itself. For him, it was not a mere condescension to human inability and weakness, a holding out of the carrot of rebirth in a heaven to stimulate faith. Above and beyond the final goal of a Pure Land of bliss where the departed may reside, Shinran emphasized the return to this world in wondrous Buddhahood to save all other beings. The end of religion is not *oso* (going to the Pure Land), but *genso* (returning from the Pure Land). Religion is not a selfish preoccupation to gain security and benefit for oneself. It is, rather, a process whereby through one's own faith, one helps others to faith (as in the case of the *myokonin Genza*). One's own faith becomes the existential condition whereby faith may arise in others.

Although Mahayana Buddhism is a missionary tradition, the aspect of mission is not clearly formulated as a task or goal of its numerous institutions. Outgoing compassion is generally expressed in the indirect, symbolic, magical *eko* (transfer of merit) rather than in the direct

organized activity which we identify generally as missionary activity. In modern times, prejudice against missions as performed by Christian sects reinforce this tendency of Buddhism to slough off its sense of mission. Such missions as Buddhism does carry out are more passive and permeative rather than active and direct. Since Buddhism generally became identified with the folk culture of the countries to which it spread, any impetus to mission was limited. Yet, in the contemporary era, the sense of mission needs to be developed in a more outgoing articulation of the ideals, values, and potential of Buddhism to deal with the problem of life. The issue in such a mission is not aggressiveness, but a reaching out to suffering beings in all areas of their need, a becoming part of the great compassion of the Vow.

In their sense of disseminating the teachings, Buddhist sutras usually involve a mission. The stories they tell present the core of Buddha's teachings to the world. The tradition derived from the three Pure Land sutras has been noted particularly for the aspect of hope which it offers to ordinary men and women through birth in the Pure Land as the basis for ultimate enlightenment. The presentation of the sutras certainly implies a mission to all beings.

Prior to Shinran, the Pure Land was regarded as a launching platform to enlightenment, though for the masses it was an end in itself to the sufferings in this world. When we come to Shinran, we can observe that for him, the Pure Land was Nirvana and was therefore not a launching platform or a secondary phase but the ultimate end of life. He depicted the birth in the Pure Land (oso) as the attainment of Buddhahood, and thus set the stage for a more penetrating understanding of this concept. Although this distinction was not new with him, Shinran emphasized that there were two aspects to Amida's transfer of merit on behalf of beings. There was the aspect of going to the Pure Land (oso) and the aspect of return (genso). It is this latter aspect that has central meaning for any discussion of the ultimate end of faith as understood in Shin Buddhist teachings, and as an illustration of how Shinran conceived of religion in a totally non-egoistic way.

Based on the Vows of Amida, Shinran declared that the goal of faith is the salvation not only of oneself, but of all beings. Popular Pure Land tradition has generally stressed the aspect of "going" since obviously the issue of mortality appears most immediate. However, in so doing, religion has been made an exercise in egoistic self-concern to assure one's salvation. In the consideration of Shinshu in the modern world, it may be possible to reinterpret the futuristic element in the principle of Return to a present reality in which our daily actions and lives as well as the efforts of others might be considered as Buddha in the world working for the salvation of all. Saichi was able to see this in terms of the Pure Land itself:

“My joy is that while in this world of shaba

I have been given the Pure Land –

‘Namu-amida-butsu!’” [1]

He also identifies himself and Tathagata:

“O Saichi, who is Nyoraisan? He is no other than myself!” [2]

Everything in the world is, for Saichi, the manifestation of Amida’s compassion:

“How grateful!

When I think of it, all is by him (Amida’s) grace.

O Saichi what do you mean by it?

Ah, yes, his grace is real fact.

This Saichi was made by his grace;

The dress I wear was made by his grace;

The food I eat was made by his grace;

The footgear I put on was made by his grace;

Every other thing we have in this world was all made by his grace,

Including the bowl and the chopsticks;

Even this workshop where I work was made by his grace;

There is really nothing that is not the ‘Namu-amida-butsu!’

How happy I am for all this!

‘Namu-amida-butsu!’” [3]

Just as ki and ho give ultimate meaning to the world in which we live, they — together with the principle of genso — establish an active side in Shin Buddhism, a mission for men and women of faith to fulfill and make real. The compassion of Amida expresses itself in many

unseen and hidden ways as the world itself, and to be an active part of that compassion in a spontaneous, non-ego-centered way is the ultimate end of faith in Shin Buddhism.

