

The Idea of the Last Dharma-Age in Shinran's Thought, Part 2¹

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SHINRAN'S VIEW OF THE LAST DHARMA-AGE AS SEEN IN THE *SHŌZŌMATSU WASAN*

The Version of the *Shōzōmatsu wasan* Relied upon
by the Hongwanji Branch

We have examined above Shinran's view of the last dharma-age, as seen through his principal text, the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. I would now like to look at works other than his chief writing in order to further explore his view of the last dharma-age. One can infer from its title that the *Shōzōmatsu wasan* (*Hymns of the True, Semblance, and Last [Dharma-ages]*) directly takes up the issue of Shinran's view of the last dharma-age through the use of a form of "Japanese hymns of praise" (*wasan*). In Shinran's other works there are one or two notes addressing the question of the last dharma-age, but they cannot compare with the explications in the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*. Thus, I will focus on these hymns in order to explore further Shinran's view of the last dharma-age.

In Japanese, the title *Shōzōmatsu wasan* should more precisely be the *Shōzōmappō wasan* (*Hymns of the True, Semblance, and Last Dharma-ages*). Currently two manuscript versions of the text are known to exist. The first version has a postscript that states, "First day of the third month in the first year of the Shōka era (1257), year of the fire/serpent, ninth calendar sign. I, Gutoku Shinran, wrote this at 85 years of age." This is currently stored at the head temple of the Takada branch, and is recognized as a national treasure. There is a prefatory hymn,

For Maitreya Bodhisattva,
5,670,000 years must pass.
But, those who have faith in birth through the *nembutsu*
Will attain enlightenment when this life ends.

This is followed by thirty-five hymns, the first nine of which are written in Shinran's hand. The hymns are followed by a comment that refers to "the thirty-four hymns above." Next, there is a hymn with a note relating that it was told to Shinran in a dream at the dawn of the ninth day of the second month of the second year of the Kōgen era (1257). A postscript is then followed by five linked hymns.

The saying of the Name arising from true and real *shinjin*
Is Amida's directing of virtue to beings;
Therefore, it is called "not directing merit,"
And saying the *nembutsu* in self-power is rejected.²

Prince Shōtoku, the prince regent of the great country of Japan
Universally propagated the Buddhist teachings;
His benevolent virtues were vast and profound.
Do not neglect to praise him with reverence!

Out of deep care for the beings of Japan,
Prince Shōtoku, appearing from his original state,
Widely proclaimed the Tathāgata's compassionate Vow;
Let us rejoice and reverently praise him!³

Karmic evil is from the beginning without real form;
It is the result of delusional thought and invertedness.
Mind-nature is from the beginning pure,
Thus, beings are in themselves buddhas.⁴

Although ignorance and dharma-nature differ,
The [two] minds are actually one [non-dual].
This mind is itself nirvana;
This mind is itself Tathāgata.

The second manuscript version of the *Shōzōmatsu wasan* was copied by Kenchi, who added the colophon, "This is an early draft, [copied on the] twenty-fourth day of the ninth month in the second year of the Shōka era (1258). Shinran is 86 years of age." The manuscript begins with an excerpt from the Shan-tao's *Pan-chou-tsan* (*Hymns of All Buddhas' Presence*). It is followed by a prefatory hymn with a note that it was told to Shinran in a dream at the dawn of ninth day of the second month in the second year of Kōgen (1257). Under the title *Shōzōmatsu wasan*, the hymns address the right, semblance, and last dharma-ages, beginning with the first hymn,

It is now more than two thousand years
Since the passing of Śākyamuni Tathāgata.

The right and semblance ages have already closed;
So lament, disciples of later times!⁵

Almost all of the thirty-five hymns present in the first manuscript are also found here, although in different order. In addition, the hymns are expanded to fifty-eight in number. The hymns end with the comment, "Here ends the Hymns of the Right, Semblance, and Last Dharma-ages. Fifty-eight hymns." The next group of twenty-two hymns is entitled, "Gutoku's Hymns of Reflection," which conclude with the words, "Here ends the hymns pertaining to the offense of doubt. Twenty-two hymns." There is also an appended note, "These hymns reveal the depth of the offense of doubting the Buddha's wisdom. This refers to the difficulty of birth in the borderland, the realm of indolence and pride, and the womb palace."

Next, there are the eleven hymns presented as "Gutoku's Hymns of Lament and Reflection," which conclude with the statement, "The above thirty-three hymns are Gutoku's reflections of grief and lamentation." In addition, there is a concluding note that, "This is an early draft." Following this the date of the copy made by Kenchi is recorded as "In the hour of the tiger, on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, in the third year of Shō-ō (1290), I was allowed to finish transcribing this copy." The Kenchi manuscript ends with the following two passages:

The *Nirvana Sūtra* states:

[His] face is like the pure, full moon; [his] eyes are like blue lotus blossoms. The waters of the great ocean of the Buddha-dharma flows into the heart of Ānanda.

