



Nyoshin and the Kudensho

by Phillip K. Eidmann

The prominent position of Shinran in Shin Buddhism has been secured by hundreds of years of tradition. However, very little of his charismatic personality has been handed down through these centuries; and the oldest biography is brief and conservative, never really bringing the Sage to life. Later biographies are regarded by scholars as mostly myth and legend. Thus any little new insight into his character ought all the more to be precious.

It is, accordingly, remarkable that a document of twenty-one chapters exists, which, even in Japan, is hardly referred to; yet, *The Notes on the Oral Transmission (Kudensho)*¹ is the only early extended work which gives us a first-hand acquaintance with Shinran. These twenty-one chapters record the memories of Nyoshin, Shinran's grandson and heir. Nyoshin, at the request of his nephew, Kakunyo, preached, in the year 1311, for the week of Thanksgiving and Gratitude (*hoonkoo*), on what he remembered of Shinran and his teachings. Kakunyo, the successor and dharma-heir of Nyoshin, ordered a disciple to record the sermons on this occasion. Long years later, when Kakunyo was sixty-two, he used this material and perhaps other things that he had heard from Nyoshin as the text of his own sermons at a similar Feast. This, in turn, was recorded by Josen, one of his chief disciples. Later, in 1345, Kakunyo made a fair copy of this transcript; and this autograph manuscript is the basis of the text in the *Shinshuu Shyogyo Zensho*. Another very early text is preserved at Senshuji, the headquarters of the Takata branch of the Shin Sect. Various authorities regard Nyoshin as the author of these *Notes*, but others insist Kakunyo must be called the author. However, it is clear that their content comes from Nyoshin and constitutes the oral transmission to Kakunyo by which he claims the direct succession to Shinran's teachings.

Aside from the actual writings of Shinran, which are chiefly poetical or academic, these *Notes* represent the oldest Shin Scripture. Among secondary literature, *The Notes Lamenting Differences (Tannisho)*² alone might be older, though evidence does not support the fact. They share several chapters, but in each case, *The Notes on the Oral Transmission* seems more original and alive.

These *Notes* whet our appetite for more, but, even as they are, they furnish a great deal of information about Shinran and his teachings, far surpassing the better-known *Notes Lamenting Differences* in presenting insights into the period. Nine chapters give pictures of Shinran's life and emphasize his personality. The other twelve chapters deal with doctrinal matters of great importance; these chapters serve as extended commentaries on various problems.

Some of the doctrinal chapters, as a matter of fact, parallel the *Notes Lamenting Differences* quite closely. In most such cases, the Nyoshin tradition seems closer and more reliable than the *Notes Lamenting Differences*, though it is impossible to say which was first committed to writing. The point is, however, that Nyoshin's *Notes on the Oral Transmission* give a historically reliable and authenticated tradition, while the *Notes Lamenting Differences* are the questionable work of an anonymous writer's memories.

Nyoshin gives nine chapters containing episodes of Shinran's life, which are divided into three periods equally: the period with Hoonen, the period in exile in the eastern provinces, and the period of his retirement in Kyoto. Of these nine, chapter eight is particularly important and revealing.

This chapter deals with two episodes which occurred while Shinran was serving as proof-reader for the copying of the whole Buddhist canon. That he was selected for the job (whether he was the sole proof-reader or one of several is unclear), indicated clearly that he was regarded in his own time as a learned and exacting scholar. This conclusion is further supported by the first incident noted in the chapter. During the work on the canon, the vice-Shogun set forth a feast, to which Shinran and other religeaux were invited. Shinran ate fish and fowl like a layman and, when the sake cup was passed, took a sip of sake; all of the time he wore his kesa, despite the custom of a monk's removing his kesa when partaking of anything not in accord with the vinaya.

Shinran was approached by the nine-year old Kaiju, a Zen acolyte of Sainyoji temple, who was the son of the vice-Shogun. Kaiju asked why Shinran wore his kesa when everyone else had removed his. Shinran replied, "As the others are quite used to this kind of food, they know they should remove the kesa. But I rarely get such food, and forgetfully gobbled it right down." The young acolyte answered Shinran: "You think I'm just a young child, and you're teasing me"; and Kaiju left. One can almost see the glint in Shinran's eyes and the thin smile on his lips as he light-heartedly answered the child.

But the young Kaiju was not to be put off indefinitely. The next time he saw Shinran eating fish, the Sage was again wearing the kesa. The child asked again after the reason, and when Shinran put him off, the acolyte said, "It is a matter of your not explaining this point because one should not impart deep principles to the foolish minds of young children. I beg you to explain fully the real reason."

