

## Shin Buddhism, the *Nembutsu* Experience, and Faith

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Anyone who knows a little about Shin Buddhism, or more particularly about the teachings of its founder Shinran (1173-1262), will know that the essence of the *nembutsu* experience is *shinjin*, or faith. That is, the *nembutsu* — the outward practice of invoking the name of Amida Buddha — is inextricably tied to the inner state of mind of the person, specifically the mind of faith. The name of Amida may be invoked outside of the state of faith, but in that case it is not the true *nembutsu* but rather a self-contrived *nembutsu*. Faith in fact is the active ingredient giving the *nembutsu* its potency. Without faith, the *nembutsu* becomes merely words imitated but not understood. In short, faith is the crux of the *nembutsu* experience. It is this basic premise that makes Shin Buddhism a highly psychological religion, one in which the inner state of mind becomes an overriding concern.

This inner state of mind known as faith is not a personally generated condition, for it is not a product of one's own internal activity. Inward striving and effort only obstruct faith, so it is only when they come to an end that faith itself can appear. When it appears, it comes on almost miraculously, or perhaps unexpectedly, or maybe even imperceptibly. The reason is that faith is an utterly unpremeditated (*wa ga hakarawazu*) condition. But when it is in place, faith exists as an indestructible state of mind (*kongōshin*), and hence it endures the moral and personal vicissitudes of one's life. Faith, then, is the true cause of birth in Pure Land (*shinjin shōin*), or to use Shinran's words it is the "immediate cause" (*naiin*). It is unfailing not because it is the creation of human beings, for they are subject to repeated failings, but rather because it is a state of mind generated by the Buddha and implanted in humans.

What is the connection between this special state of mind and the *nembutsu* itself? The *nembutsu*, or invoking Amida's name, is a concrete external event to which faith is directly linked. Saying the *nembutsu* may be the starting point for faith, i.e., the event that causes faith to arise in a person in the first place. Or, it may be a continuing practice in a person's life of faith, i.e., the most poignant outward expression of one's inner state of faith. The *nembutsu* has the power to evoke faith from a person, and it also offers a palpable form for faith to be expressed outwardly from the person. It provides concretion to a religious state which is in essence personal and private. The *nembutsu* is, in short, a public symbol used interactively between individuals. It has the capacity to transform the experience of any one individual, but at the same time it gives individuals a commonly recognized vocabulary for conveying to the world what that transformative experience is like. The *nembutsu* and faith thus breathe life into each other. They bestow meaning on one another. The *nembutsu* without faith is a hallow symbol, preserved in society by historical happenstance. Faith without the *nembutsu* is religiously "solitary confinement" — the state of being locked into one's own mind with no religious link to the outside world. Only in connection with each other do faith and the *nembutsu* constitute a complete religious life.

### RELIGIOUS TRADITION AND PERSONAL CONFIRMATION

The profile of Shin teachings just presented is, needless to say, an interpretation. It is a patchwork of ideas drawn from the Shin tradition on the one hand and from my own conceptual structuring on the other. Virtually any attempt to

deal with religious questions will inevitably involve a combination of these two elements. When we pose questions like "What is Shin Buddhism?" or "What is the *nembutsu*?" or, perhaps hardest of all, "What is faith?" we are forced into a quandary. We are forced to ask: What is going to be the basis of authority for providing a correct answer to these questions? In searching for sources of authority, we are ultimately led back to tradition on the one hand and personal affirmation on the other.

In addressing questions of faith, we must first come to terms with what people have said in the past. We have inherited a body of religious writings which speak directly to these issues. Shinran, Kakunyo (1270-1352), Rennyo (1415-1499), and subsequent Shin Buddhists right down to the present have all given their own explanations of the significance and meaning of faith. Are their writings the basis of our authority? And if so, should we give more weight to some — such as Shinran's — and less to others — such as Rennyo's? Certainly, Shinran has emerged as the towering figure in the Shin tradition, and he is even regarded as a manifest form of Amida Buddha. Such aggrandizement adds special weight and authority to his teachings. The religious tradition built around Shinran's words offers one means of answering these fundamental religious questions. Specifically, the tradition has provided a variety of doctrinal formulas for explaining what faith is.