The *Kuan-nien fa-men (Methods of Contemplation on Amida Buddha)* states:

Further, I respectfully say to all who aspire for birth: if you hear these words and follow this voice, [Amida's] compassion will rain like tears. Throughout continuing *kalpas* and overlapping *kalpas* you should repay with gratitude the benevolence of the Buddha, even though your bodies be crushed, and your bones be ground into dust.

The version of the *Shōzōmatsu wasan* currently used by the Hongwanji branch does not contain a postscript written by Shinran. This version was included in the *Sanjō Wasan (Collection of Hymns in Three Volumes)*, which was published by Rennyo in the third month of the fifth year of Bunmei (1473), and thus is referred to as the Bunmei version. It begins with the prefatory hymn, which, according to Shinran, was told to him in a

dream during the hour of the tiger on the night of the ninth day of the second month in the second year of Kōgen (1257). The work is entitled *Shōzōmatsu Jōdo Wasan (Pure Land Hymns of the Right, Semblance, and Last [Dharma-ages])*, by Gutoku Zenshin. This version of the text uses the exact same fifty-eight hymns present in the Kenchi manuscript.

The twenty-two “Hymns on the Offense of Doubting the Primal Vow” have been increased to twenty-three hymns. The same twenty-two hymns from the Kenchi manuscript are used here, although their order has been changed. The additional hymn is the second of the group,

Doubting the inconceivable Buddha-wisdom,
 People devote themselves to saying the *nembutsu* in self-power;
 Hence they remain in the borderland or the
 realm of indolence and pride,
 Without responding in gratitude to the Buddha’s benevolence.⁶

This group of hymns concludes with Shinran’s note that, “The above twenty-three hymns were composed in order to awaken people to the offense of doubting the Primal Vow that embodies inconceivable Buddha[-wisdom].”⁷ Next is a set of eleven hymns entitled “Hymns in Praise of Prince Shōtoku, by Gutoku Zenshin.” This group concludes with the note, “Here ends the Hymns in Praise of Prince Shōtoku. Eleven hymns.”⁸ This is followed by a group of hymns entitled “Gutoku’s Hymns of Lament and Reflection,” the first hymn of which states,

Although I take refuge in the true Pure Land way,
 It is hard to have a true and sincere mind.
 This self is false and insincere;
 I completely lack a pure mind.⁹

This group is made up of the same eleven hymns that are present in the Kenchi manuscript and five additional hymns. They conclude with the comment, “The above sixteen hymns are my reflections, expressing my grief and lamentation. It is saddening to see the behavior of the monks of the major temples and monastic complexes at present, whether high-ranking monks or ‘teachers of dharma.’ Composed by Shaku Shinran.”¹⁰

This version of the *Shōzōmatsu wasan* next contains the five so-called “Hymns on Zenkō-ji Temple.”¹¹ Following this is recorded the so-called passage “On Jinen-Hōni,” which is a “writing by Shinran at age eighty-eight.”¹² Finally, two concluding hymns are added at the end of this volume.

While persons ignorant of even the
 characters for “good” and “evil”

All possess a sincere mind,
I make a display of knowing the words "good" and "evil";
This is an expression of complete falsity.

I am such that I do not know right and wrong
And cannot distinguish false and true;
I lack even small love and small compassion,
And yet, for fame and profit, enjoy teaching others.¹³

Above we have taken a brief look at the order of the contents of the extant versions of the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*. Looking at them superficially we can see a development from the thirty-five hymn manuscript in Shinran's handwriting, to the Kenchi manuscript, and then to the Bunmei version. Since it could be said that the Bunmei version is the most fully developed, from the standpoint of content, we will focus upon that version as we inquire into Shinran's view of the last dharma-age, as seen in the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*.

In this connection, a perusal of the postscripts contained with these three versions of the *Shōzōmatsu wasan* reveals that the hymns were developed from the time when Shinran was eighty-three, until he was eighty-five or eighty-six years old. When we also consider that these versions of his hymns must have been given to his followers, it would appear that the incident involving Shinran's eldest son, Zenran, was a backdrop for the hymns.¹⁴ The essential form of Amida's salvation during the period of the last dharma-age is expressed in these hymns. Thus, we can view the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*, and particularly the "Hymns on the Offense of Doubting the Primal Vow," as admonitions against those, starting with Zenran, who held views that diverged from that.

The View of the Yearly Progression of the Last Dharma-Age as Seen in the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*

We will begin our examination of the view of the yearly progression of the last dharma-age, as seen in the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*, by citing the hymns that directly mention it. (The numbering of the hymns corresponds to the order in which they appear in the Bunmei version.)