Finding it hard to avoid the issue, Shinran answered the young Kaiju:

Rare is it to attain a human body; to destroy life and greedily taste meat ought to be extremely unnatural. Thus, in the controlling precepts of the Tathagata, this is extremely prominent. However, since the sentient beings of the present age, which is the Latter Law in a world of corruptions, are in a time without the precepts, there is no one who holds them nor anyone who breaks them. . . . However, although I admit to the Shakyas' clan name, my mind is stained by mundane dust, and I have no wiser virtue. With what, indeed, should I save those having passions? Well now, the kesa is a spiritual cloth which is a sign of the release of various Buddhas. Thinking that if I eat while wearing this, I shall, by virtue of the kesa, bring to fruition the resolute mindfulness of benefiting things by saving the living, I shall eat it while wearing this.

The important part of this statement of Shinran is his declaration that there are no validly ordained monks, that the vinaya does not exist. The valid transmission of the precepts which the Tathagata set to control the Sangha have been lost to the world. In his Japanese poems, Shinran says: "bhikkhus in name only, without the precepts." This passage preserved by Nyoshin is the most clear statement of Shinran's position and clarifies the words of this verse, and such other expressions as "neither monk nor layman." Since there were no validly ordained bhikkhus in the world, there were also no true laymen.

The importance of understanding Shinran's position is great. It refutes the notion of western scholars that Shinran was a married bhikku or that he urged bhikkhus to marry. Entirely misunderstanding Shinran's position, Albert Schweitzer concluded: "Like Luther, Shinran . . . abolished the celibacy of the priesthood, of the monks and nuns."³

Not only does this chapter clarify Shinran's doctrinal position with regard to eating flesh and marrying, but it shows clearly a unique principle of Shin Buddhism that becomes more clear in the writings of Rennyo that one should not teach others until his own faith has been established, and even then one is to teach quietly and privately, not broadcasting his teachings to an admiring bog.

A different aspect of Shinran's character is seen in the first chapter of the *Notes* where two incidents are mentioned. A special week-long service was held at the imperial palace, which was attended by the Emperor. At its end, as an offering to the liturgist, Seikaku of Angoin, who had spoken out against Honen, the Emperor issued a rescript banning the Jodo teaching as an illegal cult. Honen asked Shinran to go to Angoin to try to mediate the situation. Honen's group agreed that this was a sensible action, but Shinran several times declined. Finally, he said, "Since this is a very important matter, can someone accompany me?" Honen acceded to this request, naming Saii as his companion.

When Shinran arrived at Angoin, Seikaku was in the bath. An attendant told him that messengers had arrived from Honen. Seikaku asked who had come, and when told that Shinran was the messenger, he said, "It is a rare chance to meet this messenger." He immediately went from the bathroom and met Shinran and Saii face to face.

Shinran spoke in detail of the principles taught by Honen, and at the conclusion, Seikaku said: "How could I have belittled what Honen has taught for years? Even though it be the Emperor's order, I cannot destroy the Master's word? . . . He should put his mind at ease."

When Shinran and Saii had returned to Honen, they were asked to recount their visit to Angoin. Before Honen,

Shinran explained in detail what had happened, and when he had finished, the Master asked Saii if there were any errors in Shinran's account. Saii replied, "I have heard the same preaching of the law in both places. It is beyond words." Shinran had not only explained the teachings in an understandable way, but convinced Seikaku that these teachings were not dangerous to the order of the country. Moreover, when he related the embassy to Honen, Shinran repeated the entire matter word for word, which shows us his brilliant memory. Nyoshin points out that Shinran held high rank among Honen's eighty-three close disciples.

Despite Shinran's brilliance and high-rank among the disciples, he was not the least conceited. Nyoshin notes his humility in a second incident given in this same chapter.

Shinran did not feel himself worthy of being a preacher, so, at Honen's feet he took a vow, "I shall cease to be a teacher of men, nor shall I be a preceptor." Nyoshin further noted that Shinran never flattered dana-givers, nor acted on their wishes.

About that time a well-known person came to Shinran, asking him to become rector of a temple which this man had just built. Though he persisted in his request over considerable time, Shinran would not give in to his importuning.

These last two related anecdotes suggest that already while he was with Honen he had come to believe that his ordination was invalid, that he was not a monk in the true sense of the word, which is a matter of historic interest.