Over and against tradition we have another basis for religious authority: what might be described as "personal confirmation." The source of personal confirmation is individual experience. At every moment in the history of a religious tradition there is a personal assessment of its message. Individual members are constantly "trying-on-for-size" the sacred teachings and doctrines that their tradition presents to them. The things that "fit best" in a person's religious psyche are the things that the person tends to identify as the essence of the tradition. Things that do not "fit" well tend to fall into the background of that

person's perception of the tradition. Though we might look upon such perceptions as subjective and idiosyncratic, they are in fact the life-blood of the tradition. It is only when the inherited elements of a religion are internalized on a personal basis that the religion continues to be a living tradition. Without such individual "trying-on-for-size" it merely becomes a curiosity of the past.

The principal elements of any religious tradition originally began as the subjective and idiosyncratic views of particular individuals. For instance, the great religious insights propounded by Shinran and Rennyo represent their own rendition of what religious truth is. In the beginning these insights were personal religious views arrived at individually. What has made them foundational doctrines of Shin Buddhism is repeated confirmation of them by individual Shin believers over the centuries. Hence, when we inquire into the nature of faith, we cannot ignore the personal inspirations and insights of individuals.

#### ORTHODOXY AND HERESY

Before returning to the question of faith, I would like to extend this analysis of religious tradition one step further — to touch on the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy. In the abstract, orthodoxy may be defined as diametrical opposites. If orthodoxy is synonymous with religious truth, then heresy is that which opposes or obstructs this truth. Heresy does not indicate just anything outside of orthodoxy, for there are many things that may not be orthodox and yet not heretical. Heresy must diverge from orthodoxy in such a way that religious truth is distorted and salvation subverted. In this respect, heresy is not merely a mistake but rather a profound religious failing that has dire consequences for one's life.

Orthodoxy and heresy can be approached from two different standpoints. One is the personal point of view emerging out of the believer's inner religious experience, and the other is the public point of view defined by an

organized body of believers. The two levels are inextricably linked to each other. Public designations of orthodoxy and heresy are informed by private views, and therefore constantly depend on the religious experiences of individuals for confirmation. Theoretically, what undergirds the public conception of orthodoxy and heresy is the assent of a body of believers guided by their own inner experiences. Nonetheless, the public and the private views are not always identical. What is heretical from the public standpoint may be orthodox in the eyes of the individual, and vice versa. Whenever people propound a heresy, they do not conceive of it in their own mind as heresy but rather as religious truth. It would take a profoundly cynical and devious individual to propound as religious truth what he or she knew to be false. Hence, when conflicts arise between an individual and a body of believers over matters of orthodoxy and heresy, it is almost always a case of conflicting views of religious truth, not of clear-cut choices between orthodoxy and heresy. In these conflicts, the personal beliefs of the individual cannot be ignored, since they are the milieu from which public designations of orthodoxy and heresy arise. Likewise, the public view cannot be disregarded, for it represents a consensus of individual believers, which often shapes and influences private religious experiences. Consequently, any definition of orthodoxy and heresy must take into account both personal and public points of view, or in other words both tradition and personal confirmation. Where conflict exists between the two, new formulations of orthodoxy and heresy are in the making.

Orthodoxy and heresy, as public concepts, are most commonly associated with formal religious organizations. During their early stages of development, religious organizations frequently revolve around a charismatic leader. In succeeding generations the teachings of that person act as a kind of tether for orthodoxy, constraining it within the limits of consistency and plausible interpretation. Orthodoxy may develop in a