1. It is now more than two thousand years
Since the passing of Śākyamuni Tathāgata.
The right and semblance ages have already closed;
So lament, disciples of later times!¹⁵

2. Now, amid the five defilements in the last dharma-age,
Sentient beings are incapable of practice and realization;
Hence the teachings that Śākyamuni left behind
Have all passed into the *nāga's* palace.¹⁶
3. During the right, semblance, and last ages,
Amida's Primal Vow has spread.
At the end of the semblance and in this last dharma-age,
Good practices have all gone into the *nāga's* palace.¹⁷
4. The *Great Collection Sūtra* teaches
That we are now in the fifth period of five hundred years;
Because people are resolute in conflict and dispute,
The pure dharma is concealed in dormancy.¹⁸
10. Without trusting themselves to the
Tathāgata's compassionate vow,
No sentient beings of these times—the last dharma-age, and
The fifth five-hundred year period since
Śākyamuni's passing—
Will have a chance of parting from birth-and-death.¹⁹
17. With the advent of the semblance and last dharma-ages, and
this world of the five defilements,
The teachings left by Śākyamuni entered into concealment.
Only the compassionate Vow of Amida becomes
widely known,
And attainment of birth through the *nembutsu* spreads.²⁰

In these hymns, the years marking the beginning and end of the right, semblance, and last dharma-ages are not expressed; nor is the time of the extinction of the dharma to be seen. Hence, it is impossible to confirm, other than through conjecture, that the yearly progression of the dharma-ages is the same as that found in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*; that is, the period is five hundred years for the right dharma-age, and one thousand years for the semblance dharma-age. However, according to hymn #1 above, it was produced more than two thousand years after the Buddha's passing. The hymn states, furthermore, "The right and semblance ages have already closed." Thus, we are informed that we have entered the last dharma-age. For that reason, hymn #2 makes a direct reference to sentient beings living "amid the five defilements in the last dharma-age."²¹ As we can see in hymns #4 and #10, this era of the last dharma-age is described as being the "fifth five-hundred year period since Śākyamuni's passing," based

on the theory of the five five-hundred year periods set forth in the *Great Collection Sūtra*.

From this we can discern that we exist between the 2001st year and the 2,500th year after the Buddha's demise. In other words, we are now living within the ten thousand year period of the last dharma-age. These expressions of the yearly progression of the last dharma-age, it could be said, are identical to those that we found above in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. That is to say, in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* it is calculated that 2,183 years had passed from the year of the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* up to first year of the Gennin era. That date is considered to be the 683rd year of the last dharma-age. These calculations are in agreement with both Tao-ch'o's explication and with the passages cited from *Great Collection Sūtra* in the *Mappō tōmyōki*.

The Internal Features of the Last Dharma-Age as Seen in the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*

What then are the internal features of the last dharma-age? First of all, we know from hymns #1, #2, #3, #4, and #7 above that the last dharma-age is a period in which "[s]entient beings are incapable of practice and realization," "the pure dharma is concealed in dormancy," and "the teachings that Śākyamuni left behind have all passed into the *nāga's* palace."

Further, Shinran states this in hymn #55,

Although we have the teachings of Śākyamuni,
There are no sentient beings who can practice them;
Hence, it is taught that in the last dharma-age,
Not a single person will attain enlightenment through them.²²

In the last dharma-age, we are told, all that remains is the verbal teaching of Śākyamuni. No one is able to practice those teachings, however, and so "[n]ot a single person will attain enlightenment through them." Needless to say, this statement that only the verbal teaching exists and that there is neither practice nor enlightenment is made with regard to those who have adopted the standpoint of the Path of Sages, in which they seek to attain enlightenment through self-powered practice. Thus, in hymn #10 Shinran strongly emphasizes that enlightenment would be impossible for everyone in this world to attain through the self-powered practices of the Path of Sages.

He also asserts that the position held by the Path of Sages in the last dharma-age applies to the semblance dharma-age as well. We can see this in his statements, "At the end of the semblance and in this last dharma-age, good practices have all gone into the *nāga's* palace" (hymn #3) and "[w]ith

the advent of the semblance and last dharma-ages, and this world of the five defilements, the teachings left by Śākyamuni entered into concealment" (hymn #17). In these hymns, the compound phrases, "semblance and last dharma-ages," make mention of the semblance dharma-age. Yet, even though teaching and practice are both present, no one attains enlightenment during this period. Hence, it is identical to the last dharma-age, in which neither practice nor enlightenment exists.

Because the semblance dharma-age follows after the right dharma-age, it is generally regarded as being relatively better than and certainly not identical to the last dharma-age since, although no one attains enlightenment, Buddhist practices are still being performed (albeit formalistically).

Let us assume, for now, that the semblance dharma-age and the final dharma-age are not identical. In that case, Shinran's descriptions of the semblance dharma-age in terms of "the end of the semblance and in this last dharma-age" and "the advent of the semblance and last dharma-ages, and this world of the five defilements" would seem mean that he is using it here to indicate the "final period of the semblance dharma-age," as stated in the *Mappō tōmyōki* passage cited in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. The reason is that the final period of the semblance dharma-age verges upon the period of the last dharma-age. Thus, the circumstances of its inner reality are not so different from those of the last dharma-age.