On the other hand, Shinran's refusal to be a teacher, preceptor, or rector, may well have been related to the Shin principle most clearly enunciated in Rennyo's *Epistles*:

Other anecdotes and incidents related by Nyoshin bring Shinran to life in a way that few other writings do. Doctrinally, too, these sermons of Nyoshin are of tremendous value, for in several points, they keep us from going astray in our consideration of Shinran's teachings as recorded, for example, in the *Notes Lamenting Differences*. The latter is so difficult to interpret correctly that Rennyo warned lest it be shown to ordinary people who had no background to interpret its true meaning. For example, chapter eight of the *Notes Lamenting Differences* is the most paradoxical chapter in that work. Its message is amplified and clarified at great length in chapter four of Nyoshin's *Notes*, so that there can be no question of what Shinran says. Indeed, this chapter is virtually a brief commentary on the *Notes Lamenting Differences* because it clarifies so many teachings that appear there in great brevity. Chapter five of Nyoshin's work also treats of the same doctrines as the eighth chapter of the anonymous *Notes Lamenting Differences*. Chapter six of the latter seems almost lifted from the sixth chapter of Nyoshin's *Notes*, but his account, given in greater detail, reveals even more of Shinran's personality, as well as the pettiness of his disciples.

On one occasion, Shingyo Niizutsumi in Hitachi had come to disagree with Shinran, though he had earlier been a disciple and received an image of the Buddha and some scriptures from the Master. Now "he was at the point of returning to his own province and stuck up his nose" at the Master and his teachings. Shinran's other followers came running to him, saying that the Master should demand the return of the image and scriptures which had been given the apostate Shingyo. Shinran replied:

It is not an appropriate thing to deprive one of the main image and the scriptures. The reason I say this is that I, Shinran, have not a single disciple. What did I teach that I could call him my disciple? Since we are all disciples of the Tathagata, we walk together. . . . As

the image and the scriptures are accommodations to benefit and reward all sentient beings, even though the sacred scriptures in which my name was written were thrown somewhere in a mountain or in a field with the thought, "Hate the priest, and you will hate this very kesa," in that place some folk having passions might be saved by the scriptures, and each and every one gains benefit.

Nyoshin's fuller version of the incident is the more touching, and the more significant. It shows us a side of Shinran that we otherwise might not see.

Nyoshin's *Notes on the Oral Transmission* is a scripture of major significance to an understanding of Shin Buddhism. This book of twenty-one chapters is certainly the most important source of information on early Shin Doctrine and on the real Shinran in existence. In reliability and volume

of information it far surpasses the anonymous and questionable *Notes Lamenting Differences*, which in modern times have become extremely popular. It stands next in importance to the authentic writings of Shinran, and nothing reaches its level until the *Epistles of Rennyo* in the next two centuries renew the Hongwanji tradition. Nyoshin's week of sermons produced jewels of immeasurable value.

NOTES

1. Shinshuu Shogyo Zensho, vol. 3, p. 1 f.f.
2. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 773 f.f.
3. Schweitzer, Albert. *Indian Thought and its Development*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1960, p. 152.

FROM THE TEACHING OF BUDDHA:

Where, then, is the source of human grief, lamentation, pain and agony? Is it not to be found in the fact that people are generally ignorant and willful?

They cling obstinately to lives of wealth and honor, comfort and pleasure, excitement and egoism, ignorant of the fact that the desire for these very things is the source of human suffering.

From its beginning, the world has been filled with a succession of calamities, over and above the unavoidable facts of illness, old age and death.

But if one carefully considers all the facts, one must be convinced that at the basis of all suffering lies the principle of craving desire. If avarice can be removed, human suffering will come to an end.

Ignorance is manifested in greed that fills the human mind.

Ignorance and false inventions rise from the fact that men are unaware of the true reason for the succession of things.

From ignorance and greed there spring impure desires for things that are, in fact, unobtainable, but for which men restlessly and blindly search.

Because of ignorance and greed, people imagine discriminations where, in reality, there are no discriminations. Inherently, there is no discrimination of right and wrong in human behavior; but people, because of ignorance, imagine such distinctions and judge them as right or wrong.

Because of their ignorance, people are always thinking wrong thoughts and always losing the right viewpoint and, clinging to their ego, they take wrong actions. As a result, they become attached to a delusive existence.

Making their deeds the field for their ego, using the working of discrimination of the mind as seed, beclouding the mind by ignorance, fertilizing it with the rain of craving desires, irrigating it by the willfulness of an ego, they add the conception of evil, and carry this incarnation of delusion about with them.

In reality, therefore, it is their own mind that causes the delusions of grief, lamentation, pain and agony.

This whole world of delusion is nothing but the shadow caused by this mind. And yet, it is also from this same mind that the world of Enlightenment appears.