

Introduction to Jōdo Shinshū

by Alfred Bloom, *Institute of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley, CA*

INTRODUCTION

As one tradition among the variety of Buddhist traditions, the name *Jōdo Shinshū* is the Japanese reading for the Chinese characters meaning *True Teaching of the Pure Land*. The present organization which sponsors the Institute of Buddhist Studies relates to the *Hongwanji*, *Hongwanji-ha* in Kyoto. Jōdo Shinshū comprised 10 branches (*ha* means branch) of which the Hongwanji, through a long history, became the most dominant. The Hongwanji itself was divided in the 17th century so that in addition to the Hongwanji-ha, there is the *Ōtani-ha*. They are also known respectively as Nishi Hongwanji and Higashi Hongwanji or West and East Hongwanjis. They are located within very short distances from each other in Kyoto, one being west of Horikawa street and the other east.

Ostensibly the sect or school was begun by Shinran (1173-1263) in Japan. However, the term was used by earlier teachers such as Shan-tao (Zendō), a major Pure Land teacher in China, and later Hōnen, Shinran's direct teacher. The origins and roots of the teaching may be traced back to India in the three major Pure Land Sutras which became the basis for interpretation and development of the popular tradition. According to the lineage of teachers developed by Shinran to position his teaching in the history of Buddhism, the stream of teaching extended from Śākyamuni to Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu, two major Buddhist thinkers in India, to T'an luan (Donran), Tao-ch'o (Dōshaku), and Shan-tao (Zendō) in China, finally with Genshin and Hōnen in Japan. Thus, the tradition covers the three major centers of Buddhist tradition. While this lineage is not one of direct historical transmission, it has spiritual and symbolic meaning in maintaining Pure Land teaching

as authentic Buddhist doctrine and providing the basis of authoritative texts and interpretations to support the religious experience and teaching interpreted by Shinran.

Over the centuries the branches of Shinshū have developed elaborate ecclesiastical systems with their own schools and broad followings among the people. It has had the reputation for being the largest Buddhist tradition in Japan. We should call attention here also to Rennyō, the eighth successor of Shinran in the 16th century, who made Jōdo Shinshū the faith of the masses. He made the more subtle aspects of Shinran's teaching comprehensible to the masses and was also an eloquent preacher and religious organizer.

SHINRAN

As we have indicated, Shinran is the ostensible founder of the teaching, but he never claimed to be a founder. His followers looked upon him as the founder of their particular stream of tradition, though he was an obscure figure in his own time. Hōnen had numerous successors, each claiming the correct interpretation of the teacher. These still exist today and are generally known as the Jōdo-shū. As might be expected, the teachings of all these divisions are very close, varying in some aspects of emphasis.

Shinran himself set a distinctive course for the interpretation of the Pure Land teaching as a result of his 20 years experience of discipline as a monk in the Tendai monastery on Mount Hiei from his 9th to 29th year. From his own testimony and that of his wife, Shinran had great uncertainty and anxiety about his future salvation despite the long years of practice. His confessions scattered

through his writings indicate he had a deep sense of defilement and imperfection, or we might say sin (in Buddhist terms). When his experience became intense enough he rejected the monastery, and went to study with Hōnen. Eventually Hōnen's disciples, including Shinran, were exiled to various parts of Japan. Shinran never saw his teacher again.

During his experience of exile and long teaching career in the relatively undeveloped area of eastern Japan, Shinran married and fathered some six children. A study of Shinran's teachings and his life experience indicates the close interrelation of the two aspects. His interpretation is shaped by his existential grappling with the anomalies of his own life. In the course of his work among the common people and his reflections on the deeper meaning of the teaching, Shinran formulated a teaching which compares well, though on a Buddhist basis, with the doctrine of "faith alone" for which Luther is usually credited, if not Paul himself. Shinran's teaching antedates that of Luther by several centuries. St. Francis Xavier is said to have exclaimed when he heard about that teaching on his arrival in Japan that "that accursed Lutheran heresy has reached Japan!"

