

My Hope for American Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism

by Takamaro Shigaraki, translated by Nobuo Haneda

TRANSPLANTATION OF A RELIGION INTO FOREIGN SOIL

It is with considerable difficulty that a culture or religious thought is transplanted from its indigenous soil into a foreign soil which is significantly different from its own and begins to take root. This is particularly so with a religion that is usually characterized by abstract ideas.

For example, many centuries ago Buddhism was transmitted to Japan from China and Korea, but a long time passed before it became "Buddhism for the Japanese people," before it came to be truly appreciated by the Japanese people. From its entry into Japan to its eventual blossoming as Japanese Buddhism by the twelfth century, about six hundred years were necessary. Historically, it is not until this period of Kamakura Buddhism that we see the emergence of such individuals as Hōnen, Shinran and Dōgen.

Keeping this in mind, we must accept that it will take considerable time and effort before Buddhism, specifically Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism, is completely transmitted to the United States and becomes an integral part of its culture. About a century has already passed since Shinshū was first brought to America, and the introduction has just begun. Furthermore, it is crucial that the real essence of Shinshū be correctly transmitted to the United States. If we make a mistake at the outset of this process, American Shinshū will deviate completely from its proper direction.

How Buddhism correctly developed in Japan is exemplified by Shinran Shōnin's understanding that "all things [in this world] are empty, non-

sense and false. Only the nembutsu is true" (*Tan-nishō*). The precursor for this concept is seen in the words of Prince Shōtoku, one of the earliest individuals who studied Buddhism in Japan, who said that "this secular world is empty and false. Only the Buddha is true" (*Jōgū-hōō-tei-setsu*).

Prince Shōtoku introduced Japan to Buddhism through his grasp of its true essence, which allowed it to reach maturity and fruition in the thoughts of Shinran even after considerable time had passed. Having been rightly started, it was possible for the Japanese to have the birth of a tremendous Buddhist tradition by the Kamakura Period.

Hopefully, years from now, we will be able to say that the true essence of Shinshū was planted in American soil, unrecognizable as it seemed in the beginning, and it grew to be beautiful and lasting. Conversely, if Shinshū is not set into the right direction at the outset, it will never properly take root, no matter how popular it may be in the immediate future. Thus, it must again be stressed that this is the most essential point for Shinshū followers in the United States.

"TRUSTING AMIDA BUDDHA" REFERS TO "AWAKENING"

Various interpretations of Buddhist doctrine are possible, but the most fundamental teaching in Buddhism is the following verse of "Common Admonishments by All Buddhas" (*Shichibutsu-tsūkai-ge*), which is frequently described in sūtras such as the *Dhammapada*.

Refrain from all evil.
Do all good.

Purify one's mind [*kokoro*].
This is the teaching of all Buddhas.

According to these words, we should not commit any evil deeds in our daily activities and we should perform all kinds of good deeds. By doing so, we should be able to make our *kokoro* pure. And, as Jōdo Shinshū is Buddhism, its basic teaching cannot be otherwise. This is to say, the Buddhist path of Shinshū lies in one-mindedly purifying our own *kokoro* as we cease evil deeds and desire to do good deeds.

What does *kokoro* mean? English words such as "spirit" or "mind" cannot accurately express the meaning of *kokoro*, for it refers to something far deeper. This human psychological functioning is more descriptively presented by these Sanskrit terms: *citta* (mind), *manas* (mind) and *vijñāna* (consciousness). These terms are the *kokoro* to which I refer. It is sometimes inclusively called "spirituality" (*reisei*) and, as such, the Buddhist focus is on the deepest part of this concept of spirituality.

In Shinshū, we often speak of *shinjin* (the trusting mind) in regard to our trust in Amida Buddha. When we investigate the Sanskrit word for *shinjin* in the *Sukhāvātīyūha-sūtra*, specifically the section describing Dharmākara's Eighteenth Vow, we find *citta-prasāda*. This term refers to our mind becoming pure and serene and it is synonymous with the purification of the mind, or *kokoro*.

As one's mind becomes pure and serene, there is a development of new insight and wisdom. According to Nāgārjuna, this is the religious experience of "meeting with a Buddha." Moreover, what is meant in Shinshū as "trusting Amida Buddha" is the experiencing of such a new "awakening" in our minds and living a new life based on this "awakening" experience. Shinran explained this by saying that *shinjin* refers to obtaining the wisdom (*prajñā*) wherein all things come to be seen in a new light.

