

Chapter 20

The Ultimate End of Faith (Part 2)

In general, Japanese and Shinshu people were ethical, but it was largely a passive ethic, prudential in nature in the face of social problems. In the past five centuries of Shinshu there have been varying theories on the connection of this principle of “Two truths, absolute and conventional.” The view of Akamatsu, outlined by Fugen Daien in his “Shinshu Gairon,” is that they have an inevitable interrelation (Sohatsusetsu) or mutual emergence. In this view, conventional morality is held to be contained in the absolute truth. A second theory, also outlined by Fugen Daien, holds that essentially the realm of absolute truth refers to the transfer of merit of faith whereas the conventional realm refers to the principles derived from rational reflection. In this, the content of the conventional truth is that of Confucian morality with its five cardinal virtues, combining the five relationships of filial piety and the five cardinal Confucian virtues of justice, politeness, wisdom, fidelity, and benevolence. In this view, morality is impregnated with faith, but their sources differ. In his analysis, Fugen tends to accept the second view as more adequate, since if morality is totally a product of faith, then there is no way to account for the morality of the unbeliever. However, faith may make morality stronger through its influence, even though morality is derived from rational reflection.

In his “Introduction to Shin Buddhism,” Kosho Yamamoto states the mutual relation of the two spheres of truth:

“To clarify the relation between ‘religion’ and ‘moral,’ the Shinshuist of modern ages has brought about the so-called teaching of ‘shinzoku-nitai,’ i.e., the ‘Two truths of True and Secular.’ By ‘true’ is meant the Way of Truth, which is what concerns emancipation from ‘dukkha,’ i.e., life’s ‘sorrow.’ By ‘secular’ is meant what concerns the Way of Life. It is said that these two gates are to go as the wheels of a vehicle. This is to say, the failure of one cripples the other, hence jeopardizing the faculty of the whole.

If we view this in the light of the traditional meaning of secular truth (as embodying Confucian morality and following the Imperial Law), the standard of religion ultimately becomes whether or not that religion is a fulfillment of the individual’s citizenship role. One’s religion is thus evaluated on the basis of whether it makes one a good citizen and the essential nature of religion is subsumed under social obligation. In the history of Japan, persecution of

Pure Land Buddhism was based on this point. The teachings of Honen, and of his pupil Shinran, as well as that of their contemporary Nichiren, were intolerable to the Kamakura Imperial regime because they challenged this standard and broke communality in their profession of a deeper meaning in religious truth.”

From another aspect we can see that in periods when the control of the society over the individual was total, the secular standard of political conformity for religion does have the virtue of offering an area where faith can be free — albeit at the expense of not disturbing the social order. Such a formulation of isolated limited freedom of faith contrasts with our democratic modern standpoint in which free faith is indistinguishable from freedom of action. The limited freedom of the traditional secular standard does not spell out precisely what faith adds to the action of achieving justice and benevolence in society, or how faith deals with situations of oppression and exploitation in a society beyond acceptance or even resignation.

Shinshu theologians frequently identify the practice of gratitude with morality, yet the full thrust of Shinran’s morality was obstructed during the period of nationalism when the principle of two truths was interpreted to conform to the priority of the Imperial Law. In his analysis of Shin Buddhism, Prof. Futaba sharply questions the relationship between the faith that is the practice of gratitude and morality. He calls attention to the thought of Manshi Kiyozawa, who saw morality as indispensable for the perfecting of humanity and ourselves, but a morality not of social conformity but of definition by faith alone. For Futaba, the stance provided by Shinran for approaching the ethical life was the principle “believing oneself, teach others to believe” (Jishinkyoninshin). It is in this principle that we see demonstrated the critical thrust of Shinran’s thought, piercing the false, hypocritical “good” of society and religion in his day.