variety of directions, but it may not controvert the founder's teachings in any blatant way as long as they stand as the basis for the religious heritage. That is the reason that Shinran's teachings tend to be viewed as sacrosanct and inviolable in the Shin tradition. From the point of view of the believer, orthodoxy is fixed, absolute, and eternal, for it is none other than religious truth. From a historical perspective orthodoxy is constantly evolving, primarily as a result of the interpretations and re-interpretations presented by believers in the perennial process of personal confirmation of tradition. Hence, orthodoxy in Shin Buddhism today contains many elements that were never spelled out by Shinran, and some that were hardly intimated by him. Examples of them are the idea that the *nembutsu* is a response of indebtedness or gratitude to the Buddha (*shōmyō hōon*), the idea that the believer of limited capacity and the Buddha of absolute truth are of one substance (*kihō ittai*), and the idea of relying on the Buddha to please save me (*tasuke tamae to tanomu*). Throughout Shin history a host of propositions have been put forward as the definition of faith or the essence of Shin Buddhism. Some of them, such as the particular items I have just mentioned, have been accepted as true, and hence have emerged as the basic axioms of Shin orthodoxy. Others have been rejected, and therefore are branded as Shin heresy. We must keep in mind, however, that whether viewed today as orthodox or heretical, each of these propositions began as an attempt to explicate the meaning of Shin faith in the light of personal experience, and thus to get at the nature of religious truth.

## SHIN ORTHODOXY

At this point we should return to our original topic of Shin faith, its meaning and significance. Questions of orthodoxy and heresy are particularly problematic in Shin Buddhism simply because faith is such a crucial component. In systems of religion where practice is the

essential element — examples are Vedic Hinduism, Orthodox Judaism, and perhaps even Shin-gon Buddhism — questions of right and wrong are tied in part to externally observable forms: sacred chants, defined rituals, ethic codes, dietary practices, and so forth. Hence, the correctness of one's religious condition can be verified to a certain extent by outside observers. This is not to say that there is no internal or psychological dimension to those religions, but simply that orthodoxy is defined as much by what one does outwardly as by what one is inwardly. Shin Buddhism, by contrast, gives far more weight to the inner state. Because this is not a publicly observable realm, it is much more difficult to assess the correctness or incorrectness of a person's religious experience. This means that statements of orthodoxy and heresy in Shin Buddhism tend to deal with one's frame of mind or religious outlook rather than with one's performance or practices. This psychological dimension of Shin Buddhism is observable in the classical statements of orthodoxy and heresy which will be taken up below. In analyzing them, we should look upon both as attempts to get at that inward and very elusive experience of faith.

### 1. Shin Faith

The first example of Shin orthodoxy to be examined is the widely invoked doctrinal formula *shinjin shōin shōmyō hōon*: faith is the prime cause of birth in Pure Land, and the *nembutsu* is an expression of indebtedness or gratitude to the Buddha. This doctrinal equation is often presented as the crux of Shinran's teachings, and yet Shinran himself very rarely stated his ideas in precisely these terms. The first part of the formula — that faith is the primary cause of birth in Pure Land — does not appear frequently in his writings, for it was assumed to be true every time Shinran mentioned faith. Shinran inherited from his teacher Hōnen (1133-1212) the proposition that the *nembutsu* is the primary cause of birth in Pure Land. But what Shinran conceived of as the

*nembutsu* was the *nembutsu* of faith. Hence, for Shinran Honen's proposition really meant that faith, as embodied in the *nembutsu*, is the true cause of salvation.

What is interesting about this doctrinal formula is that on the surface it really does not attempt to define the rare and enigmatic state of mind known as faith which is the crucial element for salvation. We can look in some of Shinran's many writings for that. Sometimes this pristine state of mind is defined in terms of the repudiation of *jiriki* (self-effort) and the reliance on *tariki* (the Buddha's power). Sometimes it is defined in terms of *jinen* (naturalness) and *hōni* (Dharma-quality). Sometimes it is defined in terms of relinquishing *hakarai* (human contrivances). What is interesting is that Shinran's most extensive expositor of faith, that found in his *Kyōgyōshinshō*, is usually limited to doctrinal analyses of faith, and therefore seldom appears in popular explanations. In his *Kyōgyōshinshō* exposition, Shinran explicates faith in terms of three elements appearing in the eighteenth vow: *shishin* (sincerity), *shingyō* (trust or reliance, for lack of a better translation), and *ganshō* (aspiration to be born in Pure Land). Here we have an interesting psychological profile of the person of faith. Sincerity: all human pretenses fall away when confronting Amida Buddha face to face in one's state of frailty and inadequacy. Trust or reliance: there is little recourse for humans outside of entrusting themselves to whatever saving powers might exist. Aspiration for birth in Pure Land: it is one's realization of the futility of the present life and one's hope for something greater that gives urgency to trust or reliance. The psychological frame of mind defined compositely by these three is, according to our doctrinal formula, the true cause of salvation.