However, we discussed previously that the Path of Sages only exhibits efficacy in attaining enlightenment when the world is in the period of the right dharma-age. We emphasized that the Path of Sages is completely ineffective during the semblance and last dharma-ages, as well as the age of the extinction of the dharma. Based on that stance, Shinran now strongly asserts that the expression, "the end of the semblance and in this last dharma-age," points to the two periods—the semblance and last dharma-ages—and equates the semblance dharma-age with the last dharma-age. We can see this in hymn #28,

Even the wise who lived during the semblance dharma-age
Put aside the various teachings of self-power
And entered the gate of the *nembutsu*,
For it is the teaching in accord with the times and with beings.²³

This hymn expresses the idea that, even during the semblance dharma-age, persons of superior wisdom take refuge in the gate of *nembutsu*, which is the "teaching that accords with the times and with beings." In other words, the Path of Sages, which emphasizes the self-powered performance of meritorious actions, is regarded as a teaching that does not accord with the times or beings during the semblance dharma-age. Since Shinran simply mentions here "the wise who lived during the semblance dharma-age," we cannot know with certainty to whom he might be referring. However, he

is no doubt pointing to those practitioners of the Buddhist path in India and China during the period of semblance dharma-age who aspired for birth in the land in the western direction.

We can certainly understand the irony in the expression “even the wise” when made from the perspective of Shinran, who sought to equate the semblance dharma-age with the last dharma-age. That is to say, for him, persons of wisdom were those who aspired for birth in the land in the western direction; foolish beings were those who stubbornly continued to uphold the various teachings of self-power and who were out of touch with the current situation of the times.

In any event, Shinran states that the path that enabled persons to attain true enlightenment during the semblance dharma-age was not Path of Sages, but the teaching of the *nembutsu*. For him, when the question involves the attainment of enlightenment, the semblance dharma-age is identical to the last dharma-age.

The second internal feature of the last dharma-age may be stated in this way: The idea of attainment on the Path of Sages does not accord with either the times or beings during the last dharma-age; nor can it effectively reveal the true attainment of emancipation. In contrast, the teaching that truly brings about the attainment of emancipation in the last dharma-age is the path of birth through the *nembutsu*. This is clearly expressed in words of hymn #3, “During the right, semblance, and last ages, Amida’s Primal Vow has spread,” hymn #10, which states, “Without trusting themselves to the Tathāgata’s compassionate vow, no sentient beings of these times—the last dharma-age, and the fifth five-hundred year period since Śākyamuni’s passing—will have a chance of parting from birth-and-death,” and the words of hymn #17, “[o]nly the compassionate Vow of Amida becomes widely known, and attainment of birth through the *nembutsu* spreads.”

Here, Shinran reveals that the teaching of Amida Buddha’s salvation—birth through the *nembutsu*—was widely transmitted throughout the right, semblance and last dharma-ages. As we have discussed above, one would expect that that teaching of the *nembutsu* would be superior in bringing about the attainment of emancipation during an age when the practices of the Path of Sages are without benefit. However, it is more than somewhat questionable that the *nembutsu* of Amida Buddha would spread even during right dharma-age, when the Path of Sages was effective. Shinran answers that question in the following way,

14. We may think that these times belong to the
right dharma-age,
But in us—the lowest of foolish beings—
There is no mind that is pure, true, or real;
How could we awaken the aspiration for enlightenment?²⁴

15. The aspiration for enlightenment through
self-power taught in the Path of Sages
Is beyond our minds and words;
We foolish beings ever sinking in transmigration—
How could we awaken it?²⁵

16. Under the guidance of Buddhas who appeared in this world,
Three times the sands of the Ganges in number,
We awakened the aspiration for supreme enlightenment,
But our self-power failed, and
we continued to transmigrate.²⁶

That is to say, even in the right dharma-age (the perfect age in which to practice the Buddhist path), the minds of “the lowest of foolish beings,” or, “foolish beings ever sinking in transmigration,” which ought to be “pure, true, and real” serve as the starting point for self-powered practices, which were in reality merely useless, blind passions. Because such persons were unable to persevere through the practices of self-power, it was impossible for them to attain emancipation through the Path of Sages. Thus, during the right dharma-age the path of attaining emancipation through the *nembutsu* was broadly spread by Śākyamuni as the teaching that could effectively bring “the lowest of foolish beings,” or, “foolish beings ever sinking in transmigration” to the attainment of enlightenment.

This point of this is that the *nembutsu* became widespread even during the right dharma-age. For this reason, it goes without saying that persons were able to attain emancipation through *nembutsu* during the right dharma-age. During the inferior and unfavorable periods of the semblance and last dharma-ages, in which the Path of Sages is not able to lead to the attainment of emancipation, the *nembutsu* is the exclusive path for attaining emancipation. For this reason, the *nembutsu* could bear the title of “true and real teaching.”