Although Shinshu traditionalists still may define the practice of morality as the expression of gratitude, such has seldom been the case. Instead, under the impact of Japanese social history, the principle of morality as the expression of gratitude more often meant uncritical subservience to the reigning ethic. The boundless freedom of Jodo Shinshu was thus obscured during much of the Tokugawa and Meiji eras and, indeed, Buddhism as an acceptable set of rites for funerals and memorial services with few exceptions supplanted the original focus of Shinran and his Kamakura contemporaries on Buddhism as the very way and meaning of life itself. It is this element of Shinran’s critical insight into religion and society that must be recovered if the true meaning of his potential is to be made effective in the modern world. As Prof. Futaba says:

“Whatever occupations all the successive followers of Shinran participate in, is it not imperative that they must reject becoming virtuous in the world of political power but in the end must focus on (the principle of jishinkyoninshin (to teach others the faith one holds oneself). Should not the people of the world accept Shinran’s standpoint that, within the conflict of enormous political powers which have grown like monsters, the only moral path is jishinkyoninshin, as a society of non-authoritarian believers.

“The belief in material things and political authority reveals that a primitive faith in the gods pervades modern times. It is regarded as rational, intelligent, and something that brings a world to fruition, something strong on which we can rely. However, it is clear that its history is false and absurd. The standpoint of faith which brushes aside a self-power mentality and rejects belief in gods is the only way which people must seek through their lives confronting the delusions of history even in the modern age. [2]

In the light of the collapse of traditional moralities East and West, Shin thought offers a new approach to the relationship of faith, and action. In our present period, belief in objective structures of morality has weakened if not collapsed. We have too often seen such structures manipulated and applied in the interests of special classes and groups. In a world which cannot guarantee the validity of one’s ideals through some supernatural or cosmic guarantee, contemporary people have been given the responsibility to establish ethical existence from within themselves. In this context, Shinran’s religious perspective, with its roots in deep inward transformation and commitment, become an important resource for considering contemporary issues. We would not be attempting to discover the precise content of Shinran’s ethical outlook in terms of specific do’s and don’ts (although some are present in his writings). Rather, we can try to discover the basic underlying principles that govern his perspective.

For that reason, we have directed attention to Shinran’s statements on “Sage Path” and “Pure Land compassion,” as recorded by Yuienbo in “Tannisho,” IV:

“In the matter of compassion, the Path of Sages and the Pure Land path differ. Compassion in the Path of Sages is to pity, sympathize with, and care for beings. But the desire to save others from suffering is vastly difficult to fulfill.

“Compassion in the Pure Land path lies in saying the Name, quickly attaining Buddhahood, and freely benefiting sentient beings with a heart of great love and great compassion. In our present lives, it is hard to carry out the desire to aid others however much love and tenderness we may feel; hence such compassion always falls short of fulfillment. Only the saying of the

Name manifests the heart of great compassion that is replete and thoroughgoing. Thus were his words.” [3]

This passage might be titled the limit of compassion, when brought into relation with Shinran’s understanding of karma, his experience of the futility of reciting sutras on the road to Inada, and when viewed also in relation to Shinran’s concept of neither-priest-nor-layman. It yields insight into the context for his ethical thought. The point of this passage seems very clear, in that the Sage path approach to compassion and its attempt to help beings falls short of its own goal. As limited beings in the world, we cannot generate sufficient power on our own to effect the release of all. Shinran discovered this for himself when on the road to Inada, he vowed to save all beings through reciting the thousand parts of the three Pure Land sutras. Realizing that this effort was futile, he abandoned the practice. It was again the situation he met when striving for his own salvation by trying to build a bridge to infinity from the narrow basis of his own strength and intention.

In Chapter XIII of “Tannisho” there appears an interesting discussion of the role of karma in determining action, in which Yuienbo quotes Shinran as saying:

“Remember that no evil is ever done, that does not originate from a past karma, be it so minute as a grain of dust on the point of a hair of a lamb or rabbit.” [4]

Shinran here appeals to the reality and strength of karma which places us in this life and directs our actions in this world. Nothing we do can be done unless there is the karmic basis for it. Hence, from that side of existence, we are utterly powerless to act on our own as though we were totally autonomous beings. In contemplating his relation to other beings, and his efforts to save them, the utter limitation of being able to do anything on his own was Shinran’s basic realization. This was his way of facing his historical reality which, as with the later myokonin, heightened his sense of imperfection and sin. Through this historical reality which bounds our lives, we become aware of deeper forces at work which strive to save us and all other beings. This is the faith in Buddha’s compassion which has no superior power to compete with it, and which cannot be obstructed by any evil. Therefore, in the Pure Land faith the goal is to become Buddha and, by uniting with that power of compassion which we call Amida Buddha, to attain the salvation of all beings.

Despite the futuristic element of Pure Land, which places this attainment in another life, there is built into such a faith a guard against despair as to either our own capacities or the results which may be achieved through our limited efforts. Shinran, while indicating the limits of

human action, does not reject action as such and it is in this way that he reaches out to the despairing, alienated men and women of today. He understands that we will be moved to act through compassion. We may have aspirations and hopes, but he cautions against expectations. Such a viewpoint goes against much of contemporary ideas of “thinking big,” but its realism is quite evident when one considers the failure of the many movements for social changes in our time. In countless cases, the participants have had too high expectations and when they failed to reach their goal, they turned on society and those about them with bitterness. They sought escapes and dropped out. Many also perceived they needed a deeper understanding of reality and frequently joined extreme religious movements.

By contrast, Shinran’s way sets the direction for ethical action by providing a realistic assessment of the possibilities of human effort in a world such as ours and with people like ourselves. When we understand his idea of “poisoned good,” we see that a major concern he had was to purge religion of egoism; that is, to place religious action in a context where the act would be spontaneous and not tinged with egoism. His concept of neither-priest-nor-layman also attests to this view. Our actions are not to proceed from the traditionally understood religious motivations to create merit and gain enlightenment for ourselves, which is the priestly approach, nor merely for the maintenance of social order, which is the responsibility of the layman. For Shinran, action must proceed from the realm beyond, which he terms the realm of no calculation or contrivance, from the realm where working is no working. It is the supernal realm of Jinen honi, of Buddha nature, of the Unimpeded Infinite Light, a realm beyond shape or definition, a realm symbolized in the compassion of Amida Buddha as depicted in the sutras.

What does such a basis mean for ethic and ego? In his effort to avoid the possibility of arrogant presumption on the part of his disciples, Shinran cast this participation in the ultimate nature of compassion into the future — after our birth in the Pure Land. We can never believe that we fully realize that ethic, even though we may understand that we are sustained by the power of the Vow itself. Over against our efforts to work ceaselessly for the good of our brothers in the light of the Vow of Amida without discrimination or being judgmental, we are illumined by the power of that Vow, and aware of our egoism, sinfulness and desire for power and fame (Takuwa, in his “Perfect Freedom in Buddhism,” pp. 89-99).

Shinran’s definition of compassion is thus not meant to inhibit ethical action of an outgoing, positive type, but to instill in such ethical action a sense of deep limitations with respect to our capabilities, our intentions, our prospects. While this view may well induce a passivity in face

of a well-established social order which limits any criticism or efforts for change, I do not believe Shinran would have entirely condoned subservience to the status quo. He was himself able to make judgments concerning the justice and righteousness of the society which exiled his teacher Honen, his fellow students, and himself. He could not fight back on that society's political terms, and he probably did not desire to do so. His motivation went far deeper and he continued in exile, despite government prohibitions, to propagate the teaching of the Pure Land way.

In cases when his followers faced persecution, he did not counsel that they merely be servile to the state, but in the interests of the further progress of the teaching to be more sensitive to their actions and the social implications of their actions. Thus, he advised not to despise the gods and Buddhas of traditional communal religion, but to regard them as manifestations of Amida and therefore essentially benefactors. He counseled against useless arguments which created hatred, and urged that believers practice their faith quietly. He advised also that his followers should have aspirations for the welfare of society in general, for when there is peace and tranquility, the conditions are better for the spread of the teaching. His stance toward society was not one of acquiescence to the status quo, but one which viewed the situation from a higher plane and attempted to act in harmony with that plane.

To fully comprehend this essential dimension of Shinran, we must emphasize, particularly as exemplified in chapter IV of "Tannisho," that the important point is non-egoistic action, action which is not an instrument merely for advancing the self but which is action that reveals the compassion of the Buddha. This perception supplies a major consideration in determining in our own time what actions are appropriate to a Shin Buddhist. I believe that one important determination would be — what does that action do to bring meaning into other people's lives? Rather than the Shin Buddhist's focus being on the meaning of his or her own life (which may under these conditions seem not to have meaning), we may consider how meaningful our actions are in the lives of others — all in light of the boundedness of our lives.

For Shinran, the directive influence in determining one's moral activity must be Buddhism. As illustration of this, in chapter V, "Tannisho," Shinran makes a statement which is truly remarkable in view of the nature of the importance of filial piety in his time:

"I, Shinran, have never invoked the Nembutsu even once in the feeling of filial piety for my parents. All sentient beings have been, and will be at one time or another, our fathers, or mothers, brothers, or sisters in the course of transmigration. So, we, after becoming Buddha in our next life, should save each one of them."

While we might agree with Shin scholars that in this passage Shinran is not advocating disrespect of parents, but actually perhaps even a broadening of filial obligation to all beings, the fact remains that from traditional Confucian viewpoints (which were also promoted in Buddhism through its memorial services), society is based on graded love. One's parents and family have a greater claim on one's duty than have the broader masses of people. This was an ancient issue between Confucianists and the advocates of Universal Love, such as Mo ti in ancient China. Buddhists in China argued that they fulfilled filial piety through services on behalf of departed ancestors. Yet Shinran, guided by his own understanding of Buddhist universality and his awareness of absolute Other Power, confessed that he never performed such Nembutsu.

In reality, he is saying that there is nothing special about his parents over against all other beings, and in this life he is in any case powerless. He does concede to human sentiment, however, that when one has become a Buddha, this statement hardly displaces the earlier, since he has already stated that everyone at some point is mother and father to us. It is only the last in succession that would qualify for special treatment? It is difficult to reconcile Buddhism universalism and Confucian hierarchy at this point. We must, I believe, accept Shinran's personal re-direction of ancient Japanese social morality.

The discussion of the ultimate end of faith has led us from the consideration of issues pertaining to the afterlife and human destiny to ethical issues rooted in this life. The problem of afterlife and the challenge of this life are in healthy tension in Shin thought. The charge of other worldliness is misplaced. While there are instinctual and important concerns for afterlife which we all face as mortal beings, the center of gravity of Shinran's thought lies in this life because of the deep confidence and assurance we have that Amida has embraced us never to abandon and the Vow covers all times and space. With destiny assured, life can be lived with meaning and dedication, with hope and courage.

Multiple Choice Questions

1. According to Kosho Yamamoto, the Shinshuist of modern ages has brought about the so-called teaching of shinzoku-nitai, or "Two Truths of True and Secular," for the purpose of:

a) clarifying the relationship between "religion" and "morality" b) showing that there is no relationship between religious truth and morality c) demonstrating that link between morality and good citizenship

2. For Shinran, the salvation of all beings could only be attained by:

a) pitying and caring for beings b) reciting sutras that would generate enough merit to save all beings c) saying the Name and quickly attaining Buddhahood

3. How does Shinran's thought set the direction for ethical action? By:

a) encouraging us to "think big" in bringing about social change b) providing a realistic assessment of the possibilities of human effort in a world such as ours c) instructing us that no such actions are possible since everything is ego-motivated

4. In Chapter V, "Tannisho," Shinran states that he has "never invoked the Nembutsu even once in the feeling of filial piety for my (his) parents." What is Shinran actually saying? That:

a) family is not important b) filial piety is a delusion c) there is nothing special about his parents over against all other beings

Thought Questions

1. What is your understanding of the relationship between religion and morality?

2. The author thinks that Shinran's religious perspective can be an important resource in dealing with contemporary ethical/moral issues. Find an issue that concerns you and try to apply Shinran's perspective to it. What do you find? What problems do you encounter?

3. Today, as in the past, there are people who are attempting to bring about social change. While Shinran's stance toward society was not one of acquiescence to the status quo, he did urge his followers to constantly question their own motivations for such action and to be sensitive to their actions and the social implications they might have. How can such an approach benefit us today?

Bibliography

Bloom, Alfred: "Tannisho: Resource for Modern Living"

Notes

[1] Kosho Yamamoto, "Introduction to Shin Buddhism," pp. 172-73

[2] Shinran no Kenkyu, pp. 364-65

[3] Dennis Hirota, tr., "Tannisho: A Primer," p. 24

[4] Ryukyo Fujimoto translation

[5] Ryukyo Fujimoto translation.

[6] Ryukyo Fujimoto translation