Shinran's writings comprise a variety of materials, including a major anthological text called *Kyōgyōshinshō* (*Teaching, Practice, Faith, Realization*), poetry, commentarial works, letters to disciples, and copies of other texts. From these we glean his thought. A latter text compiled by a disciple Yuienbō, the *Tannishō*, has had a major influence in the modern recognition of Shinran. It gives the essence of his religious perspective in a very short compass. There were other texts by later successors.

PURE LAND TEACHING AND BUDDHIST TRADITION

As is well known Buddhism begins with the teaching of Gautama Buddha about the 6th century B.C.E. This teaching is known for the for-

mulation of the Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Noble Path, Doctrine of the Middle Way, and the Twelve-link Chain of Causation, as well as the emphasis on non-soul, impermanence and suffering. The goal was to follow the path of the Buddha to Nirvana as a spiritual condition of liberation from all forms of attachment and conceptions. The teaching became a monastic tradition with highly elaborate rules and meditative practices aimed at purifying passions and the mind in order to "see things as they really are." In addition there were the principles of karma and merit which appealed to the lay person as a means to build spiritual potential for attaining future enlightenment after many rebirths. This tradition continues with little change down to the present time. It is known as the Theravāda (Way of the Elders, presumably the original teaching of the Buddha) tradition.

In the course of time alternative interpretations of the Buddha's teaching emerged, perhaps about the second century B.C.E. It came to be called the Mahayana tradition. Mahayana means Great Vehicle, while they viewed their opponents as Hinayāna, the small or narrow vehicle. (This latter is presently the Theravāda. Hinayāna is pejorative and not generally used outside a historical context.)

The Mahayana stream of Buddhism itself developed monastic and meditative institutions, not altogether dissimilar to the earlier forms. However, the philosophy it developed attained very subtle depths as modes of critique of human thinking. Though the philosophy appears in some ways negative, it opened the way for a wider speculation concerning human destiny and the means to attain enlightenment. Mahayana may be seen as a type of reform movement to break through the elitism and aridity of narrow monastic practice. Mahayana religious and philosophical perspectives offered the elevated philosophy of Voidness, Interdependence, Oneness, and grand mythic and symbolic expressions describing spiritual reality and ideals. A significant feature of Mahayana thought is the effort to coordinate the

various concepts of Buddha that emerged in the evolution of the tradition. The concept of Three Bodies of the Buddha (*Trikāya*) coordinates historical, mythological and metaphysical reflection on Buddhahood. The historical level is the Body of Manifestation or Transformation (*nirmāṇakāya*) and represented by Śākyamuni Buddha in our world. The mythic level describes those Buddhas in the arcane past who have attained enlightenment and reside in their respective Land where they enjoy the fruits of their enlightenment. This is called the Body of Reward or Recompense (*sambhogakāya*). Amida Buddha illustrates this category and is considered in Pure Land teaching as the True Recompensed Buddha, surpassing all other. The highest level is the *Dharmakāya* or Body of Truth. It is the inconceivable, inexpressible ultimate reality from which all forms and mode are manifested and to which all symbols and expressions point. Mahayana Buddhism envisions the presence and reality of Buddha in every pore or fragment of dust on the micro level and throughout the universe on the macro level. Buddhas fill all aspects of time and space. In fact the encompassing ideal of Buddha-nature in all things is the final spiritual goal of all beings. While there may have been numerous streams feeding these developments, they have all come together as the variety of spiritual possibility in the Mahayana stream. One of these streams was the Pure Land teaching. Mahayana tradition provided apophatic and kataphatic means or perspectives in reaching enlightenment.

Initially Pure Land teaching involved high level meditative practices and methods of visualization by which the devotee gained visions of the Pure Land and was assured of his/her eventual enlightenment. It was imported into China and also made its way to Korea and Japan.

Despite the monastic and meditative elements in the teaching, there were openings for a more popular teaching to give hope to the masses which had little prospect of soon enlightenment based on the rigorous monastic routines. From the

Pure Land Meditation Sutra the principle of reciting the name of Amida Buddha (Skt. Amitābha Amitāyus Buddha) was believed to bring purification and merit for continuous recitation of the name. Eighty billions of *kalpas* of sins could be purified by each recitation. Since we come from a beginningless past, indicated by the fact that we are still here and unenlightened, the recitation must be carried on constantly with sincerity and faith. Other forms of worship were also indicated such as offerings and praise. Originally the principle was not restricted to Amida and even today other Buddhas or Bodhisattvas may be appealed to for benefits. In the course of time, the comprehensiveness of the Amida stream of teaching and the efforts of several capable propagators, some of whom we have mentioned, led to the dominance and widespread adherence to this form of Pure Land teaching. It became a subteaching in all schools as a means of aiding the masses.

