

A Contemporary Re-examination of Shin Buddhist Notions of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

TODAY, I BELIEVE, Shin Buddhist religious institutions in Japan and abroad are facing a huge crisis. The problem is not simply the decline in the number of temples or temple members. Rather, the problem is more fundamental than that. I believe that Shin Buddhist institutions are losing touch with “reality,” the grounding in reality that will allow people to truly live in this present age. Some time ago, Nishitani Keiji said, with respect to the relationship between contemporary society and religion, that “Religion has no [sense of] the contemporary age. In the contemporary age, there is no [sense of] religion.”¹ His point was that religion is losing sight of the very meaning of its own existence in contemporary society, even as contemporary society is losing sight of the essential meaning of religion.

Nishitani’s assertion that “Religion has no [sense of] the contemporary age” indicates that religious institutions have become isolated within their own faith or tradition and are unable to address any real societal problems in their teaching. His point applies perfectly to Shin Buddhism, a Japanese religion that has a tradition and history of nearly eight hundred years since the time of Shinran. On the other hand, we should also fully appreciate Nishitani’s statement that “In the contemporary age, there is no [sense of] religion.” That is, if religion exists simply to offer up justifications for the demands of the current age, then the meaning for the existence of religion will be increasingly lost. The meaning for the existence of religion lies in its principles, which are able to provide a critical view, from the perspective of religion, of the situation we refer to as “the contemporary age.”

I believe that a careful consideration of Nishitani’s point will help us to understand the significance of this symposium, “Meditation and American Shin Buddhism.” In general, the practice of meditation plays an important role in Buddhist traditions in America today. However, Shin Buddhism has not accepted the practice of meditation in any affirmative way. This is because historically Shin Buddhism has rejected meditation as a self-pow-

ered practice. However, when we look at the place and role of meditation in American Buddhism, we find its significance to be extremely broad.

For example, meditation is understood to be the ultimate practice in the sense of *shikan taza* as taught by Dōgen. On the other hand, meditation is also seen as “the quieting of one’s thoughts,” which is intended to serve as spiritual concentration that would be a preliminary step toward the performance of supramundane practice. In America, the latter seems to be more often the case. In cases where meditation is accepted within American Shin Buddhism, it is often practiced as a way prepare one’s attitude in order to be able to hear the teachings. Among scholars of Shin Buddhist studies in Japan, there are those who react negatively upon just hearing the word “meditation.” However, for Shin Buddhist studies in Japan as well, the question of meditation poses significant challenges to accepted, traditional approaches to that study. In that case, it should be noted, it is not so much an issue of meditation itself, but rather of questions regarding the process for the realization of shinjin.

The traditional, sectarian study of Shin Buddhist doctrine has established the tenets that “shinjin is the true cause of birth” (*shinjin shōin*) and “saying the Name is an expression of gratitude” (*shōmyō hōon*). It has then interpreted a variety of doctrines from within that framework. Naturally, for a person who hears the doctrine that “shinjin is the true cause of birth” the great concern will be what can be done in order to attain shinjin. However, due to the doctrine that “saying the Name is an expression of gratitude” one cannot be encouraged to do anything since saying the nembutsu in order to attain shinjin would amount to a self-powered practice. Therefore, traditionally people are told, “Just listen to the teachings,” or “Hear how the Buddha’s Vow arose—its origin and fulfillment.” Listening, it is said, is the process.

Certainly, hearing the teachings is the starting point for practice on the Buddhist path and in that sense it is very important. However, listening to the teachings and understanding them deeply is something that all religions have in common. Does the path to buddhahood that was taught by Shinran really have that kind of structure? Does Shinran’s idea of hearing the Name, as expressed in the phrase, “Hear how the Buddha’s Vow arose—its origin and fulfillment” mean that we should just simply listen? In a certain sense, it could be said that the question of meditation in America is posing a fundamental challenge to the traditional framework, which has historically taken the negative attitude that all practices performed as a process for the realization shinjin, including meditation, are self-powered practices.

On the other hand, just where to situate meditation in the teachings of Shin Buddhism is a considerable problem. According to one way of thinking, meditation should be accepted as a method of propagation in American Shin Buddhism. However, if it is carried out simply with the

attitude of giving in to the current state of affairs, then there is a risk that it will lose sight of the meaning of its existence as Shin Buddhism. In order to avoid such a situation the question of "What is Shin Buddhism" must be constantly and continuously asked.