The second part of the doctrinal formula — that the *nembutsu* is an expression of gratitude — is often given less emphasis compared to the first. It is frequently cited to show that the *nembutsu* is not an imploring invocation on the part of humans, nor a potent magical invocation that one



utters to gain certain desired ends. Rather, it simply expresses gratitude for blessings already bestowed. This particular interpretation of the *nembutsu* is certainly present in Shinran's letters, but it is not the dominant interpretation presented in his heavily doctrinal writings. If anything, the more prominent interpretation of the *nembutsu* presented by Shinran, especially in his *Kyōgyōshinshō*, is that the *nembutsu* is the "beckoning command of the principal vow" (*hongan shōkan no chokumei*). That is, the *nembutsu* "calls" the person, rather than the person "calling" the *nembutsu*. In effect, the *nembutsu* has a magnetic power inherent in it which engages or commands the attention of the person. This interpretation links the *nembutsu* not so much to gratitude but rather to *tariki*, the power of Amida, and hence to the state of faith. My own view is that when we take this more prominent interpretation of the *nembutsu* from Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō* and combine it with the less prominent idea that the *nembutsu* is an expression of gratitude, we get a new equation that links the two parts of the *shinjin shōin shōmyō hōon* formula together more meaningfully. If the *nembutsu* (in the form of the "beckoning command of the principal vow") equals faith and if the *nembutsu* also equals gratitude, then faith itself equals gratitude. That is, the life of faith is none other than the life of gratitude. Here we see a profounder significance to the idea of gratitude than simply the inner meaning of saying the *nembutsu*. Gratitude becomes synonymous with the religious state that is the root cause of salvation. This doctrinal formula, then, is one attempt to explicate what the outer visible expression is of the inner private state of faith.

## 2. Kihō Ittai

The second classical statement of Shin orthodoxy to be examined is the idea that the believer of limited capacity and the Buddha of absolute truth are of one substance (*kihō ittai*). This is one formulation of Shin orthodoxy that

cannot be found in Shinran's writings, and thus represents the efforts of later Shin thinkers — specially, Kakunyo and Rennyo — to explore and unpack the meaning of faith. Traditionally this doctrine has been used to analyze the words contained in the *nembutsu*. The two characters *Namu* mean "I take refuge in ..." (*kimyō*), and in the *nembutsu* they stand for the *ki*, the sentient being of limited capacity. The four characters *Amida Butsu* are of course the Buddha's name, and they signify the *hō*, the absolute truth or *Dharma* that Amida embodies. Just as the *Namu* and the *Amida Butsu* are joined together in a single religious affirmation in the *nembutsu*, likewise the believer of limited capacity (*ki*) and the Buddha of absolute truth (*hō*) are united as one substance (*ittai*).

This doctrinal proposition, though it has been a part of Shin Buddhism from Kakunyo's time on, presents certain conceptual problems for the Shin understanding of faith. As a doctrinal formulation, it is meant to show another dimension to the idea of faith. That is, faith is none other than the state in which the believer is united with absolute truth. The problem is that the absolute truth of the Buddha can be none other than complete enlightenment itself. Hence, the danger of this particular doctrine is that it may give the impression that faith is simply a cloaked form of enlightenment. Needless to say, there have been many *ianjin* or heresies in Shin history that have made this primary assumption. It seems clear from Shinran's writings that he never went as far as to say that faith equals enlightenment. Nonetheless, we do see several instances in his writings in which he idealized the state of faith to a profound degree. Specifically, he declared the person of faith to be "equal to all the Buddhas" (*tōdō shobutsu*). The ultimate significance of this idea and of the *kihō ittai* doctrine as well is that faith is profound, rare, and precious — just as absolute truth and all the Buddhas are — and hence it should not be taken for granted or made light of. It is the pristine state of salvation in the Shin

Buddhist tradition, and it should be treasured as a special endowment. This understanding of faith underlies the Shinshu's adoption and articulation of the *kihō ittai* doctrine.