It was in Japan during the tumultuous Kamakura period in the 13th century that the Pure Land teaching became an independent sect, with its own teachings and eventual organizations. This was largely brought about through Hōnen's teaching of the *Sole Practice of Nembutsu* (recitation of the name). All his followers retained this practice, but dispensed with the rigorous meditation systems. Among the general trend of Pure Land teachers, the practice of recitation had the purpose of attaining merit toward one's future rebirth in the Pure Land or to help others. It is at this point that Shinran significantly differs from other teachers.

THE PURE LAND

A word should be said about the Pure Land itself and the story behind it. According to the *Sūtra*, an ancient king, looking out on his world, saw the mass of human suffering. He resigned his throne and practiced the disciplines to attain enlightenment. In this process, he made 48 Vows which were designed to create the ideal environment for spiritual fulfilment. It is said he practiced

for five kalpas and fulfilled his Vows. It is ten kalpas since that time. The Pure Land has been established in the west, many millions of miles away. Amida resides in that land, as the land is the essence of Amida through his Vows. Yet through his spiritual nature he is present in this world, manifesting himself in any form needed to advance the person's spiritual progress.

While the Vows advocate a range of spiritual activities for rebirth in the Pure Land, they came to be viewed as emphasizing the recitation of the name. This was offered as an easy way for common people to attain the highest realization. Especially the 18, 19, and 20th Vows were central in the development of the popular tradition.

Rebirth in the Pure Land was seen as a step on the way to enlightenment. In the Pure Land the disciplines that could not be practiced suitably in this life would be easily and naturally attained in that land. Finally one would attain Nirvana.

The Vows of Amida Buddha are cast in the form that if a certain condition is not attained for the people through his efforts, then he also will not accept the highest enlightenment. The philosophic principle of interdependence and Oneness are given dramatic expression through the character of the Vows. There can be no salvation if anyone is left out. It is like liberty which is indivisible by its nature. This understanding makes the Pure Land tradition ultimately an altruistic teaching. The goal is not merely to save oneself, but to save all other beings as well. There are several ways to look at this process. Since the Vows have been fulfilled ten kalpas ago, everyone is saved, though they do not know it. On the other hand, the Vows are being fulfilled and Amida is becoming Buddha as the teaching spreads to embrace all beings.

While the opposite of the Pure Land, hells and the like, have been retained in the tradition, they are not eternal, otherwise the Vow would be futile. They have the function to stimulate reflection and desire for the Pure Land. Because of the

absoluteness and unqualified view of Amida's Compassion in Shinran's teaching, these ideas become virtually irrelevant. Amida embraces and never abandons.

SHINRAN'S TEACHING

At most this can only be a brief outline of the basic elements making up his Buddhism. We can perhaps best get at it by using the outline of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*.

The Kyō is Teaching — For Shinran this meant primarily the *Larger Pure Land Sutra* which relates the story of the Bodhisattva Dharmākara who became Amida Buddha. Shinran's interpretation of this text, particularly the text of the fulfilment of the 18th Vow, provides the basis of his soteriological view. Based on Japanese grammatical structure, as against the Chinese, Shinran makes clear that the faith we engender in the teaching is not of our making but is really the endowment of Amida's Pure Mind within our own. While on the existential level we "believe" or arouse "faith" (*shinjin*, the believing mind), in actuality it is not our working. In the Pure Land tradition up to Shinran there was a strong trend of self-working or self power as the basis of salvation. With Shinran it is absolutely Other Power or Power through Others. For Shinran, involved in egoistic passions as we are, even religious acts are poisoned by the egoism of trying to gain salvation for oneself. This egoism that infects all religious endeavor means that if there is any salvation to be had at all, it cannot be something calculated and devised by the person. It must have its basis elsewhere. The Sutra relates the source and basis of the soteriological process.