Regarding the concept of trust, people generally use words such as "belief" (*shin'yō*) and

"faith" (*shinkō*). These words presuppose a relationship between the believer and the believed. Here the believer recognizes the truthfulness of the believed in spite of the latter's truthfulness having been unconfirmed. Relatively speaking, we can say that "faith" is higher and firmer than "belief."

When we examine the Sanskrit term for *shin* (trust), we see that the most commonly utilized word is *śraddhā*. But there are additional words which give us a more concrete meaning of the term: *adhimukti* and *abhisampratyaya*. These refer to one's trustful understanding or recognition of the Buddhist teaching and the people who are living the Buddhist teaching. They correspond to the meaning of the word "belief," and also have the meaning of "faith."

Another Sanskrit word for *shin* is the previously mentioned *citta-prasāda*, the mind which is pure and serene. Chinese Buddhists translated this word as *shen-hsin* (later to become *shinjin* in Japanese). "Trusting Amida Buddha" refers to this *citta-prasāda*. It also refers to having the previously mentioned "awakening" experience in our minds.

Hence, there is a clear distinction between Christian faith (the faith in God), and Jōdo Shinshū *shinjin* (the trusting in Amida Buddha), as the latter is synonymous with an "awakening" experience. An accurate understanding of this concept of *shinjin* is critical to the transmission of Shinshū teachings to the United States.

PRACTICE IN SHINSHŪ IS CHANTING THE NAME OF AMIDA BUDDHA (NAMU AMIDABUTSU)

As *shinjin* in Shinshū refers to an "awakening" experience, the question arises as to how an individual can have such an experience. If we follow the "Common Admonishments by All Buddhas," we are told to stop evil deeds and perform good deeds in order to have a pure and serene mind, in order to have *shinjin*. These admonishments teach us that a practice is necessary because, in

Buddhism, it is by performing certain types of practice that we experience *shinjin*. In this manner, Buddhism is different from Christianity.

There are two types of paths in Buddhist practice: 1) the path of the monk, and 2) the path of the lay person. In the former, as did Sakyamuni, one leaves one's family and wealth, detaches from all worldly desires, and lives a life of meditation and isolation. The path of the lay person, on the other hand, is one approachable by all people. Within this path one can study and practice Buddhism while engaged in an occupation and maintaining a family life.

The practice of the Shinshū lay path refers to single-mindedly chanting the name of Amida Buddha. This arose because Shinran came to the understanding that it is impossible for an individual to take the path of the monk in this time so far removed from Sakyamuni's presence. It can be further stated that the path of the lay person is now the only effectual Buddhism, and Shinshū is the path of the lay person. This path teaches us that we can experience *shinjin* through the single practice of chanting the name of Amida Buddha with a mind-heart of true gratitude for the deep meaning within the Name.

As Shinshū practice is the chanting of the Name, and although it is through this chanting practice that we obtain *shinjin*, it must be clearly stated that it is not sufficient to mechanically repeat the Name. Shinran harshly criticized such chanting and called it "Name chanting of expe-

diency" (*hōben no shōmyō nembutsu*). According to Shinran, real Name chanting has two aspects. It is an expression of our taking refuge in what is true and it is our hearing the Name as Amida's invitational voice directed toward us.

In other words, true Name chanting must be something like this: it is my calling voice directed toward Amida Buddha. Simultaneously, this calling voice of mine comes to be heard by me as Amida's calling voice, which is always directed toward me. When our daily chanting of the Name simultaneously becomes our hearing the Name, the *shinjin* experience becomes reality for us.

FORMATION OF AMERICAN JŌDO SHINSHŪ BUDDHISM

In order to have true Shinshū grow and develop in America, people must not think merely of importing Japanese Jōdo Shinshū to the United States. There must be serious confrontation between the Buddhist teachings of Shinran Shonin and the thoughts of the people of the United States.

What we need in the future is American Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism, not some form of Jōdo Shinshū in America. It is my fervent wish that Shinshū followers in the United States will continue their untiring efforts toward this goal and we who are in Japan will do our utmost to work together with Americans to establish American Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism.