

How is Shinjin to be Realized?

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I THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRACTICE AND *SHINJIN*

When we study Shinran Shōnin's thought—not from the perspective of the various disciplines, but out of the aspiration to enter the world of religious awakening that he attained—then we are immediately confronted with the crucial problem of method: how is *shinjin*, or true entrusting, to be realized?¹ Shinran speaks often of the nature and significance of his religious awakening, so even those who have not experienced that realm as deeply can have some grasp of it. But as for the precise process by which he attained it, he is almost totally silent. In this, he differs remarkably from the founders of other Buddhist traditions.

When we look to such representative Mahāyāna masters as Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, Chih-i and Fa-ts'ang, we find that the central issues of their teachings revolve around the nature of the world of *satori* that they attained and the practices that should be performed in order to reach it.

Thus, if we are able to understand the practices in detail, we can accept that to the extent we carry them out, we can attain the same realization. For these founders, the question of method—how a person should practice—is extremely clear-cut, and the basic problem for us is whether we follow their methods or not.

All this is different with Shinran. His Buddhism shares with all other Buddhist paths the structure of “teaching, practice, and enlightenment.” In his case, however, “practice” is not an act that, if

we devote ourselves intensively to performing it in accord with the “teaching,” will enable us to attain “enlightenment.”

Practice is not something that we do through our own efforts and abilities, but is given to us by Amida; hence, Shinran terms it “great practice.” As long as we have not received practice from Amida, however much we may exert ourselves, what we do is not “practice” in Shinran's sense. The problem, then, becomes how we can receive great practice from Amida.

Shinran states: “The great practice is to say the Name of the Tathāgata of Unhindered Light” (*Kyōgyōshinshō*, Chapter on Practice, Passage 1). It is, in other words, for us to say, “Namu Amida-butsu.” But why is this something received from Amida? If to say, “Namu Amidabutsu,” is something received from Amida, then it is not said out of our own intents, but through Amida's working.

We can, of course, recite “Namu Amidabutsu” if it occurs to us to do so. But even though we say it, it is not great practice, for it is not received from Amida. In the saying of the nembutsu, there is a distinction between that which is great practice—utterance of the Name received from Amida—and that which is not. How does this distinction arise? Here, we encounter the problem of *shinjin*.

For the nembutsu we say to be great practice given to us by Amida and not recitation through our own will, our utterance must be based on the Primal Vow. We must have entered the ocean of the Vow, so that the Buddha's mind and our foolish minds have become one. This is for *shinjin* to have become settled in us. Hence, if we pursue

our inquiry into the reason our saying the Name—our “practice”—is great practice, we inevitably arrive at the realization of *shinjin*.

Thus, the fundamental problem of Buddhism—how one should practice in order to attain enlightenment—becomes in Shin not “How should I say the name?” but “How do I realize *shinjin*?” Practice is to say the Name of the Buddha of Unhindered Light, but merely saying it cannot be the cause of enlightenment. What leads to enlightenment is great practice, and great practice is utterance of the Name rooted in entrusting to the Primal Vow. Hence, fulfillment of great practice lies in the realization of *shinjin*.

In Shin Buddhism, the significance that practice holds in Buddhism in general—the cause that leads to enlightenment—lies in *shinjin* rather than in practice. For this reason, Shinran calls saying the Name “practice,” but for the person studying the Shin teaching, “How should I say the Name?” is not a problem. The frequency, manner, occasion, intonation—none of these are at issue. But for practice to be “great practice,” it must be practice-and-*shinjin*: practice is inseparable from *shinjin*.

In reality, however, it is perfectly possible for a person who has not realized *shinjin* to say the Name. There are any number of people who say the Name without a clear idea of what Amida's Vow is. And it is often the case that one has every intention of saying the Name with *shinjin*, but the question of whether one has really realized *shinjin* remains.

Shinran speaks of *shinjin* becoming settled, or becoming true *shinjin*, or becoming the diamond-like mind. From this we know that his usage of the term “*shinjin*” includes a stage before it becomes settled. Though at first *shinjin* is not true, there is a point at which it becomes true.

Since practice is inseparable from *shinjin*, this means that there is a point when the merely human act of saying the Name becomes great practice. This happens at the moment that person's *shinjin* becomes settled, when he is grasped by Amida. At

that moment, the Buddha's mind and the mind of the foolish being become one; the person's mind of good and evil is transformed into the mind of great compassion, and his utterance of the Name comes to arise from the mind of the Vow.

From that time on, utterance of the nembutsu possesses power as the cause for attaining enlightenment. Since the utterance of the person who has not realized *shinjin* is not great practice, however many times he may say the Name out of his own efforts, it cannot become the cause resulting in birth in the Pure Land (i.e., attainment of Buddhahood or enlightenment). Neither can it be an expression of gratitude, as Rennyo teaches, for it can have this significance only when *shinjin* has been realized.

Since the mind of a person who has not realized *shinjin* is not one with the Buddha's mind, he does not yet fully grasp the Vow; accordingly, it is impossible for him truly to appreciate Amida's compassion and benevolence, and genuine feelings of gratitude do not arise. Though such a person is taught that saying the Name is an expression of gratitude, it is surely hard for him to understand why it should be so.

How, then, should utterance of the Name before the settlement of *shinjin* be considered? Since it is not great practice that will lead to birth in the Pure Land, what significance does it hold? In a letter, Shinran states:

The person who feels that his attainment of birth is not settled should, to begin with, say the nembutsu in aspiration for birth. The person who feels that his attainment of birth is definitely settled should, thinking of the Buddha's benevolence, devote himself to the nembutsu in order to respond with gratitude for that benevolence, and should hope for peace in the world and the spread of the Buddha Dharma. (*Goshōsokushū*, *Shinshū shōgyō zensho* II, p. 697)

A person who feels that his attainment of birth is uncertain has clearly not realized *shinjin*.

Accordingly, his utterance of the Name is not great practice. Thus, however much he devotes to saying the Name, he cannot attain birth in the Pure Land through such effort. Nevertheless, he is urged to say the Name. Shinran's meaning here is not, of course, that through the merit accrued from saying the Name thus one can attain birth. But if one says the Name aspiring to attain Buddhahood, then since verbal expression (saying the Name) and thought (right-mindedness) are inseparable, *shinjin* will naturally become settled.

Shinran seeks to guide the person in the direction of such a settlement of *shinjin*. Saying the Name is not a means for realizing *shinjin*; *shinjin* will not become settled just because one says the Name. Nevertheless, there is no question, I think, that earnest saying of the Name naturally brings a person's heart closer to the Buddha's. Here, the words of *Tannishō* 11 are illuminating:

Even though a person does not entrust himself, he will be born in the borderland, the land of sloth, the castle of doubt, or the womb palace and, by virtue of Amida's Vow of ultimate attainment for those who say the Name in self-power, in the end will attain birth in the fulfilled land. This is the inconceivable power of the Name.

A person may encounter the Shin teaching and earnestly say the nembutsu, but doubts may remain so that he does not realize true *shinjin*. Nevertheless, the compassion of the Vow (*jinen*) never abandons such a person. It works to guide him to the transformed realms, to nurture him and await the maturation of conditions by which he will realize *shinjin*; it then brings him to birth into the true fulfilled land. This too is none other than the inconceivable working of the power of the Primal Vow, which is also the power of the Name.

Shinran states:

To say Namu Amidabutsu is to repent all the karmic evil one has committed since the beginningless past . . . Know that the

Buddha has gathered all roots of good into the three syllables, A-mi-da, so that to say the Name, Namu Amidabutsu, is to adorn the Pure Land. (*Inscriptions*)

The saying of the Name discussed in this passage is, of course, great practice, but surely Shinran is not questioning here whether the person's *shinjin* is settled or not. If *shinjin* has become settled, there is in general a personal awareness of it, but there is a danger of self-deception in deciding oneself that one has realized *shinjin*. In a letter addressed to his disciple Shinjō, Shinran states:

That the people have been shaken in their long-held *shinjin* because of what Jishin-bō has said reveals, in short, that their *shinjin* has not been true, and so is a good thing. (*Goshōsokushū, Shinshū shōgyō zensho* II, p. 709)

That people have been shaken is ultimately for the best because through such an experience the way for their *shinjin* to become true and real is opened up. Though ordinarily one may assume that one's *shinjin* has been settled, if it is not true *shinjin*, in a time of personal crisis this will inevitably become manifest.