### 3. Relying on Buddha for Salvation

The last formulation of Shin orthodoxy to be examined is the idea of "relying on the Buddha to please save me" (*tasuke tamae to tanomu*). This is a doctrinal theme that became very important in the Shin tradition from Rennyo's time, but was gradually pushed into the background in the late nineteenth century. Hence, for almost four hundred years it was seen as perhaps the most profound explanation of faith in the Shinshū. I personally think it deserves more attention in present-day Shin thought than it is actually given. One of the reasons I say that is because I am convinced that this doctrinal formula, unlike others, arose from among the common people and only gradually gained the recognition of the Shinshū's ecclesiastical elite. In essence, it gained prominence as a doctrine from the bottom up rather than being propounded from the top down.

The earliest analysis of "relying on the Buddha to please save me" is presented in Rennyo's teachings. It cannot be found in Shinran's or Kakunyo's writings. Rennyo, however, came to place considerable emphasis on it, and to consider it the most important idea for leading the ordinary person to faith. He is quoted as saying:

When we speak of *shinjin* or *anjin*, uneducated people do not understand. In speaking of *shinjin* and *anjin*, they take them to be different things. All they need to know is that ordinary beings can achieve Buddhahood and they should rely on Amida to please save them in their next life. No matter how uneducated

sentient beings may be, if they hear this they will attain faith. In our tradition there is no other teachings besides this. (*Rennyo Shōnin gyōjitsu*, p. 99)

Here Rennyo raised this concept to the level of being the one and only idea that people need to understand. If they comprehend this, faith will arise in them. No other teaching is necessary.

The idea of "relying on the Buddha to please save me" has a complex and somewhat shadowy history. Many Shinshu scholars attribute the phrase to the Jōdoshū, Hōnen's Pure Land school, or more particularly to the Chinzei branch of that school, especially as found in the writings of Ryōchū (1199-1287), and Shōgei (1341-1420). I myself believe the idea was popularized by an obscure group of Pure Land believers known as the Ikkōshū — or, the "single-minded adherents." Most people think that the word Ikkōshū was simply an alternative name for the Shinshū, but that use of the name occurred only after Rennyo's time. Prior to that the Ikkōshū was more or less an independent group which, evidence suggests, Rennyo absorbed and integrated into the Shinshū. It was this group, I think, that popularized the expression "Buddha, please save me" (*tasuke tamae*). It seems clear that this expression was invoked by people in times of distress or danger, and that it eventually became a chant repeated over and over again to beseech Amida to please save them. Needless to say, the pleading and importunate tone of this chant was in direct conflict with the sense of true assurance (*shōjō*) and peace of mind (*anjin*) that Rennyo and earlier Shin leaders had ascribed to faith. Hence, Rennyo had to formulate a way of linking this desperate plea to the Shin concept of faith. He did this through the idea of *tanomu*, "relying on the Buddha." That is, the desperation that one feels in the cry, "Please save me, please save me!" is a prime condition for experiencing "reliance on the Buddha." And this state of reliance is tantamount to faith. In the face

of hopelessness, hope arises. Faith encompasses both dimensions. What we see here is a profound innovation of Rennyo's. Not only did he propound a new facet of faith or a new significance to faith, but he took a common religious emotion widespread in people — i.e., the desperate desire to be saved — and made it a vehicle to, or a point of entry into, the experience of faith. This dialectical explanation of faith — made up of the seeming contradictory components of desperation and assurance — provides new insights into the nature and meaning of faith. Hence, he inserted a new wrinkle into the fabric of Shin orthodoxy.