In any event, the theme "Meditation in American Shin Buddhism" poses some fundamental questions, in a variety of ways, for future Shin Buddhism in America and Japan. By no means should it be taken lightly or thought of simply as a problem of self-powered practice. Nor should the possibility of having meditation in Shin Buddhism be accepted as an attempt merely to respond to the current situation in contemporary life. Rather, this theme addresses problems that Shin Buddhism in America and Japan share in common, and, as such, I believe that we must combine our discussions and respond to those challenges together.

In this paper I will attempt to re-examine an issue related to the question of the practice or the process leading to the realization of shinjin, which is raised by the theme, "Meditation in American Shin Buddhism." That is, I will undertake a re-examination of the doctrines "shinjin is the true cause of birth" and "saying the Name is an expression of gratitude" (the latter in particular), which have become the framework for discussion in the traditional, sectarian study of Shin Buddhist doctrine. The reason is that the doctrine that "saying the Name is an expression of gratitude" has become the basis for the criticism that practices performed as a process for the realization of shinjin are all self-powered practices. However, I question whether Shinran's idea of the nembutsu can be in fact comprehended simply from within the framework of "an expression of gratitude." Through this study, I would also like to consider the fundamental structure that can be seen in Shinran's idea of practice.

THE PATH OF PRACTICE IN SHIN BUDDHISM

Buddhism constitutes the teachings expounded by the Buddha. At the same time it is a teaching through which one can become buddha.² Buddhism is neither mere idealistic thinking nor philosophical speculation, but the path leading to the attainment of buddhahood. This is the reason that the teaching of Buddhism is traditionally expressed as the way of Buddha, or the path to buddhahood. Buddhism clarifies the path of practice by which one comes to awaken to true wisdom. For this reason Buddhism is often referred to as the religion of practice. In contrast, Shin Buddhism has been called at times a religion of faith, since it emphasizes the importance of attaining shinjin or faith to realize buddhahood.

Needless to say, one of the characteristics of Shinran thought lies in his idea of shinjin or faith. For example, Shinran says "the truly decisive cause is shinjin"³ or "the true cause of attaining nirvana is shinjin alone."⁴ Shinran

explains that we can achieve buddhahood through attaining shinjin. Shinran also describes shinjin as “the straightforward mind directed to us through the selected Vow.”⁵ He further states:

The Tathagata, turning with compassion toward the ocean of living beings in pain and affliction, has given unhindered and vast pure shinjin to the ocean of sentient beings. This is called the “true and real shinjin that is [Amida’s] benefiting of others.”⁶

Shinran taught that shinjin becomes the true cause of nirvana because it is the true and real mind directed to us through the selected Vow. For Shinran, our attainment of shinjin arises from the heart and mind with which Amida Buddha selected the Vow. That is why Shinran calls shinjin “[s]hinjin that is the inconceivable working of the power of the Vow”⁷ or “this is shinjin-itself Other Power.”⁸

However, it should be noted that Shinran also asserted that the Pure Land path of practice, through which one attains buddhahood, is the path of saying the Name. For example, Shinran states:

The Name embodying the Primal Vow is the act of true settlement.⁹

Further, he states:

Nothing surpasses saying the Name of the Tathagata as the essential in attaining birth.¹⁰

The truly decisive act-as-cause is none other than the act of saying the Name of the Buddha.¹¹ Shinran explained that to say the Name is the decisive act, which is the essential for attaining birth. In other words, for Shinran, the path of shinjin and the path of nembutsu form the Pure Land path of practice.

But why did Shinran present both the path of shinjin and the path of saying the Name? Throughout the historical development of Shin Buddhist studies, the relationship between shinjin and saying the Name has been discussed intensively. Traditionally, this relationship has been dogmatically explained as “shinjin is the right cause of birth” and “saying the Name is an expression of gratitude.” However, it is doubtful whether this formula is fully adequate to explain the above-mentioned relationship between shinjin and saying the Name, as they are elucidated in Shinran’s thought. At the very least, it is clear that attempts to limit Shinran’s understanding of the act of saying the Name to the sole function of expressing gratitude are problematic. Moreover, I would like to point out that this traditional perspective is closely linked to attitudes that sought to reject any practices

before attaining shinjin, not only meditation but also saying the Name, as self-power.