What Shinran calls *shinjin* is not merely personal and individual; while it is opened forth within a person, there is an aspect in which it transcends the individual. It is the mind that has attained the stage of nonretrogression, and as we see from Shinran's labeling of it as "equal of perfect enlightenment," it is a kind of realization. Hence, it shares with enlightenment in Buddhism in general the character of "wisdom of awakening to self" (*pratyātmaśāntāna*). Since it is completely different from personal conviction, however firmly one may intend to entrust, such firmness is no proof of authenticity.

To summarize, with regard to our subjective feelings, the person who feels uncertain about his attainment of birth says the Name aspiring for birth, and the person who feels that his birth is wholly settled says it out of gratitude. In the latter

case, hopes emerge for peace in the world and for the spread of the dharma—that is, for the benefit of all living things. It is useless for us to ponder whether the nembutsu said with these feelings is great practice or not—that is, whether our *shinjin* is truly settled or not. What we should do—what we can do—is simply devote ourselves to entrusting totally, deeply, to the Primal Vow and say the Name.

II THE PROCESS OF REALIZING *SHINJIN*

It is probably the actual situation for most of us that although we wish to cast off the pain and self-attachments of our lives, and though we entrust ourselves to the Vow and say the nembutsu, we do not sense that our salvation is settled. We have no intention of being doubtful of the Vow, but it remains somehow alien to us. We are told to eliminate all our desperate clinging to the goodness and worth of our selves, but even while we wish to do so, we have no precise idea of how to go about it. Shinran tells us, “Give yourselves up to Amida’s entrusting with sincere mind” (*Inscriptions*), or “Simply entrust to the Tathāgata” (*Letters*), or “Simply entrust to the power of the Vow” (*Letters*), but what, concretely, is it to entrust?

“Amida” or “the power of the Vow” cannot be seen or grasped through our senses, so though we may wish simply to entrust ourselves, it is impossible for us. Shinran gives no concrete advice, and since there are no written sources to depend on, Shin scholars have no basis for teaching us how to consider the question of method directly. As mentioned at the outset, this problem represents a special characteristic of Shinran’s thought—a difficulty not encountered in other forms of Buddhism, in which the practitioner need simply endeavor in the prescribed way.

Actually carrying out the practice is extremely difficult, but the method is clear. In the case of Zen, which does not set forth a concrete method as a teaching (does not rely on words), the *roshi* gives individual instruction and guidance to each practitioner. Shinran, however, merely states, “Deeply

entrust yourself to the Vow,” or “Free yourself of self-power calculation,” or “Free yourself of doubt.”

Thus, it is unclear what we must do to rid ourselves of calculation or doubt. This is a difficult problem. But even if a perfectly adequate answer cannot be given, surely Shin scholars should seek to deal with it. Merely saying that it is important to listen to the teaching is not enough.

When we look to Shinran’s writings, we find that there is a distinction between settled and unsettled *shinjin*—that is, true *shinjin* and that which is not yet true. There are scholars who say that since *shinjin* is given to beings by Other Power, it is true and sincere, and *shinjin* that is not true and real is a contradiction in terms. This is, however, only a partial understanding.

The distinction in *shinjin* arises because there is a point—a time—at which *shinjin* becomes settled. As we have seen, Shinran states that for people to be shaken in *shinjin* means that their *shinjin* is not true. The *shinjin* of such people has yet to become true. Concerning the point at which this happens, Shinran states, “Since true *shinjin* is awakened through the working of the two honored ones, Śākyamuni and Amida, it is when one is grasped that the settling of *shinjin* occurs” (*Letters*).

The point of receiving Amida’s grasp is the point of entering the ocean of the Primal Vow, the point at which the mind of the foolish person and the mind of Amida become one. At this point, “the waters of foolish beings’ minds, both good and evil, are transformed into the mind of great compassion” (*Shōzōmatsu wasan* 40). Shinran explains, “To be transformed means that the mind of evil [i.e., our blind passions] becomes good [Amida’s mind].” What becomes good through being transformed previously was evil; good becoming a higher form of good is not “transformation.” The point of receiving Amida’s grasp forms a boundary, and after it there is true and real *shinjin*.

Though we enter upon a life of listening to the Dharma and seeking the way, of entrusting to the Primal Vow and saying the nembutsu, such a process is roughly divided in two—the process up to the point at which *shinjin* becomes settled, and the process after settlement. Shinran distinguishes “the person who feels that his attainment of birth is uncertain” and “the person who realizes that his attainment of birth is settled” based on the actual possibility of distinguishing before and after in the process of seeking the way, with the point of the settling of *shinjin* as the boundary. As we tread the path of listening to and studying the teaching, we must keep this in mind.

In the process before reaching the point at which *shinjin* is realized, though we entrust to the Primal Vow and say the nembutsu, that entrusting is still not given to us by Other Power. Although Amida has turned to us, on our part our hearts are closed. Concerning this process, Shinran is silent, and in the long tradition of Shin Buddhism, discussions of it are rare. One example, however, is the following passage by Ikeyama Eikichi:

Entrusting begins with knowing oneself. The deeper self-knowledge goes, the closer absolute Other Power approaches, and thereby little by little the self becomes clearly visible. Then, self and Other Power encounter each other in a perfect fit, like box and lid: this is the most thoroughgoing point of *shinjin*. Here, for the first time, one grasps the nature of oneself and the nature of Other Power. (*Shin o yuku tabibito*)

“Self and Other Power encounter each other in a perfect fit, like box and lid,” speaks of the point when Amida grasps us. Here, the mind of the foolish person and the mind of Amida become one, and we come to know both the true nature of the self as deeply-rooted karmic evil and also the mind of Amida. The process up to this point is described by the unusual expression, “absolute Other Power approaches.” Without the process of this “approach” it is impossible for the encounter of self and Other Power—and their becoming

one—to take place.

In this stage of coming nearer, one has not yet been grasped; hence, *shinjin* is not yet settled. Whether Other Power is approaching or not we cannot know, but it is impossible to be grasped by Amida without this approach. The *shinjin* of this stage is not yet true *shinjin*, and accordingly the saying of the Name has not yet become great practice. Nevertheless, such *shinjin* and nembutsu are inseparable from true *shinjin* and great practice and indispensable to their realization; hence, they may be considered elements of them.

In other words, the nembutsu said in aspiration for birth and the nembutsu said in gratitude for the Buddha’s benevolence are, as the nembutsu (great practice), indistinguishable. The term *shin* (信) in Shinran’s writings refers basically to true *shinjin*. But there are also cases in which it is impossible to limit the meaning to *shinjin* after the point of having become settled; *shinjin* up to the point of realization is included.

The question of the self-consciousness of *shinjin* often arises here. As stated before, if *shinjin* has become settled, there is commonly personal awareness of it, but finally it is not a problem that one determines oneself. Hence, *shinjin* must hold a broad meaning. As we have seen from Shinran’s letter to Shinjō quoted above, it may be dangerous for one to decide that one has realized *shinjin*.

The process of Other Power approaching is accompanied by deepening self-knowledge. If we desire that Other Power approach us, we must strive for awareness of ourselves. Concerning this, Ikeyama states:

How is it for you? Do you have a genuine and immediate sense of yourself as one in whom “karmic evil is deep-rooted”? Without such self-awareness, it is impossible to encounter Other Power perfectly. Without it, there is no link between the mind of Amida and our minds. Where we realize that through our own efforts and abilities there is not a thing we can do to save ourselves,

there is need for the Primal Vow, for absolute Other Power . . . To listen to talk of entrusting and yet not respond in our hearts means that since we have not grasped ourselves as we are, the words naturally do not touch us; our listening is absent-minded.

To know the self is a fundamental problem not only in Buddhism, but in Western philosophy and religion as well. In Shin Buddhism, one comes to know one's true self at the point *shinjin* is realized, and at the same time comes to know the Buddha (as the power of the Vow). Ikeyama states, "Where we realize that through our own efforts and abilities there is not a thing we can do to save ourselves, there is the need for the Primal Vow." This expresses the mode of self-knowing in Shinran.

For such realization, abstract reflection by itself is of no avail. It is through earnestly confronting the serious problems that arise in the course of our lives and exerting all our efforts that we come to realize the nature of our abilities as human beings and our limitations. When the work that has given our life meaning ends in failure, or the love that has absorbed us is not fulfilled, or the hopes and efforts we have turned toward an unfortunate child have been in vain, so that the child is doomed to a life of defeat—through such agonizing experiences, we come to know our own powerlessness.

The problems that confront us are varied, but the condition of coming up against our limitations and being rendered completely helpless is surely the same for all of us. By being brought to this limit, we come to know directly and acutely our own true powerlessness. Any problem, when faced in earnest, becomes an opportunity for knowing ourselves.

Section 4 of the *Tannishō* deals with the compassion awakened through our own powers, but may be taken as applying broadly to the limits of human love: "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." This speaks of the keenly-felt limitations of parental love also. In cases where we cannot but feel transfixed by such feelings, if we do not turn to religion, there is nothing for us but to pass dark and isolated days of unreconcilable pain.

Shinran's path does not, like other forms of Buddhism, prescribe certain practices, for any problem in human life can lead toward the realization of *shinjin*. The important thing is our attitude. It is when we have exerted all our efforts and our powers have been expended that for the first time it becomes possible to "know ourselves" to the very limits of our existence. At this point, the call of the Primal Vow can sound in our hearts. In Ikeyama's words, "The deeper self-knowledge goes, the closer absolute Other Power approaches." Self-knowledge here refers to the deepening awareness of the powerlessness of the self.

When we stand in such self-realization, it is impossible for us to depend on our own wisdom, or love, or goodness—in Shinran's term, our self-power. Where we become incapable of such reliance, we cannot but quit the designs and calculative thinking (*hakarai*) of self-power. We have striven with all our intellectual and moral capacities, and yet our efforts have been in vain. We need something beyond our own powers. Here, if there occurs a transformation in which we have no alternative but to abandon the powers that have ceased to be reliable and to give ourselves over to the power of the Primal Vow, then our *shinjin* becomes settled, and we become completely free of self-power. It is perfectly possible to stand at the limits of self-power without having followed a religious life. But for that awareness to hold religious significance, it is necessary for us to have listened earnestly to the teaching up to that point. Without such a process of earnest listening, it is impossible for Other Power to approach us, and hence for transformation to occur. When we are forced to face our helplessness and seek to rise again, if we have already encountered the Buddha's teaching and listened thoroughly to it, the answer emerges from it, bringing about transformation. It is in this sense

that *shinjin* and nembutsu that are not yet true are structural elements of true *shinjin* and great practice.

Nishida Kitarō, in his essay "Gutoku Shinran," describes this entrance into Other Power, when our powers are abandoned at the point of their failure:

Among people there are the wise and the foolish, the virtuous and the immoral. But however great it may be, human wisdom is human wisdom, human virtue human virtue . . . Yet when a person has simply turned completely about and abandoned such wisdom and virtue, he can attain new wisdom, and take on new virtue, and enter into new life. This is the living marrow of religion.

Shinran's well-known confessions of moral ignorance ("I know nothing of what is good or evil") and his stance beyond morality ("Entrusting yourself to the Primal Vow requires no performance of good . . . nor is there need to despair of the evil you commit") do not mean that morality should be rejected as meaningless. They are expressions of one who has come to the very limits of human intellect and moral goodness, and has passed beyond, entering the mind of Amida. Hence, they include the meaning of having desperately striven with all one's powers.