The important point about all three of these orthodox formulas is that none is presented in depth in Shinran's teachings and yet each is an attempt to get at what Shinran was talking about: that elusive and hard-to-nail-down experience of faith. Orthodoxy is therefore a gradually evolving entity in Shinshū history. It develops as a result of individuals' taking tradition — specifically, the premises that Shinran laid down — and internalizing them in a process of personal confirmation. Because the traditional ideal that they inherited was the highly psychological notion of faith, their own explanations have also been couched in psychological terms — gratitude, oneness with the absolute, reliance on the Buddha. These experiences are just as difficult to verify in a person as faith itself. But they are still revealing, for they show us experiential facets and dimensions of faith that may not be readily apparent in Shinran's teachings alone. Hence, they have become axioms of Shin orthodoxy, as found in the school's *anjin rondai*, or "articles of faith."

### SHIN HERESIES

Let us turn our attention next to some of the so-called heresies, or *ianjin*, in the history of the Shinshū. The particular ideas that have come to be regarded as heresy are too many to enumerate and too diverse to sum up with a simple generalization. Therefore, it is necessary to single out

a few examples which have a direct bearing on the concept of faith and which also reveal facets and dimensions of faith, just as the orthodox tenets do. In exploring these heresies there is one thing we need to keep in mind: they, too, were attempts at some point in time to explicate the inner meaning of faith. They were not attempts to twist or distort faith but to get at its true significance. If we are going to understand them in the context in which they were intended, we should not treat them in a stereotypical way, dismissing them without trying to comprehend the rationale behind them. We have to search out the motivations and impulses that led people to postulate them. Hence, it is essential to keep an open mind and to suspend the condemnatory attitude typically adopted in dealing with them. Heresies, like orthodoxy, can be instructive. They can indicate complexities and pitfalls in trying to understand faith.

#### 1. Licensed Evil

The first heresy for examination is what has come to be known in English as "licensed evil" (*zōaku muge*). It is the idea that faith is an inner state of liberation that frees one from all ethical and moral obligations. One may do anything that one pleases; one may indulge in any capricious or self-serving act, for there is nothing that would nullify salvation. Expressed even more radically, immoral action is not simply one of the freedoms of faith; it is an obligation of faith. Not to commit immoral acts is to reveal some uncertainty on one's part over whether faith truly liberates one. Hence, acting in a socially reprehensible way is a sign of faith. Such action derives from the profound trust one has in Amida and in his infinite capacity to save.

This heresy is an attempt to translate the highly private and personal experience of faith into public and external forms. This, needless to say, is the impulse that stands behind many formulations of both heresy and orthodoxy. The "licensed evil" heresy, in particular, seems to be an

attempt to explain one dimension of Shinran's concept of faith, the dimension that focuses on the evil person as the primary object of Amida's vow of salvation (*akunin shōki*). If it is the evil person that Amida is determined to deliver into Pure Land, then the evil that a person does must not be an obstacle to salvation. Even the orthodox tradition acknowledges that to be true. It is at this point, however, that the "licensed evil" heresy diverges from Shinran's teachings, as indicated in Shinran's own writings where he criticized licensed evil adherents. When evil is willfully and intentionally committed, using Amida's vow as a pretext for doing it, then it is not a matter of displaying one's true reliance on Amida but rather of manipulating Amida's vow to serve one's own desires. Thus, licensed evil is not an expression of faith but an expression of contrivance (*hakarai*) which actually stands in the way of faith. It is only when evil acts erupt in one's life as a part of one's inherited karmic tendencies and when one laments the evil done even in the midst of doing it, that one can talk about evil as being no obstruction to Amida's vow.