RE-EXAMINATION OF THE DOCTRINE THAT
“SAYING THE NAME IS AN EXPRESSION OF GRATITUDE”

A close examination of Shinran's writings will reveal that the phrases “shinjin is the right cause of birth” and “saying the Name is an expression of gratitude” do not exist therein. In fact, those tenets can be found for the first time in the writings of Kakunyo. Kakunyo was Shinran's great-grandson and it was his aim to establish the foundations of the Hongwanji denomination. By employing the phrases “shinjin is the right cause of birth” and “saying the Name is an expression of gratitude,” Kakunyo tried to make clear that the right cause of birth is shinjin and that one will be truly settled at the moment of attaining shinjin. Kakunyo, at the same time, was intent on criticizing the idea of Amida's coming at the moment of death, which was emphasized by other Pure Land denominations, especially by the proponents of many-callings of nembutsu.¹² It is also said that Kakunyo's interpretation of the idea that “saying the Name is an expression of gratitude” actually originated with the once-calling faction.¹³

However, Kakunyo's approach becomes problematic when we consider the following words of Shinran regarding the issue of once-calling versus many-calling:

The tradition of the true Pure Land teaching speaks of birth through the nembutsu. Never has there been mention of “birth through once-calling” or “birth through many-calling.” Please understand this.¹⁴

Shinran also states in a letter:

Since the selected Primal Vow of Amida has no room for the practitioner's calculation, it is wholly Other Power. It should never be said that once-calling alone is right, or that many-callings alone is right.¹⁵

Here, Shinran clearly rejects any understanding that would place the viewpoints of once-calling and many-callings in opposition to each other. Hence, one cannot simply conclude that Shinran's comprehension of the nembutsu is based upon the once-calling position. In this sense, we should understand that Kakunyo's interpretation of the idea that “saying the Name is the expression of gratitude” came into existence during particular

historical circumstances and that it represented a departure from Shinran's original teaching.

The difference between Shinran's and Kakunyo's understanding of the path of practice reflected the fundamental difference in their understanding of the relationship between shinjin and the act of saying the Name. For Kakunyo, the significance of saying the Name was as an "expression of gratitude" that takes place after one has attained shinjin. His position was based on Shinran's emphasis on "shinjin is the right cause of birth" and the sequential relationship between the portions of the Eighteenth Vow that pertain to the three minds and saying the Name ten times.

In Shinran's thought, on the other hand, the relationship between the practice of the nembutsu and shinjin is understood fundamentally from the standpoint of their inseparability. For instance, Shinran comments on the inseparability of practice and shinjin in the following passage:

As to the matter you raise, although the one moment of shinjin and the one moment of nembutsu are two, there is no nembutsu separate from shinjin, nor is the one moment shinjin separate from the one moment of nembutsu.¹⁶

That fundamental inseparability between the practice of nembutsu and shinjin is further elucidated in this passage:

The reason is that the practice of nembutsu is to say it perhaps once, perhaps ten times, on hearing and realizing that birth into the Pure Land is attained by saying the Name fulfilled in the Primal Vow. To hear this Vow and be completely without doubt is the one moment of shinjin. Thus, although shinjin and nembutsu are two, since shinjin is to hear and not doubt that you are saved by only a single pronouncing, which is the fulfillment of practice, there is no shinjin separate from nembutsu.¹⁷

Here, Shinran clearly explains that shinjin and saying the Name are inseparable, because this was fulfilled in the Primal Vow. In other words, shinjin without saying the Name is mere abstract concept, and, on the other hand, saying the Name without true and real shinjin is a fruitless voicing.

However, Kakunyo's approach was to impose a sequential order onto the occurrence of the shinjin and the nembutsu, in essence ignoring the dynamic relationship between them. And this interpretation remains as the fundamental interpretation found in traditional sectarian studies of the doctrine.

The scholastic character of traditional sectarian studies of the doctrine has been mostly restricted to exegetical and interpretative textual studies. Traditional doctrinal studies have not sought to interpret Shinran's texts in

order to uncover the meaning of the religious experience of Shinran or the psychological structure of nembutsu practice and the shinjin experience that lies concealed beneath the words and phrases. Those studies always take the subjective problems, which are transcendental or metaphysical in nature, and simply try to reduce all explanations to the side of the transcendence in a dualistic, conceptual, and abstract manner.