Further, hymn # 16 indicates that we had been born during times past, prior to Śākyamuni, when Buddhas more numerous than three times the sands of the Ganges River appeared in the world. We endeavored to attain emancipation through self-power, but those practices were of no effect, and we continued to transmigrate. Even though we might have been born during Śākyamuni’s presence in the world, or during the right dharma-age, we were foolish beings who had not been able to attain emancipation through self-power and so had been transmigrating from the distant past. We would continue to transmigrate, unavoidably, as long as we relied upon the Path of Sages. However, because Śākyamuni had already expounded the teaching of Amida Buddha to such “lowest of foolish beings” (Shinran explains that we are “foolish beings sinking in the depths of blind passions. We who are possessed of blind passions,” in a left-hand note²⁷),

he had revealed the efficacy of the teaching of Amida Buddha even in the right dharma-age. The efficacy of this teaching is revealed in the *Contemplation Sūtra* and is further explained in the narrative of King Ajātaśatru's attainment of faith in the Chapter on Shinjin in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*.²⁸

The reasoning behind Shinran's assertion that the teaching of Amida Buddha was broadly spread during the right dharma-age is apparent. From the opposite perspective, even if Shinran himself had been born during the time that the dharma existed in this world, it would have been impossible for him, as "the lowest of foolish beings," to attain emancipation through the self-power practices of the Path of Sages. However, if he were able to encounter the Śākyamuni's exposition of the teaching of Amida, then it would have been possible for him to be assured of attaining emancipation during that period. Thus, shifting to his own era, Shinran would have no reason to rush around in a panic, even though he was transmigrating in the last dharma-age. In the same way, if he had been born during the semblance dharma-age, it would have been impossible for him to realize attainment on the path through self-power. Nevertheless, just as wise persons in the semblance dharma-age were able to overcome the causes and effects of transmigration by taking refuge in the teaching of Amida, he would have had the potential to take refuge in the teaching of Amida himself.

In spite of that, shifting again to his own era, Shinran states that, as a person born during the last dharma-age, he was even now continuing in transmigration, and had himself not even one opportunity to encounter either the right or semblance dharma-ages. For him, both the right and semblance dharma-ages had already passed by. His lamentations were insufficient to express his sense of sadness. The sorrow that he felt was overwhelming. This was his sorrowful lament: Even though the auspicious periods of the right and semblance dharma-ages had existed, he had not been born into those worlds, but instead was born during the present last dharma-age. For that reason, hymn #1 states with sorrow, "The right and semblance ages have already closed; so lament, disciples of later times!"

Next, we come to the third internal feature of the last dharma-age. As hymns #4 and #17 tell us, the world is indeed "resolute in conflict and dispute." It is an evil world replete with "the five defilements," brewing up only the karmic causes for transmigration. We can examine the content of this feature in more detail by citing other hymns from the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*. For instance,

5. When sentient beings' life-span of tens of thousands of years,
Through a gradual decline of their karmic reward,
Decreased to twenty thousand years,
The age came to be called the "evil world of the
five defilements."²⁹

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6. As the time of *kalpa*-defilements advances,
The bodies of sentient beings gradually grow smaller;
Their evil and wrongdoing amid the five defilements increase,
So that their minds are like poisonous snakes and evil dragons.³⁰
7. Ignorance and blind passions abound,
Pervading everywhere like innumerable particles of dust.
Desire and hatred arising out of conflict and accord
Are like high peaks and mountain ridges.³¹
8. Sentient beings' wrong views grow rampant,
Becoming like thickets and forests, bramble and thorns;
Filled with suspicion, they slander those who
follow the *nembutsu*,
While the use of violence and the
poison of anger spread widely.³²
9. With life-defilement, the untimely end occurs in a moment,
And both forms of recompenses—
oneself and one's environment—perish.
Rejecting right and turning to wrong prevails,
So that people senselessly injure others.³³
12. With the advent of the age of the five defilements
Both monks and laity have fallen into contention;
When they see persons who have entrusted themselves
to the *nembutsu*,
Filled with suspicion, they slander and attack them.³⁴
13. Those who, it appears, will never attain enlightenment
All attack the practice of solely saying the Name.
The mark of destroying the teaching of sudden attainment
Is that for them, the vast sea of birth-and-death
will have no end.³⁵
40. "Among my disciples, who will give themselves to doing evil,
Wrong views and self-indulgence will flourish,
And in the last age they will destroy my teaching."
Thus Śākyamuni foretells in the *Lotus Face Sūtra*.³⁶
41. Sentient beings who slander the *nembutsu*
Fall into Avici hell
And suffer great pain and affliction without respite
For eighty thousand *kalpa*-s; thus it is taught.³⁷

45. If we had not encountered
 Amida's directing of virtue for going forth and returning,
 Our transmigration in birth-and-death would have no end;
 What could we do then, sinking in this sea of pain?³⁸

With these hymns Shinran discusses the results that will be attained by those who habitually possess the "five defilements" and "resoluteness of conflict and dispute" in the last dharma-age. All of the "five defilements" are given detailed mention in these hymns: *kalpa*-defilement (hymn #5), defilement of sentient beings (hymn #6), defilement of blind passions (hymn #7), defilement of views (hymn #8), and life-defilement (hymn #9). Needless to say, the state of the world prior to Śākyamuni's appearance therein was already that of an evil world of the five defilements. Śākyamuni began his practice in order to overcome the five defilements, and the path he taught to overcome them was none other than the Buddhist path. However, the Buddhist path itself does not reform the evil world of the five defilements. Rather, it enables the individual to overcome those defilements. Hence, the world of the five defilements does not change even as the era shifts from the right dharma-age to the semblance dharma-age.