Concerning evil action, one other point should be made. There is a tendency in the Shinshū to interpret the *akunin shōki* doctrine — the idea that the evil person is the primary object of Amida's vow — in a very noncontroversial way. The meaning often ascribed to it is that all people are evil and hence all are the object of salvation. Thus, people should recognize the evil in themselves and in the midst of that recognition faith will arise. There is no doubt that this interpretation has a basis in Shinran's teachings. But I cannot help but wonder if Shinran also meant something more literal when he talked about the *akunin* or evil person. That is, can Shin Buddhism become a faith for people who are actually recognized as evil? Can it have an impact on the obnoxious and maladjusted in society? Were it to do so, I think the *akunin shōki* doctrine would stand out not simply as a doctrinal platitude but also as a truth confirmed in social experience.

## 2. Single Reward Teaching

The second Shin heresy for examination is the so-called "single reward teaching" (*ichiyaku bōmon*). It received its greatest attention not during Shinran's time but in Kakunyo's and Rennyo's period. The idea inherent in this heresy is that the experience of faith is none other than the experience of enlightenment. There are not two rewards — faith in this life and enlightenment in the next — but just one in the here and now. This notion shows certain affinities to the Shingon idea of "achieving Buddhahood in this very body" (*sokushin jōbutsu*) and the Zen idea that the Buddha-nature (*bushō*) exists fully developed in all people if only they would simply realize it. There have been many interpretations of Pure Land connected with this idea — e.g., the belief that the Pure Land is not different from this corrupt world and that Amida is none other than a transformation of one's own consciousness. All of these are attempts to define the Shin concept of faith in terms of the Shingon, Zen, or perhaps Tendai experience of enlightenment. The Shin tradition has never been willing to do that. Hence, the "single reward teaching" is deemed a heresy.

If there is anything that this particular heresy can teach us, it is that there is a tension or ambivalence in the Shin tradition concerning the nature of faith — an ambivalence that goes back not only to Rennyo and Kakunyo but also to Shinran himself. On the one hand, there is an attempt to aggrandize faith as a special transformative experience that totally changes one's life. This undoubtedly is the intent behind Shinran's "equal to all Buddhas" teaching (*tōdō shobutsu*) and Rennyo's "unity of believer and absolute" doctrine (*kihō ittai*). That same impulse exists in the "single reward teaching" and in another heresy which demands that believers pinpoint the exact moment — day and time — when faith arose in them, when that great transformation took place. All of these teachings, both orthodox and heretical, lie at the "Zen" end of the spectrum in explain-



ing what faith is. At the other end of the spectrum are interpretations of faith that do not depict it as such a sudden and jarring event. They present faith as a subtle and perhaps gradually evolving outlook. It does not transform one overnight, but slowly and steadily. Which of these two ends of the spectrum is the correct way of portraying faith? There are valid arguments, I believe, for both sides, but also misrepresentations can occur on both sides.

### 3. *Sangō Wakuran* Controversy

The last of the Shin heresies to be discussed concerns the concepts that were at issue in the great *Sangō wakuran* controversy at the end of the eighteenth century. Specifically, they are the ideas that the crucial element in the religious make-up of the believer is the aspiration or desire to be born in Pure Land (*ganshō kimyō*) and that in the life of faith there necessarily arises a response to Amida in the three spheres of human activity (*sangō kimyō*). In the sphere of physical activity one worships the Buddha (*raihai*); in the sphere of verbal activity one beseeches the Buddha to "please save me" (*tasuke tamae*); and in the sphere of mental activity one earnestly thinks "please save me." The crux of the argument in this controversy was whether *ganshō* (the aspiration to be born in Pure Land) was the essence of faith or whether trust and reliance (*shingyō*) were. In a sense, the issue boils down to is whether the believer takes an active role in the salvation process or whether it is all accomplished unilaterally by Amida. An analogy from the doctrinal treatise *Ganshō kimyōben* best exemplifies the position of the *ganshō* faction. According to it, salvation occurs in the same way that a baby chick is born from an egg. The mother hen pecks at the egg and breaks the shell to liberate the chick, but at the same time the baby chick is exerting itself from inside the shell, for it is motivated by the "desire to be born." Hence, there is a bilateral movement — inside and out — that leads to birth. Needless to

say, the internal desire to be born is ultimately traceable to the mother hen also, in the sense that the hen conceived the chick and laid the egg in the first place, but in function the activity is occurring on both sides. Those who opposed this view believed that *shingyō* (trust or reliance) is the active element in a person's religious make-up, and in that state the person relinquishes to Amida the entire process by which salvation occurs.