I also believe that this methodological attitude has led to the tendency in traditional doctrinal studies to neglect questions of social praxis or human existence. Although I also understand the historical background that compelled sectarian, doctrinal studies to move in that direction, we all need to bear responsibility for its consequences in the contemporary world. In any case, this attitude is apparent in Kakunyo's understanding of the relationship between shinjin and saying the Name.

What then is the path of practice of birth through the nembutsu in Shinran's thought, which he considered in context of the relationship of the inseparability of practice and shinjin? I would now like to examine the structure of the path of practice of birth through the nembutsu, which Shinran discussed.

THE PATH OF PRACTICE AS HEARING THE NAME

If I may begin with the conclusion, Shinran's path of practice of birth through the nembutsu has the structure of "hearing the Name." That is to say, the practice of "saying the Name" is in itself identical with the Buddha's "command of the Primal Vow calling to and summoning us."¹⁸ Being able to hear (the Name) is called shinjin.

In the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, it states,

All sentient beings, as they hear the Name, realize even one thought-moment of shinjin and joy.¹⁹

Shinran interprets this passage in the following way:

The word *hear* in the passage from the Larger Sutra means that sentient beings, having heard how the Buddha's Vow arose—its origin and fulfillment—are altogether free of doubt.²⁰

Further, he explains that

Hear the Name is to hear the Name that embodies the Primal Vow. "Hear" means to hear the Primal Vow and be free of doubt. Further, it indicates shinjin.²¹

In other words, as we say the nembutsu, we hear the Buddha naming itself. And at the same time that the Buddha's calling voice comes to us to be heard, we realize shinjin, the experience of awakening. In each voicing of the Name, we come into contact with the truth of Amida Buddha's compassion and reflect upon our reality. Shinran explained that to "hear" is to realize the "origin and fulfillment of the Buddha's Vow" that has been established for our sake. In other words, it is to realize the truth of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow and the real state of our existence. As we come into contact with the truth and reality of the Buddha through saying and hearing the Name, at the same time, we are able to awaken to our delusion and ignorance. In this regard, the recorded words of Shinran reads:

When I consider deeply the Vow of Amida, which arose from five kalpas of profound thought, I realize that it was entirely for the sake of Shinran alone.²²

Furthermore, Shinran's assertion that saying the nembutsu and shinjin are in a relationship of inseparability, which we considered earlier, could be said to have been made in the context of this profound religious experience. Though a person may have shinjin, if he or she does not say the Name it is of no avail. And conversely, even though a person fervently says the Name, if that person's shinjin is shallow he cannot attain birth. Thus, it is the person who deeply entrusts himself to birth through nembutsu and undertakes to say the Name who is certain to be born in the true fulfilled land.²³

As I mentioned above, practice in Shinran's thought has the structure of "hearing the Name." If hearing the Name can be understood from the standpoint of the inseparability of practice and shinjin, then we can see that shinjin arises when the nembutsu that one recites is heard as the nembutsu of all the buddhas. This is the reason that Shinran calls recitation of the nembutsu the "act of true settlement." Accordingly, if we were to limit our understanding of the recitation of the nembutsu to that of "an expression of gratitude," as in the traditional understanding, we would lose sight of Shinran's essential understanding of saying the nembutsu.

The notion that "saying the Name is an expression of gratitude," first seen in the writings of Kakunyo, was in fact the position emphasized by the "once-calling" proponents of his time who gave great weight to abstract ideas. Shinran's standpoint, on the other hand, was to reject the intellectualized calculations of once-calling versus many-callings and instead emphasize birth through the nembutsu from the perspective of the inseparability of practice and shinjin. His perspective on birth through the nembutsu was that the practice of saying the Name possesses the same structure as that of hearing the Name. The path of saying the Name and hearing the Name involves a twofold structure in which sentient beings' recitation of the

Name and the “command of the Primal Vow calling to and summoning us”²⁴ arise in a dynamic relationship within the religious experience of the realization of shinjin.