The current, last dharma-age is no exception—it is a world of the five defilements. For this reason, Shinran refers to the last dharma-age using compound phrases such as "sentient beings of the five defilements in the last dharma-age" (hymn #2) and "the semblance and last dharma-ages, and this world of the five defilements" (hymn #17). Further, during the right dharma-age it was possible for individuals themselves to overcome the five defilements through self-power. Since this is impossible during the last dharma-age, it could be said that the last dharma-age is itself a concrete manifestation of the true state of the five defilements themselves. Thus, Shinran talks about "the advent of the age of the five defilements" (hymn #12), "sentient beings of this evil world of the five defilements" (hymn #30),³⁹ and "sentient beings of this defiled world" (hymn #32).⁴⁰ He considers this as the true state of the real world and of human beings who have been born in the last dharma-age. That being the case, persons of the world of the five defilements habitually act in accordance with the five defilements, without any self-reflection. With "desire and hatred arising out of conflict and accord," they use "violence and the poison of anger," "reject right and turn to wrong," "slander those who follow the *nembutsu*"; they have "distracted minds and self-indulgence," possess "wrong views and self-indulgence," and "do evil." Certainly, the description "resolute in conflict and dispute" fits them perfectly.

These five defilements, moreover, are the result of transmigration based in one's own five-fold defiled nature. As we see in Shinran's phrase, "casting off the pain of [transmigrating in] birth-and-death since the beginningless past" (hymn #49),⁴¹ this transmigration is also the result of

our having transmigrated in samsaric existence since the beginningless past. It follows that, as long as we are always in the state of the five defilements and of evil and false views, the world will truly be a “vast sea of birth-and-death [that has] no end” (hymn #30), which is replete with blind passions, false views, slandering of the dharma, and destruction of the dharma. The inevitable result will be that we will “fall into Avici hell and suffer great pain and affliction without respite for eighty thousand *kalpa-s*” (hymn #41), and will not be able to escape from “transmigration in birth-and-death [that has] no end; . . . this sea of pain” (hymn #45).⁴² The sixteen verses of “Gutoku’s Hymns of Lament and Reflection,” which are appended to the end of Shinran’s *Shōzōmatsu wasan*, represent the sorrowful laments of a person squirming within his five-fold defilements, lamenting over his wretched form, and comprehending the concrete aspects of the five defilements in his actual existence.

Next, Shinran indicates that the fourth internal feature of the last dharma-age consists of all aspects of salvation through the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha—the exclusive path for attaining emancipation in the last dharma-age. As we have already seen, his hymns state, “During the right, semblance, and last ages, Amida’s Primal Vow has spread” (hymn #3), “Without trusting themselves to the Tathāgata’s compassionate vow, no sentient beings of these times will have a chance of parting from birth-and-death” (hymn #10), “Only the compassionate Vow of Amida becomes widely known, and attainment of birth through the *nembutsu* spreads” (hymn #17).

The ultimate essence of salvation through the Primal vow of Amida is expressed in the hymn, which Shinran was told in a dream, at the outset of the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*.

In 1257, on the night of the ninth day of the second month,
 during the hour of the tiger, I was told in a dream:
 Entrust yourself to Amida’s Primal Vow.
 Through the benefit of being grasped, never to be abandoned,
 All who entrust themselves to the Primal Vow
 Attain the supreme enlightenment.⁴³

As we have discussed above, for Shinran, even a foolish being who is transmigrating within the five defilements with evil and false views will be able to attain unsurpassed enlightenment (emancipation) by having faith in the Primal Vow. Shinran clearly records that he received this hymn in a dream during the night (the hour of the tiger) on the ninth day of the second month, when he was eighty-five years old. In this way, he is declaring that the only way to attain emancipation during the last dharma-age is through the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha. At that time Shinran was troubled day and night by many issues. We know from the dates found on some of his

extant letters that he was receiving many visits by his followers from the northern regions who came to ask him a myriad of questions. He was also concerned about the heretical ideas that were being spread by his eldest son, Zenran. As these troubles became compounded, however, the salvation of Amida was manifested to him in the form of a declaration in a dream, and with a content consistent with the assertions that had had been making every day. This could be seen as virtually incontrovertible proof of the working of Amida's salvific activity in this life. That being the case, we can recognize that Shinran recorded the date of the dream with great care.

Shinran describes salvation through Amida Buddha's Primal Vow in the following way,

18. Of the Vows embraced as supreme and all-surpassing,
Selected through five *kalpa*-s of profound thought,
The Vows of immeasurable light and life
Were made the foundation of the working of great compassion.⁴⁴

37. When we reflect on the establishment of the Vow,
We find that the Tathāgata, without abandoning
sentient beings in pain and affliction,
Has taken the directing of virtue to them as foremost,
Thus fulfilling the mind of great compassion.⁴⁵

52. Amida, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta
Ride on the ship of the great Vow;
Going out on the ocean of birth-and-death,
They call to beings and bring them on board.⁴⁶

31. The Buddha of Unhindered Light declared:
"To benefit the sentient beings of the future,
I entrust the *nembutsu* of wisdom
To Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta."⁴⁷

48. Casting off the pain of birth-and-death since the
beginningless past,
We are certain of attaining supreme nirvana.
This is through Amida's directing of virtue for
going forth and returning;
Our gratitude for the Buddha's benevolence is
truly hard to fulfill.⁴⁸

50. The directing of virtue embodied in *Namu-amida-butsu*
Is, in its benevolent working, vast and inconceivable;

Through the benefit of the directing of virtue for going forth,
We enter the directing of virtue for returning to this world.⁴⁹

51. Through great love, which is Amida's directing of virtue for
our going forth,
We attain great compassion, which is
Amida's directing of virtue for our return;
If not for the Buddha's directing of virtue,
How could we realize enlightenment in the Pure Land?⁵⁰

As we can see from these hymns, Amida Buddha's salvation does not abandon sentient beings in pain and affliction. In other words, the Buddha's fundamental aspiration is to save sentient beings in pain and affliction. Hence, the foremost character of that Buddha—to direct the virtues of the Buddha's power to save sentient beings—has been fulfilled. Directing the virtues of the Buddha's power to beings means that, since sentient beings themselves possess only karmic evil that binds them to transmigration, the Buddha himself bestows them with (that is, directs the virtue of) the power to sever that karmic evil and attain emancipation.

Hymn #50 sets out the aspect of going forth to the Pure Land and the aspect of returning to this world. The aspect of going forth corresponds to attaining enlightenment oneself, while the aspect of return corresponds to returning to benefit others. These phases identify the essential condition in Mahāyāna Buddhism for attaining enlightenment. That is, the bodhisattva seeks to attain the realm of Buddhahood by performing the two practices of self-benefit and benefiting-others. However, sentient beings in the current, last dharma-age are the lowest of foolish beings who are not able to persevere in the practices of self-power. Because of this, Amida Buddha personally bestows (directs) the virtues of these two kinds of benefiting upon foolish beings. They are then able to attain emancipation and realize unsurpassed enlightenment through the aspect of going (self-benefit) and aspect of returning (benefiting-others), which have been directed to them. Thus, according to hymn #49, "casting off the pain of birth-and-death since the beginningless past, we are certain of attaining supreme nirvana." This is due to the benevolence of "Amida's directing of virtue for going forth and returning."

For this reason, the true cause of the salvation of sentient beings, as well as the recitation of the *nembutsu* that accompanies this salvation, is all due to the directing of virtue by the Tathāgata. Foolish beings, who are possessed only of karmic evil that binds them to transmigration, need only entrust themselves to this salvation.

24. Persons who truly realize *shinjin*,
Which is directed to them through Amida's Vow of wisdom,

Receive the benefit of being grasped, never to be abandoned;
Hence, they attain the stage equal to perfect enlightenment.⁵¹

27. Having immediately entered the stage of the truly settled
On realizing true and real *shinjin*, a person will,
Being the same as Maitreya of the rank of succession
To Buddhahood, attain supreme enlightenment.⁵²
42. Receiving the true cause of birth in the true fulfilled land
Through the words of the two honored ones,
We dwell in the stage of the truly settled;
Thus, we will unfailingly attain nirvana.⁵³
38. The saying of the Name arising from true and real *shinjin*
Is Amida's directing of virtue to beings;
Therefore, it is called "not directing merit,"
And saying the *nembutsu* in self-power is rejected.⁵⁴

Through these hymns we clearly know that both *shinjin*, the true cause of birth, and saying the Name are both directed to beings by Amida. Further, at the same moment that one receives faith one enters into the ranks of the truly settled, whereby one is assured of attaining birth and enlightenment (attaining emancipation).

In this section we have examined Shinran's view of the last dharma-age, as seen in the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*. As a result, we can understand how rigorous the foundation and basis of his faith-experience truly was.

Finally, in this study we have considered Shinran's view of the last dharma-age, based on the descriptions found in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* and the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*. The descriptions of the last dharma-age in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, however, do not involve as full a discussion of the Primal Vow of Amida, which is the true essence of the Pure Land way, as we find in the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*. However, when we consider the discussion presented in the first five chapters of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, which have no direct connection with the section on the last dharma-age, we could say that absolutely no difference can be seen between the two texts. Thus, it could be said that Shinran's view of the last dharma-age flows continuously even through those portions of his work that do not touch directly upon his understanding of the last age. Unfortunately, because we tend to concern ourselves only with arguments apparently being made, we must probe more deeply into Shinran's understanding, so as not to lose his real message. Finally, Shinran also describes the last dharma-age in some of his other writings. I hope to be able to consider them in a future study.

NOTES

1. This is the second part of an article that was originally published in Japanese as “Shinran Shōnin ni okeru mappō shisō,” the fourth chapter of Kyōshin Asano, *Shinran to Jōdokyōgi no kenkyū* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 1998). Part 1 was published in *Pacific World*, Third Series, 3 (2001): pp. 53–70. For the most part, the English translations of passages from Shinran’s texts have been taken from The Shin Buddhism Translation Series, *The Collected Works of Shinran* (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997) (hereinafter *CWS*).
2. See *Shinshū shōgyō zensho*, vol. 2 (hereinafter *SSZ II*) (Kyoto: Ōyagi Kōbundō, 1983), p. 520; *CWS*, p. 408.
3. See *SSZ II*, p. 527; *CWS*, p. 419.
4. Although the last lines of hymns differ, see the hymns at *SSZII*, p. 528 and *CWS*, p. 423 for reference.
5. See *SSZ II*, p. 516; *CWS*, p. 399.
6. *SSZ II*, p. 523; *CWS*, p. 413.
7. *SSZ II*, p. 525; *CWS*, p. 417.
8. *SSZ II*, pp. 526–7; *CWS*, pp. 418–420.
9. *SSZ II*, p. 527; *CWS*, p. 421.
10. *SSZ II*, p. 529; *CWS*, p. 424.
11. *SSZ II*, p. 529; *CWS*, pp. 425–6.
12. *SSZ II*, pp. 530–1; *CWS*, pp. 427–8.
13. *SSZ II*, p. 551; *CWS*, p. 429.
14. A letter written in Shinran’s own hand, know as the letter in which he disowns Zenran, is currently housed at the Senju-ji temple. At the end of the letter are the notations, “Fifth month, twenty-ninth day (arrived: sixth month, twenty-seventh day) [written seal], Reply to Jishin-bō, copied for reference: Kenchō 8 [1256], sixth month, twenty-seventh day, copied: Kagen 3 [1305], seventh month, twenty-seventh day.” See *CWS*, p. 584. We can see from this example that, during this period, Shinran sent many letters, written by himself, to his followers in the Kanto region.
15. *SSZ II*, p. 516; *CWS*, p. 399.
16. *SSZ II*, p. 516; *CWS*, p. 399.
17. *SSZ II*, p. 516; *CWS*, p. 399.
18. *SSZ II*, p. 516; *CWS*, p. 399.

19. SSZ II, p. 517; CWS, p. 401.
20. SSZ II, p. 518; CWS, p. 403.
21. In the early 35-hymn manuscript version of the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*, this section read, "Sentient beings at the end of the semblance and in this last dharma-age." It now reads, "Sentient beings amid the five defilements in the last dharma-age." This revision is an example of Shinran's emphasis on the last dharma-age.
22. SSZ II, p. 522; CWS, p. 412.
23. SSZ II, p. 519; CWS, p. 406.
24. SSZ II, p. 518; CWS, p. 402.
25. SSZ II, p. 518; CWS, p. 402.
26. SSZ II, p. 518; CWS, p. 403.
27. CWS, p. 402.
28. Chapter on Shinjin, SSZ II, pp. 81–97; CWS, pp. 125–143.
29. SSZ II, p. 517; CWS, p. 400.
30. SSZ II, p. 517; CWS, p. 400.
31. SSZ II, p. 517; CWS, p. 400.
32. SSZ II, p. 517; CWS, p. 400.
33. SSZ II, p. 517; CWS, p. 401.
34. SSZ II, p. 517; CWS, p. 402.
35. SSZ II, p. 518; CWS, p. 402.
36. SSZ II, p. 521; CWS, p. 409.
37. SSZ II, p. 521; CWS, p. 409.
38. SSZ II, p. 521; CWS, p. 410.
39. SSZ II, p. 519; CWS, p. 406.
40. SSZ II, p. 519; CWS, p. 406.
41. SSZ II, p. 521; CWS, p. 410.
42. SSZ II, p. 521; CWS, p. 410.
43. SSZ II, p. 516; CWS, p. 397.
44. SSZ II, p. 518; CWS, p. 403.
45. SSZ II, p. 520; CWS, p. 408.
46. SSZ II, p. 522; CWS, p. 411.
47. SSZ II, p. 520; CWS, p. 406.
48. SSZ II, p. 521; CWS, p. 410.
49. SSZ II, p. 522; CWS, p. 411.

50. *SSZ II*, p. 522; *CWS*, p. 411.
51. *SSZ II*, p. 518; *CWS*, p. 405.
52. *SSZ II*, p. 519; *CWS*, p. 406.
53. *SSZ II*, p. 521; *CWS*, p. 409.
54. *SSZ II*, p. 520; *CWS*, p. 408.