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## The Metaphor of “Ocean” in Shinran

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### 1. PREFACE

This paper examines the significance of the “ocean” metaphor prevalent in the writings of Shinran (1173–1262), the first and foremost teacher of Shin Buddhism, as well as provides some historical background. In Shinran’s thought, hearing the call of Amida Buddha’s vow is key, as found in such expressions as *hongan no chokumei*, wherein the vow is understood as arising from the ocean of Amida’s compassion, *gankai*. As we shall see, the ocean is not just one among many metaphors for Shinran, but a cornerstone of his thought. It evokes the depths of human suffering and the even greater depths of boundless compassion that rises up from the fathomless bottom of the *dharmakāya*, the body of emptiness, the source of the voiceless voice of Amida Buddha, that to which we listen deeply beyond the bounds of our ordinary life and thought.

### 2. THE CONCERN WITH “OCEAN” AND THE PROBLEM OF METAPHOR

Metaphor is etymologically composed of *meta* and *pherein*, meaning “transcendent” and “carry,” respectively, signifying literally, “to carry beyond.” It is translated in Japanese as *inyu*, “hidden comparison,” and is distinguished from the “direct comparison” of “like” or “as” attributed to simile. Metaphor was long studied within the discipline of rhetoric, but Aristotle defined “the converted use of a word (metaphor) as the application of one word to signify another where the former is usually used to mean something else.”<sup>1</sup> This meaning of converted use is the general sense of metaphor we have inherited today.

For that reason, we tend to think of metaphor as a decoration or as an embellishment produced by the poetic imagination.

Since the publication of *Metaphors We Live By*, by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, research into metaphors has been transformed in what may be called the New Rhetoric movement. Here metaphor is not regarded as something secondary but as an inherent possibility within language. For example, Lakoff and Johnson state, “Not only within the functioning of language, but in thought and language as well, we find metaphor everywhere.”<sup>2</sup> Based on this Ken’ichi Seto states, “Even before the problem of language, metaphor must be understood epistemologically.”<sup>3</sup> If metaphor is fundamental to human existence, then it fulfills an essential function in many aspects of human life.

Within religion, we find metaphor filling an essential role not just in scripture but also in rites and rituals. For example, some have described Christianity as a religion of metaphor, but metaphor is also highly significant in Buddhism. The historical Buddha Śākyamuni is often said to have used metaphors in his dharma discourses. In the *Jūnibukyō*, for example, there is the *Avadāna (Metaphor Sutta)*. Metaphors abound in Mahāyāna sutras and allude to emptiness or explicate difficult points. In the *Nirvana Sutra*, metaphors are classified into eight types, with one of those types indicating that the entire narrative is a metaphor.

Shinran’s writings contain numerous metaphors that work in interconnection with one another, but “light” in particular deserves our attention; in fact, “light” serves as a root metaphor across many cultures and historical periods. In Shinran’s case, one might say that “light” and “ocean” are two of the key metaphors. For example, at the beginning of the preface to his magnum opus, the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, he states, “The universal vow that is difficult to fathom is the great ship for crossing the ocean difficult to traverse, the unhindered light is the Wisdom Sun that destroys the darkness of ignorance.”<sup>4</sup> In this way, he describes the work of Amida Buddha bringing all sentient beings to awakening in terms of “light” and “ocean.” It evokes a darkened ocean into which light penetrates to illuminate the entire vista. For the spiritual seeker, this is read not as a distant vision but as a present occurrence with his own life as the scene of transformation. “Ocean” and “light” metaphors convey such a powerful sense.

Not only in this specific passage but in many others, Shinran uses the “ocean” metaphor in such terms as *gunshōkai*, *ichijōkai*, *shinnyokai*, *hongankai*, *daihōkai*, *shinjinkai*, *mumyōkai* (ocean of: sentient beings, one

vehicle, original vow, great treasure, true entrusting, ignorance), and others. According to Ryūkichi Mori, there are 32 different metaphors used in 104 places in his opus.<sup>5</sup> Of course, Shinran is not the only one to use the "ocean" metaphor, but the particular weight of this metaphor for him is evident by the fact that he does not use other common metaphors such as "mountain" nearly as much as other Buddhist thinkers, and that his case is somewhat of an anomaly within his own Pure Land group: even his teacher Hōnen does not use the "ocean" metaphor in his main work, the *Senchaku hongan nembutsu shū*.

It is hard to know how many people actually saw the ocean in Shinran's day. Certainly, it was far fewer than today. In that case, Shinran used "ocean" not as a means of making it easier to relate to in an ordinary sense but because it carried for him the significance of elucidating the fundamental problem of sentient beings and the nature of Amida Nyorai or Amida Buddha.

Even if one does not see the ocean, there is a profound connection between it and human beings. It is said that all of the thirty million species living on earth had their origins in the ocean over 3.8 billion years ago. The ocean is the womb, the "home country," *kokyō*, of all life, and for this reason the salinity of human blood is said to be very close to that of the ocean. Especially in Japan, we have relied heavily on the ocean for our food and for help to come to us culturally from overseas. Cultural interchange has occurred across the water, and Japan's distinctive culture is inseparable from its association with the sea. Even Buddhism arrived on Japanese shores crossing over the Sea of Japan. What is the significance of the ocean as a metaphor with which we are so closely associated? Of course, we must examine the textual context of the metaphor's usage, but first I would like to explore what our usual sense of "ocean" is.

In the *Kōjien* dictionary, the entry for "*umi*" reads:

- 1) Umi. Usually a smaller body of water than *yō* [used for the Pacific and Atlantic oceans]. The opposite of *riku* [land, continent], as in *kaigan* [seashore], *kōkai* [crossing the ocean], *Nihonkai* [Sea of Japan].
- 2) Vast and large, as in *kaiyō*. 3) A large gathering that is broad-faced, as in *kukai* [ocean of suffering], *jukai* [ocean of trees], *unkai* [ocean of clouds].<sup>6</sup>

The definitions are by and large the same in other widely used dictionaries and indicate two main usages, that of vastness and that of a large, gathering mass that has the collective appearance of a broad, flat

surface that is undulating. These two facets of meaning can be regarded as complementary opposites, plus and minus respectively, or perhaps as light and dark. These conventional connotations found in common dictionaries, however, only provide a glimpse into the hidden potentiality of “ocean” as metaphor. In Ad de Vries’s *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, under the entry for “sea,” the following is to be found:

- 1) The birth place of the enemy of Yahweh (chaos).
- 2) One of the three forms taken by the Sun deity.
- 3) The remains of the water of chaos, showing the beginning of creation. Thus, it expresses the limitless, mystical source of life to which it also returns.
- 4) Immeasurable truth and wisdom.
- 5) Sexual desire; collective unconscious.
- 6) Conscience.
- 7) The sea as hiding great treasure or human life.
- 8) Flux, death, time.
- 9) Eternity.
- 10) Fertility and barrenness.
- 11) The locus of activity, expressing the direct enactment of carnal desire.
- 12) A cool, refreshing place that does not easily accept people.
- 13) Loneliness.
- 14) Purification. . . .<sup>7</sup>

The highlights of this entry are: truth, wisdom, conscience, eternity, fertility, purification (plus; light), and sexual desire, death, barrenness, loneliness (minus; dark), showing the dual images of the “ocean” metaphor. None of these are particularly Eastern in character. Giving rise to all of these polar opposites and then returning to unity originates in the Bible. Buddhism tends to negate the existence of an almighty Source that gives rise to all creation. Yet, in Japan certainly, there is the image of an archetypal “Mother” who gives birth to everything. We in Japan also share the senses of (5) sexual desire and (14) purification, as well as the general dual senses attributed above to the ocean metaphor and found in both East and West.

Based on this, we can see the egalitarian, all-embracing, vast characterization typical of the “ocean metaphor,” as well as the eternal quality transcending human history and time. Furthermore, the “ocean” is transcendent, silent. On the one hand, it has the ability to purify all defilement and is essentially True. On the other, its limitlessness is associated with desire and is thus associated with evil and darkness.