Undoubtedly, in the past, the social circumstances of history limited the active side of this perspective from expressing itself, but in the modern age, the fulfillment of meaning in human existence lies not in merely being recipients of meaning, but in becoming bearers of that meaning. *Namu Amida Butsu* is an existential response that can signify this active expression. The embodiment of ego-transcendence in those who experience the one thought-moment of settled faith can ameliorate and help change the suffering of a self-centered, ego-focused humanity.

Such an active expression of the ultimate end of faith involves two other aspects in Shinshu, in Buddhism of the Pure Land schools, and in Buddhism in general. One of these aspects is the limits of human compassion and the other is the relationship between filial piety and our role as human beings, both of which are deeply involved in any consideration of the ethical or social aspects of faith. These will be taken up in more detail in subsequent discussions.

Any such exploration of Shinran's thought and teachings inevitably leads to a consideration of the style of life and action which grows out of the internalization of that thought and those teachings. Every religious view implies some stance or approach to the problem of living and human relations, and this is true also of Shinshu.

The principles of "neither monk nor layman," of joy and gratitude, of *Nembutsu* as total existence, the examples of *myokonin* and the idea of *genso* (the return to this world as Buddha), embody the understanding that our very lives should manifest the reality of Buddha; compassion and wisdom. We are to give those qualities existential reality and not merely an abstract and idealistic verbalization. In fact, the principle of absolute Other-Power which distinguishes Shinran's religious view demands inquiry as to how Shinran's way of life, implied by his teachings, significantly differs from that of traditional Buddhism. Or, to put it in more experiential terms: How does one live egolessly in an egoistic world? How does one keep faith and life together? If there is only faith, there is formalism. If there is only action, there may be no depth. What is a non-moralistic ethic?

In his study "Shinran's Philosophy and Faith," Terada Yakichi indicates that it was Shinran's achievement to bring life and faith together in the history of Buddhism. That is, Shinran made Buddhism a part of daily life and in that way can be said to have originated laypeople's Buddhism. Terada notes that through its history, Buddhism was separated from ordinary life

through the establishment of monastic existence so that, in time, Buddhism became very difficult for laypeople to understand. As faith became separated from ordinary life, it also became more formalistic. Terada sees this process at work in the development of Hinayana which then stimulated the evolution of Mahayana.

In Mahayana, it was the rise of Pure Land which in its evolutionary turn once again tried to bring faith and life together. The *igyodo* (way of easy practice) was a problem revolving around monks and a way of a life of faith, a way which took a bold leap with Shinran when he made the evil person the true object of Amida's Vow and totally abolished the distinction of monk and layperson. Legitimation of marriage, and the eating of meat were two changes in lifestyle in Shinran's fellowships. There is no question that Shinran's interpretation of Buddhism opened the way to a new style of Buddhist life in his age — but what does it mean for now, for our own age, for we modern, alienated, absurd, and lonely men and women of this mappo era?

The ultimate test of any system of thought is its meaning in everyday life, its survival as idea translated into terms of ordinary experience. Societies through the ages have recognized dangers in free religious commitment and have made efforts to restrain or dilute any commitment which might expose the exploitation or oppression in a society. There have been numerous examples of this in the persecution of Socrates, Jesus, the prophets of Israel, Zoroaster, Honen, and his disciples including Shinran, and Nichiren. In diluting religion and blurring its critical focus, society encourages two approaches. First, religion focuses on this-worldly success defined in terms of the prevailing order. It promises physical and mental benefits from its practice. It highlights the immediate needs of individuals for health, wealth, and security which it grants at the expense of conformity to established social powers. Secondly, it focuses attention on the afterlife, making conformity to present social norms a means of securing a good destiny in that afterlife. For this reason, magical and other-worldly religions are often deficient in social criticism.

Society fears any religion that gives an individual an independent basis for moral judgment on affairs related to his life. We can trace such issues in American and Japanese societies. By reducing religion to a partial and pragmatic concern, its essential moral impact is blunted, and although societies have been interested in accomplishing this, they have not been without ethical orientation. In all types of religious traditions there can be distinguished two types of moral concern.

First, there is the communal, socially-supported, prudential ethic. It usually takes the form of negative abstention — the things an individual is to avoid in order to not receive punishment or be exposed to shame and public censure. An ethic of this type aims at preserving the status quo and at avoidance of individual problems. It is a system-maintenance ethic and generally stresses how to get along within the system. The second ethical orientation is more positive and out-going. It faces problems created by the system by placing individual good before the good of the system. It is motivated by compassion, love, or justice, and seeks higher goals than mere social order. In our time, it has been seen in the call for justice versus law and order. If the first ethic is other-directed, this latter is inner-directed, being based on some type of universal philosophy. The first ethic stresses submission. The second stresses freedom. The first is reactive. The second is responsive-responsible.