The teaching has two major aspects. On the one hand there is the process leading to rebirth, called the aspect of going (*ōsō*), it is in this context that the Teaching Practice Faith and Realization text is to be viewed. It shows the process of going

(to the Pure Land). On the other hand, there is the aspect of return, which is actually taken up in the volume on Realization. This is *gensō*, the aspect of returning from the Pure Land to save others. The terms *ōsō-ekō* and *gensō-ekō* in which the term *ekō* means turning over or transfer of merit refer to the working of Amida whose Vows underlay the total spiritual process by which we are saved and then work to save others. In Shinran's view no spiritual action can be credited as human virtue. Whether consciously known or not, whatever good is done is done through Amida's compassionate intention and wisdom.

The spiritual foundation of this understanding of religion can be found in the principles of interdependence, voidness and nonduality of Mahayana philosophy and given symbolization in the story and interpretation of Amida's Vows. Though we live our lives activated by a sense of individual self and ego-centeredness, there is nothing we are able to achieve or become in this world that is done in total isolation and independence of others. From our very childhood we live through Other Power of those who care and nurture. The concept of the self-made man is self-contradictory by definition. Amida Buddha symbolizes that larger world of nature and social relations that make our life and growth and creativity possible. Flashed on the screen of ultimate destiny, whatever we are to become in any future life or world is based on this same principle.

The abstract philosophical dimension is given a religious character through symbols to arouse our awareness of this reality in our lives. From strict Mahayana thinking Amida is an *Upāya*, a tactful means to guide spiritual development to higher levels. It is void or empty. Amida is not a being in some world off to the west except for religious conception at a certain level of understanding. It is more a metaphor or poetic expression of the nature of our lives. As we indicated in the discussion of the Three Bodies of the Buddha, the highest level, *Dharmakāya*, is beyond conception and expression.

Amida in Shinran's thought was influenced by Tendai philosophy as well. Amida became for him not a Buddha of ten *kalpas* but the eternal Buddha whose life is incalculable, based on the imagery of the *Lotus Sūtra*. He emphasized the Vow in which the Buddha pledged his eternity. Amida is not an ordinary name but means Eternal Life, in essence the very reality of all beings. He is also Infinite Light which signifies the eternal wisdom in things. For Shinran, Amida is really the Buddha-nature in all things, not as something to be realized through meditation and monastic existence, but through the compassion we feel in the life around us and the awareness that our salvation lies in the embracing reality of nature.

The Gyō is Practice— In the context in which Shinran placed this concept, it refers to the Great Practice of the Bodhisattva as he strove to lay the basis for the enlightenment of all beings. The virtue or essence of this practice done for five kalpas was embodied in the Name, *Namu Amida Butsu* (I take refuge in Amida Buddha) which has been recited for centuries with faith and hope by masses to the present day. Sometimes the conception of the power of the name was quite magical. However with Shinran it became spiritual as the symbol of the reality of a salvation already granted.

According to Shinran's understanding the name became available in human history through Śākyamuni Buddha in fulfilment of the 17th Vow which declared that all the Buddhas in the universe would praise that name and offer it to the people of their worlds. Thus the Pure Land Sutras are all taught as though they were preached by Śākyamuni Buddha. Historically this cannot be determined and is improbable. However, in faith many accept this attribution. Nevertheless, we can say that the original intention of Śākyamuni to relieve the sufferings of humanity has evolved into this form, carrying his original intention forward to new expressions required by different times and places. This might be viewed as in a way a *heilsgeschichte* within the very fabric of history.

The Shin is the Faith— In this volume we have the central issue of Shinran's teaching. The concept of faith can be identified in this text as a spontaneous, inner awareness that one has encountered the very truth of one's life. That is why Shinran defines it as singleminded, though having three aspects of sincerity, joyful believing and desire for birth in the Pure Land. These all become a unity in the strong assurance that one receives in hearing the name and what it signifies. Endowed trust, as we may call it, is an existential experience to which Shinran testifies himself. All three minds are bound together in undoubting unity. This undoubting unity is not the enforced undoubting of dogmatic assertion in some group, but the undoubting of a self-evident experience. We may question many things about our existence, but we cannot question our existence itself.