### 3. SHINRAN’S RENDERING OF OCEAN

Shinran uses “ocean” in two polar opposite ways. First, as seen in the “Preface” cited above, is the aspect of human existence found in such expressions as “ocean difficult to traverse.” Second is the metaphor of



the ocean as the working of Nyorai, the Compassionate Buddha. That is, Shinran expresses both practitioner and buddha, *ki* and *hō*, in terms of ocean. On the side of the practitioner (*ki*), he uses such expressions as *gunshōkai*, *shujōkai*, *shōjikai*, *mumyōkai*, and *bonnōkai* (ocean of: collective living beings, sentient beings, life and death, ignorance, and blind passion). On the side of the dharma (Buddha), he uses such expressions as *ichijōkai*, *daichigankai*, *kudokudaihōkai*, *jihikai*, *shinjinkai*, *seigankai*, *shinnyokai*, *hongankai*, *daihōkai*, *shinjinkai*, *mumyōkai* (ocean of: the one vehicle, great wisdom, virtue-treasure, compassion, true entrusting, vow, and true suchness). How does Shinran understand the relation between the two aspects?

Explicitly in relation to the nature of "ocean" Shinran has a section on the "ocean of the one vehicle" in the "Chapter on Practice" of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. First, he explains the nature of the "one vehicle" as follows. Buddhism is the dharma of the one vehicle, and that dharma is the one buddha vehicle of the vow, that is, the dharma taught by Amida Buddha. Then, he compares this dharma of absolute oneness with the ocean and states,

As for ocean, the stream-waters of the mixed practices and sundry goods of ordinary beings and sages, handed down since the ancient past, have been overturned. The slanderous Devadatta overturned the ocean-water of ignorance as vast as the sands of the Ganges and realized the truth of the great compassion and wisdom of the original vow, the great treasure-ocean-water of the myriad virtues as vast as the sands of the Ganges. This is called "like the ocean." Know well. As expounded in the Sutra, "The ice of blind passion melts to become the virtuous water." The vow-ocean does not contain the corpses of the middling and inferior sundry goods of the two vehicles [of the *pratyekabuddha* and *śrāvaka*], let alone the hollow, provisional, heterodox, imitated goods of the human and heavenly realms."<sup>8</sup>

This passage makes use of two particular virtues of the ocean: (1) its uniformity (*umi ichimi*, the one taste of the ocean) and (2) the fact that it does not hold corpses. The former expresses its egalitarian quality: regardless of whether or not a pure or defiled stream feeds into it, it manifests the one taste of the ocean. The idea of not containing corpses is usually explained as the elimination of "self-power" (*jiriki*, ego-based) practices. In examining the metaphor, however, it reveals the fundamental (all-inclusive) purity of the "ocean" of compassion. Namely, the vow-ocean has the power to transform and purify all matter of defilement. In this light, the two aspects are really just that,

two aspects of the same fundamental quality of the ocean's transformative power.

What, then, is the structure of this transformation, *tenjō*? In the *Kōsō wasan* (Hymns to the High Masters), in the section on Tanluan, Shinran states,

Through the benefit of the Unhindered Light  
Is attained the entrusting of vast and majestic virtue  
The ice of blind passion necessarily melts  
To give way to the water of awakening.<sup>9</sup>

The ice of blind passion melts when the true entrusting (*shinjin*) of other-power is grasped. In the same series of hymns Shinran states,

Karmic sin and hindrance become the body of virtue  
Like ice is to water  
The more the ice, the more the water  
The greater the defilement, the greater the virtue.<sup>10</sup>

“Karmic sin and hindrance” signify blind passion, and “virtue” signifies enlightenment, awakening. On the one hand, as the hindrance disappears, awakening proportionally grows; on the other, they are ultimately one and the same substance, “ice and water.” In the *Yuishinshō mon'i* (Essentials of Entrusting Alone), Shinran states, “*Jinen* means ‘led to become so.’ ‘Led to become so’ means that the practitioner without any contrivance from the very beginning undergoes the transformation and turning over of all karmic sin past, present, and future. ‘Turning over’ means that the good is realized without eliminating karmic sin. It is like the fact that all water, once it enters the great ocean, becomes of the same tidal rhythm.”<sup>11</sup> For Shinran, *jinen* signifies the working of the power of the original vow of Amida Buddha that is transferred to sentient beings entirely beyond the contrivance of self-power. Shinran evokes the power of *jinen* using the ocean metaphor. The key here is that the foolish, ordinary being's karmic evil is transformed into good without being eliminated. As Shinran explicates *tenjō*, transformation, as occurring in the moment of the attainment of true entrusting, it is necessary to elucidate the structure of true entrusting. That is, in this very moment, when I recognize all of my karmic defilements, in that place is realized the wisdom and compassion of Amida as dynamic activity, as true entrusting bestowed by Amida and leading to the practitioner to truly entrust him or herself to Amida.

## 4. THE INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF THE OCEAN METAPHOR

## (1) Textual Passages from the Scriptures

What are the intellectual influences in Shinran's use of the ocean metaphor? As traditionally regarded, the influence of Tanluan's *Commentary on the Treatise on the Pure Land* (*Jōdo ronchū*) can be seen in Shinran's citation of the work that is further cited in the *Larger Sutra of Eternal Life* (*Dai muryōju kyō*) that appears in Shinran's explanation of the one vehicle. This section, originally from Tanluan's "Explanation of the Virtue of the Great Gathering under the Gate of Contemplation" ("Kansatsu monge no daishō kudoku shaku"), states, "'Ocean' signifies the limitless, vast, and profound, all-encompassing wisdom of the Buddha. The fact that it does not hold the corpses of the middling and inferior sundry goods of the two vehicles is compared to the ocean. Thus, it is said, 'Heavenly beings and human beings are immovable, and the multitudes give rise to the pure wisdom ocean.'"<sup>12</sup> Shinran cites this passage just as it appears in the original. Since Tanluan also uses the ocean metaphor, its influence on Shinran is readily apparent. This resonates with other uses of the ocean metaphor found in such Mahāyāna sutras as in the thirty-second fascicle of the *Nirvana Sutra* (T. 12, 558c) and the thirty-ninth fascicle of the *Huayan Sutra* (T. 39, 209a).

Among these various locus classicae, the *Huayan Sutra* is of particular note. As Toshio Ōta notes, Shinran draws heavily on the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, and states, "From within the Gandavyūha, Shinran selects especially those passages referring to the 'ocean.' Also, Shinran cites the passage where Sudhana meets a 'shipmaster' who leads people across a river. Even more significant is the fact that the worlds of both buddhas and sentient beings is referred to in terms of ocean. For example, it speaks of 'the ocean of the all of the names of the buddhas' and 'the great ocean of the blind passions of saṃsāra.'"<sup>13</sup> The reference to both the worlds of sentient beings and buddhas in terms of the ocean metaphor is paralleled in Shinran's use and is evidence of the *Huayan Sutra*'s influence on his thought development. One of the special characteristics of Buddhist wisdom and awakening is its purity (purified of discriminations), manifested as the working of the dharma in the *Huayan Sutra*, and expressed through the ocean metaphor. Sentient beings, the foolish beings they are, are bound and defiled by their ignorance and blind passions and destined to wander the six realms of rebirth. Since they fill the cosmos with their innumerable existences, they are likened to

an ocean: “ocean of blind passion,” “ocean of confusion,” “ocean of love and attachment.”

There are other uses of the ocean metaphor in Shinran’s thought not found in the *Huayan Sutra*, such as “ocean of great faith,” “ocean of true entrusting,” and “ocean of original vow.” As much as he may have been influenced by the *Huayan Sutra*, we must also turn to other sources for understanding, in particular his experience of exile in the distant province of Echigo.

### (2) *The Ocean Shinran Experienced*

There are no written records of Shinran’s daily life in Echigo. Only the five words from the “Afterword” of the *Kyōgyōshinshō* remain: “For five years lived variously.”<sup>14</sup> However, Ryūichi Mori states,

The world of the Buddha is like the “ocean,” and likewise with that of sentient beings. It is not that there are two oceans, let alone the thirty-two kinds described, at least not as separate entities. There is only one “ocean.” From Shinran’s vantage point on land, the most water he could see would have been the Sea of Japan visible on a clear day all the way to Sado Island from Kota Bay along the Naoetsu coastline. . . . Shinran, seeing the ocean, encountering the ocean, was able to talk with the local fishermen. He saw the valuable process of making salt. This was all new to Shinran, and it disclosed to him a new, previously unknown world.<sup>15</sup>

Shinran had moved far away from the capital of Kyoto, not just geographically but culturally and economically, to this marginal area beset by cold winters where he saw directly the reality of the people living vigorously close to nature. For him, the people of the countryside might have represented the unknown rootless reed-like existences indicated by the *Larger Sutra of Eternal Life*. If this is true, then Shinran may have internalized the sense of *gunshōkai*, “collective living beings,” in the image of these reed-like people. We can also see his sense of them in the following passage from *The Essentials of Entrusting Alone* (*Yui shinshō mon’i*): “These fishermen, hunters, and various others are like stones, broken tiles, and pebbles like us.”<sup>16</sup> Those who entrust and blend with the surging original vow, that is, those who recognize that “we are like stones, broken tiles, and pebbles” “filled with blind passion,” attain great nirvana with the blind passions as they are. “We” who have been cast aside by the traditional approaches to Buddhism are embraced in the salvific light of the spontaneous vow power (*ganriki jinen*) working

to transform the practitioner. It is exactly like the relation between ice and water and is also expressed through the phrase, "transformed into gold."

Shinya Yasutomi, following Mori, states,

The Sea of Japan in winter can produce enormous waves. Powerful blizzards can turn everything white in minutes, quickly suppressing the activity of all life. The people took refuge in their homes, combating hunger and cold, enduring the winter in stillness. When spring came, the winds would die down, and the sea would become calm again. The limpid sea would stretch out for miles. The people of the sea "would throw their nets and fish to traverse this world [of *samsara*]." (Tannishō) It is not difficult to imagine that Shinran, who regularly came in contact with both the ferocity and gentleness of Nature, held deep in his consciousness the image of this sea.<sup>17</sup>

As Yasutomi suggests, nature's ferocity and gentleness appear to have helped create Shinran's image of the two aspects of the dharma, of practitioner and Buddha.

Shinran's thought, based on the tradition of Pure Land Buddhism, represents the systematization and logical rendering of his own religious experience. His sensibility was deepened in the contours of Japanese life in nature and helped to develop his distinctive perspective. Through his experience of exile, he came to grasp the "transformation" that is essential to nature through the ocean metaphor. If we are allowed to stretch our imagination and infer further, one might say that this transformation is exemplified in his view of ice and water. The northern region that we call Echigo is snow country such that there are few places in the world where it snows more. This volume of snow is directly related to the fact that Japan is surrounded by the ocean. The snow that falls in winter turns to river water in spring and finally flows out to sea. The more the snow, the greater the flow of the river water. Seeing the dramatic change in the Sea of Japan, Shinran may have been led to express the inconceivable power of transformation in terms of the ocean.

#### IN CONCLUSION

Shinran used the "ocean" metaphor in numerous ways. For him, it was not just a simple device to make the teachings easier to understand let alone an aesthetic embellishment. Rather, it is a living metaphor that conveys beyond words the salvific structure of *tenjō*,

transformation, in which the suffering sentient being, so difficult to reach, is embraced never to be let go. Thus, to listen deeply to the vow of Amida Buddha is, for Shinran, to listen deeply to the undulations, the rhythms of the ocean. Then one might hear deep within the suffering cries of sentient beings and the silent, healing surge of the waters of formless compassion.

## NOTES

1. Aristotle, *Poetics: Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, trans. S.H. Butcher (London: Macmillan and Co., 1902), 77–79.
2. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3–6.
3. Ken'ichi Seto, *Rhetoric no ch: Imi no arukeoroji wo motomete* (Tokyo: Shinyōsha, 1988), 19–25.
4. *Shinshū shōgyō zensho* 2.2.
5. Ryūkichi Mori, *Shinran zuisō* (Tokyo: Sanichishobō, 1972), 20–23.
6. Shinmura Izuru, ed., *Kōjien* (Tokyo: Iwanamishoten, 1993), 409.
7. Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Pub. Co., 1974), 55.
8. *Shinshū shōgyō zensho* 2.39.
9. *Ibid.*, 2.505.
10. *Ibid.*, 2.506.
11. *Ibid.*, 2.623.
12. *Ibid.*, 1.302.
13. Toshio Ōta, “Shinran to Kegonkyō,” *Shinshu gaku* 105/106 (2004): 213–214.
14. *Shinshū shōgyō zensho* 2.202.
15. Ryūkichi Mori, *Shinran zuisō*, 20–23.
16. *Shinshū shōgyō zensho* 2.627–628.
17. Shinya Yasutomi, “Umi to ronri: Sōzōryoku to shinkō,” *Shinran kyōgaku* 29 (1976): 48–49.