In addition, Shinran understood the practice performed after the realization of shinjin to be the dynamic repetition of that experience. For instance, in the *Clarification of Once-Calling and Many-Callings* of Ryūkan, a work that Shinran copied and sent to many of his followers in Kanto during his later years, it states,

As life continues, this single calling becomes two or three callings; they accumulate, so that one moment becomes an hour, then two hours; a day or two; a month, a year, two years, ten or twenty years, eighty years.²⁵

This refers clearly to the continuation of the one thought-moment of hearing the Name. In that sense, the deepening of the religious experience of shinjin can be seen here. It can be said that this has essentially the same meaning as supramundane practice, which Śākyamuni alluded to when after his attainment of enlightenment he called himself “the man who has made constant efforts.”

On that point, the translation of the title of the “Chapter on Practice” in Shinran’s *Kyōgyōshō Monrui* as “Living” by D. T. Suzuki, a Zen Buddhist, is a unique interpretation that demonstrates a deep understanding of the unique character of practice in Shinran’s thought. Furthermore, Suzuki’s *Zen to Nembutsu to no Shinrigakuteki Kiso* (The Psychological Bases of Zen and the Nembutsu),²⁶ which examines common points in the process toward *satori* in both the nembutsu and Zen *kōans*, is highly suggestive to this discussion.

On the other hand, when examining the structure of practice in Shinran’s thought we can see that practice, performed in order to realize shinjin, has the same structure as that of hearing the Name. In the passage on turning and entering the three Vows (*sangan tennyū*), Shinran discusses his own process for the attainment of shinjin. There, he states that the Nineteenth Vow and the Twentieth Vow of self-powered nembutsu constituted the process through which he was able to have self-power overturned and enter into the Eighteenth Vow of the nembutsu of Other Power. Here, engagement in self-powered practice was a necessary process in order for him to turn and enter the Vow of Other Power practice. Shinran called the Nineteenth and Twentieth Vows, both of which set forth self-powered practices, “Amida’s Compassionate Vows.” In particular, the Twentieth Vow, which established the single practice of the nembutsu, is referred to as the “Vow that beings ultimately attain birth.” That is, he took careful note of the relationship between the process for realizing shinjin and the

content of the Primal Vow. In that sense, I believe that we can consider the question of the process for the realization of shinjin in the idea of turning and entering the three Vows.

In this paper, I have been critical of the doctrinal understanding that "saying the Name is an expression of gratitude." It is also important to note, however, that the idea of "responding in gratitude" in Shinran's thought possesses a broad societal character, which is not limited to the recitation of the nembutsu. For instance, Shinran sets forth the following in a letter:

Those who feel uncertain of birth should say the nembutsu aspiring first for their own birth. Those who feel that their own birth is completely settled should, mindful of the Buddha's benevolence, hold the nembutsu in their hearts and say it to respond in gratitude to that benevolence, with the wish, "May there be peace in the world, and may the Buddha's teaching spread!" Please consider this carefully.²⁷

Here we should note that Shinran instructs "[t]hose who feel uncertain of birth" to "say the nembutsu aspiring first for their own birth." Moreover, he talks about the gratitude to the Buddha's benevolence as both to say the Name and the wish for the world. This passage clearly demonstrates Shinran's attitude toward society and his role within it.

Needless to say, certain aspects of the question of meditation, which is being raised in contemporary American Shin Buddhism, transcend the framework of traditional Japanese Shin Buddhist doctrinal studies. In that sense, the resolution of the various problems raised within American Shin Buddhism regarding meditation will not necessarily be connected to those doctrinal positions. Hence, rash criticism or attempts to dictate a solution by those currently situated within Japanese Jōdo Shinshū hit somewhat wide of the mark. What we must do is together recognize that there is another side to the issue, as Nishitani's words at the beginning of this paper indicated, and work mutually to clarify the meaning of the Shin Buddhist path of birth through the nembutsu.

NOTES

1. Nishitani Keiji, "Jōdokyō to gendai," *Nishitani Keiji chosakushu*, vol. 18 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1990), p. 194.
2. Ui Hakuju, *Bukkyō shisō kenkyū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1943), p. 341.
3. The Shin Buddhism Translation Series, *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol. 1 (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997) (hereinafter CWS), p. 72.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 93–94.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 370.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 511.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 513.
12. See Kakehashi Jitsuen, *Jōdokyōgaku no shomondai: Kakehashi Jitsuen sensei koki kinnen* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 1998), p. 314.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
14. CWS, p. 490.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 562.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 538.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 474.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 679.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 539.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 701.
26. See Suzuki Daisetsu zenshū, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1970).
27. CWS, p. 560.