One of the distinctive ideas of Shinran appears in the principle of the Company of the Truly Assured. With the reception of faith one is already destined for rebirth. It compares in some measure with the idea of eternal security or once saved always saved in some Christian circles. This concept was transferred from the future in the Pure Land to the experience of faith in this life. It makes Shinran's teaching this-worldly in character as against the traditional other-worldly character of Pure Land teaching. With no anxiety toward future existence in the afterlife, Shinshū people could turn their attention to life in this world. Further, since all was assured, they did not need to spend great sums of money out of fear to take care of the destiny of their loved ones and ancestors. They may do it out of gratitude of family obligation, but not with superstitious belief in retribution for non-observance that afflicts some traditions.

In the structure of faith there are also two aspects called two types of deep faith. On the one hand the faith experience reveals to us our desperate evil and egocentricity that renders us incapable of attaining any salvation on our own, while the second aspect is the awareness that Amida has deigned to save just such people through his Vows.

Shinran, in view of his monastic experience, came to the conclusion that if there were no such way as given by Amida, he must necessarily go to hell; there is no other way given the person that he is.

In the light of his understanding of faith as the gift of Amida's true mind, the nature of religious life and practice changed completely. For Shinran one is not religious in order to be saved, but because one is already saved and through religious existence expresses one's gratitude for the compassion received. Thus the recitation of the name has no merit attached to it. It is neither a good deed nor a practice, as stated in the *Tannishō*. Similarly, Shinran rejected the magical and ancestral emphasis that dominates Japanese religious tradition, claiming that he never said Nembutsu once out of filial piety. He rejected the authoritarian approaches to religion when he stated that he did not have even one disciple and regarded all his associates as companions on the way.

The Shō is the Realization — Realization normally means birth in the Pure Land or attainment of Nirvana. In Shinran there are several aspects that require comment. In the volume on Realization he makes it clear that the ultimate end of religion is to work for the salvation of others. Here he employs the imagery of the Bodhisattva of Buddhist tradition who rejects Nirvana to return and work in the garden of sufferings. He also uses the image in several places that we become Buddha and in union with the Buddha-nature qua Amida we strive for the salvation of all. He also makes it clear, based on the teaching of Donran, that to desire to go to the Pure Land merely to escape suffering means one does not go, because one is still activated by self-serving ego, the basis of all suffering.

Together with the Realization volume there is the volume on the True Buddha Land in which he shows that the ultimate attainment is Nirvana. In this context his intention is to show that the Pure Land is not merely a temporary interval or staging platform for some higher attainment but

is itself Nirvana. Though it may appear there is a contradiction between the altruism of the Realization volume and the True Buddha Land, it is not really so. The Buddha in his nirvanic state is freed from all conceptions of what might ordinarily be thought in our unenlightened condition. As ultimate freedom, he is able to bring all beings to enlightenment, assuming whatever forms may be necessary to achieve it. To be nirvanic does not necessarily mean to be nonexistent, as that would be annihilationism which Buddhism consistently rejects, but that one is inconceivable.

The last volume of the book is called the *Transformed Buddha Land* and takes up the problem of competing religious views. Here Shinran applies his critical insight to the question of other religions, particularly Japanese native religion and Taoism which are viewed as magical and forms of Buddhism which strive through their own virtue to attain enlightenment, such as Zen or Shingon. According to Shinran, no one is ultimately condemned as such, but based on Pure Land mythic symbolism, they attain lower levels of rebirth based on the karma they accumulate. Eventually they will come to final realization.

SUMMARY

In the traditional formulations of Shinshū, not all members may understand the details, as is true in other traditions. However, Shinshū has avoided being swallowed up in Japanese folk religious tradition and has been the freest to modernize. However, there is a traditionalism that is common to Japanese culture and a communalism that sometimes inhibits creative development. Nevertheless it is very much alive. In summary there are three major points (triadic) which give the essence of the teaching:

1. *Shinjin shōin*: The true cause of rebirth (salvation, etc.) is faith.
2. *Heizei gōjō*: Faith and assurance are attained in this life.
3. *Hōon kansha*: The essence of life and faith are gratitude.