It is clear from a survey of the basic concepts making up Shinran's thought that his religion falls in the latter category. It is transcendent religion, with its understanding of reality as only what can be spoken of between Buddhas. Its path of religious activity is based on working which is no working, a religion in which Amida Buddha has emerged from the formless, inconceivable Nature as the means to guide beings to salvation — a religion not of man's devising, but the result of the primordial aspiration in the heart of reality symbolized in the work of the Bodhisattva Dharmakara. It is a religion which illumines human existence, and with all its evils, embraces it totally. Faith is thus for these reasons indescribable, inconceivable, and profound.

Transcendent does not mean "escape from." It means "more than" and is the something more which provides the person with a true sense of meaning and value, which places into question every lesser loyalty, value, and obligation. The transcendent nature of Buddhism was indicated in ancient sutras which stipulated that monks do not revere kings, parents, or gods. For Shinran, this transcendence is mediated into history through faith in which — in one thought-moment — the person simultaneously perceives his or her own sinfulness and the embrace of Amida's compassion. Having experienced faith, one's ultimate destiny is assured and one can participate more determinedly in the world. Shinran stated, there is no good superior to the Nembutsu, and no evil that can obstruct it. His standard of judgment is raised on all claims — including his own:

"I know, on the whole, neither good nor evil! For were I to know good so thoroughly that the Tathagata must regard it as good, then I should be sure to know what is good. And were I to know evil so thoroughly that the Tathagata must look on it as evil, then I should be certain to

know what is evil. With us, therefore, filled with sin and lust as we are in the transient world, unreliable and unsteady as a burning house, everything is sheer falsehood and nought is stable and sure.” [4]

It is against this background that we should view Shinran’s challenge to his age, and ours. He did not counsel us to accept complacently the conditions of the world. Without standing apart in arrogant self-righteousness, he challenged hypocrisy in all areas. Any attempt to assess the ethical orientation resulting from Shinran’s philosophy of existence must taken into account the ethical norms imposed in his time on members of the society. These norms were considered valid because they were expressions of some objective moral order — such as the law of karma in traditional Buddhism or Heaven in Confucianism, in much the same fashion as, in western Christianity, the objective moral order was considered to be the expression of duty to God. In the Shinshu tradition, the distinction of religious existence and social life came to be formulated in the principle of Shinzokunitai, the two truths of Absolute and Conventional.

This distinction is derived from Nagarjuna in the early philosophical evolution of Mahayana. It was, however, given emphasis by Rennyo in the 15th century to deal with the activities of Shin believers in Japan and to avoid problems with the political authorities. In his letter of February 17, 1474, Rennyo advises his disciples who have heard the teachings and are confirmed in their faith that they should pursue their religious faith in their hearts and not act scandalously or contemptuously towards people of other schools. Wherever we may be, on the road or at home, says Rennyo, we should not praise such actions. With respect to the Shugo, the guards who act as police and the manorial lords who exact their tribute from the people, believers should not act rudely, claiming they have attained faith. Instead, they should all the more yield in lawsuits or disputes. Believers are urged not to neglect all the gods, Buddhas, and bodhisattvas because all are implied in the six characters: Namu-amida-butsu. In addition, they were urged to consider worldly benevolence and righteousness and fundamental. Observing the secular law externally, they should within their hearts and minds, cultivate the Other-power faith. So in Rennyo’s “Goichidaikikigaki” we read:

“Law should be worn on the brow: the Buddhist teaching should be stored deep in one’s inner heart. So said the Shonin. One should be straight and rigid in one’s own ways of life (jingi).” [5]

As a result of this distinction, the absolute truth was the realm of religion, belief, and faith, while following the mores and demands of the secular society was the area of conventional truth. By this distinction, from the 15th century on, the full impact of the ethical implications of

Shinran's teachings were unable to manifest themselves in society at large. Indeed, they often surfaced only as a characteristic of those wondrously good people, the myokonin.

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Notes

[1] D.T. Suzuki, "Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist," P. 194

[2] Ibid., p. 175

[3] Ibid., p. 202

[4] Ryukyo Fujimoto, "Tannisho," Conclusion

[5] Kosho Yamamoto, "Words of St. Rennyo, p. 52