It is impossible to go into all the details of the *Sangō wakuran* controversy, but suffice it to say that the *ganshō* position was accepted as orthodox in the beginning, but was eventually overturned in favor of the *shingyō* position. This is an important event in Shinshū history, for it is a clear-cut instance of the changing status of orthodoxy. What should be pointed out about the *ganshō* position is that it was built heavily on ideas drawn from Rennyo's teachings, especially the concept of "relying on the Buddha to please save me." The *Ganshō kimyōben* quotes extensively from Rennyo's letters and cites such passages as the following one which strongly suggests the kind of desire to be born in Pure Land that the *ganshō* faction advocated:

If one realizes that Amida Tathāgata is the only Buddha that can save even someone of limited capacity such as this, and if, without any ado whatsoever, one thinks intently of clinging to the sleeve of Amida Buddha tightly, and if one relies on the Buddha to "please save me" in the next life, then Amida Tathāgata rejoices profoundly over this. (*Rennyo Shōnin ibun*, p. 200)

One other point which should be stressed is that the idea of *ganshō*, or aspiring to be born in Pure Land, was part of Shinran's original exposition of faith in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. The *shingyō* position,

which emerged as orthodox in the controversy, likewise had a solid basis in Shinran's teachings. With the triumph of the *shingyō* faction, emphasis on *shingyō* came to dominate doctrinal studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The ideas of *ganshō* and *tasuke tamae to tanomu* faded into the background in explaining the faith experience. Despite their eclipse, these two ideas are rich, revealing, and valid concepts from Shin doctrinal history. The adherents of the *ganshō* faction used them in that spirit in their attempts to get at the essence of faith.

### CONCLUSION

Throughout this analysis of Shin orthodoxy and heresy, the overriding premise has been that both are motivated by a desire to arrive at religious truth. That is, both are products of the attempt to take religious tradition and make it meaningful for the individual through a process of personal confirmation. A body of believers puts any religious proposition to a personal and internal test. Confirmation of it makes it orthodoxy, and denial makes it heresy. This is the process by which a collection of religious tenets comes to be recognized as the orthodox teachings of the school, and other tenets are branded as heretical. Whatever the outcome of this process, all religious propositions begin as genuine attempts to unpack the meaning of religious truth. Furthermore, no body of orthodox teachings is ever fixed once and for all. They are constantly changing and evolving, even though they lay claim to absolute and unchanging truth.

What does all of this mean in the context of the believer? On the surface, it would appear that we live in a world of relativism. Heretics are just as much in search of religious truth as orthodox believers. Moreover, orthodoxy is not a fixed entity, for there always seems to be some important addition or reinterpretation that needs to be made. The shifting sands of this religious search could easily discourage one, or make one

think that there is no truth to arrive at, since all is relative. That, however, is not the conclusion to draw. Rather, one should conclude that there is no final truth to arrive at, for religious truth is an ever unfolding drama in the life of the believer. Hence, the religious search must not be abandoned, even though the categories of orthodoxy and heresy are not as simple as they may have seemed. The reason is that the religious search is the life-blood of any religion. It is what it means to internalize tradition and add one's personal confirmation to it. Without this search the religion is dead and the tradition a fossil.

If there is anything to be learned from this examination of the dynamics of orthodoxy and heresy, it is the lessons of toleration and religious diversity. There is just reason to give others the benefit of the doubt, even if their image of religious truth is not the same as our own. Their image arises from the same internalizing or "trying-on-for-size" process that our own does. We do not give up our image of truth simply because it does not match theirs, but we accept the fact that truth is an infinitely faceted reality, which we are unable to fathom in full from our particular vantage point in history. Perhaps that is what Shinran meant when he described the wisdom of Amida, and by extension the faith that Amida awakens in the believer, as incomprehensible (*fukashigi*).