Without having exerted ourselves thus, it is impossible to come to our limits and, through abandoning our own powers, to pass beyond them and enter the mind of Amida. Here, one naturally comes to receive Amida's wisdom and virtue: "Because one entrusts to the power of Amida's Vow, one is brought to receive the Tathāgata's virtues" (*Essentials*).

Shinran's religious experience of the settling of *shinjin*, often expressed in the simple phrase "receiving *shinjin*," is thus a decisive transformation of human life. Nishida states that herein lies the living marrow of religion. Shinran's teaching of the "attainment of Buddhahood by the person who is evil" holds at its core a transformation that

cannot be understood conceptually. He states that "the mind of evil becomes good": one is given Amida's mind of wisdom and compassion, which reveals the fundamental emptiness of human judgments, and is filled with the great ocean of Amida's virtues.

How is *shinjin* to be realized? This question of method is inevitably linked with the problem of what realization of *shinjin* is, and of the nature of *shinjin* itself. "To receive *shinjin*" suggests an image of acquiring something, some adjunct to the self, without undergoing any personal change. And this something is often thought of as a kind of ticket that enables one to enter the Pure Land.

But Shinran's teaching is altogether different. For him, to realize *shinjin* is as expressed in Nishida's words, a radical transformation in which we abandon all our previous life—all human knowledge and wisdom and goodness—and enter into new life, the realm of Amida's love and wisdom. Thus he states: "When we entrust ourselves to the Tathāgata's Primal Vow, we, who are like bits of tile and pebbles, are turned into gold" (*Essentials*).

There are many who consider morality the supreme good and who feel satisfied in their efforts to live a moral life, but such an attitude is described in the Postscript to *Tannishō*, "In truth, myself and others concern ourselves only about being 'good' or 'evil,' leaving Amida's benevolence out of consideration." This is to stand utterly apart from the world of Shinran's *shinjin*. He states:

The gods of heaven and the deities of earth bow in homage to a practitioner of *shinjin* and those of the world of demons or of non-Buddhist ways never hinder him. Moreover, the evil he has done cannot bring forth its karmic results, nor can any good act equal in virtue to his saying of the Name. (*Tannishō* 7)

This remarkable world of unobstructed freedom is no mere ideal, no exaggeration of religious expression; it was, I think, Shinran's actuality, an actuality that he teaches can be realized by each

of us. An excellent modern example of such religious realization may be seen in Asahara Saichi (1850-1932), a poor maker of wooden clogs who could scarcely write the Japanese syllabary. By ordinary standards, his was certainly a humble status in society, but his daily life was lived in the unhinderedness described in *Tannishō*. D.T. Suzuki collected and published Saichi's poems, and in his Preface states: "Saichi is truly a *myōkōnin* (wondrous, excellent person) among *myōkōnin*, an extraordinary human being who possesses what it means to be a 'wondrous, excellent person' not in Shin Buddhism alone, but in any school of Buddhism." Saichi surely manifests for us what Shinran speaks of as the transformation of tiles and rubble into gold.

NOTE:

This is a translation of "Shinjin o uru ni wa dō subeki ka," which is included in *Jōdokyō*

no kenkyū, (Kyoto, 1982), a festschrift in honor of Dr. Mitsuyuki Ishida, pp. 613-631. References are made to English translations of Shinran's writings appearing in the Shin Buddhism Translation Series published by the Hongwanji International Center, Kyoto: *Letters* (*Letters of Shinran*, a translation of *Mattōshō*, 1978), *Inscriptions* (*Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls*, a translation of *Songō shinzō meimon*, 1981), and *Essentials* (*Notes on "Essentials of Faith Alone,"* a translation of *Yuishinshō-mon'i*, 1979).

FOOTNOTE:

1. *Shinjin* 信心 is the mind of Amida Buddha given to and realized in a person. Shinran interprets *shin* 信 to mean "truth, reality, sincerity"; *jin* 心 means "mind." When *shinjin* is realized, Amida's mind (wisdom and compassion) and the practitioner's mind of blind passions become one. See my article, "The Mahayana Structure of Shinran's Thought," in *The Eastern Buddhist*, Volume XVII, Nos. 1 and 2 (Spring and Autumn 1984).