

# Musings on the Pure Land

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by Shaku Tokusui

## Introduction

"Musings on the Pure Land" is a collection of reflections which have been written down over a period of five years; some are short notes, others amount to small essays. Though the author is a philosopher by training, these texts are not meant as scholarly contributions, nor are they necessarily coherent. Presented in chronological order of their creation, they certainly show how the author's thoughts on Shinjin have evolved over time. The influence of Traditionalist authors like René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Marco Pallis and Harold Stewart is overwhelming.

## On Faith and Intellect

In the Shin Buddhist sangha, there is a misguided tendency to dismiss the intellect altogether as a form of *hakarai* ('calculation') which precludes us from attaining Shinjin. Now, the effort to lay aside the intellect in order to deserve shinjin would itself fall under self-power practice and hence qualify as *hakarai* that runs against the Greater Wisdom of Amida Buddha. If we are grasped just as we are, then we strictly speaking do not need to let go of anything at all. Paradoxically, True Entrusting means even letting go of letting go - which is an impossibility for the *bombu*, and can only be brought about by the Other Power of Amida's Fulfilled Vow.

But there is a precise sense in which Shinjin and Intellect are inseparable. Clearly, it is not the limited and limiting reason of a *bombu* that is meant here, but the "Intellectus Agens" that transcends the distinction between subject and object, since it is in complete adequation with Being as-it-is. It is the Buddha's Prajna (or Transcendental Wisdom) which fully realises Emptiness and thus does not distinguish between Nirvana and Samsara. Indeed, we are told that Shinjin is the Buddha's Wisdom, Amida's Light which embraces us and makes us realise that we are the evil person shackled by greed and hatred that is the prime object of Amida's Compassion. Our abandoning ourselves to Amida's Vow of Salvation just is the reflection of His true Intent; the letting go of the *bombu*'s *hakarai* is the effect of the Buddha's Go-*hakarai*. It is this co-intentionality of *bombu* and Buddha that ensures Non-retrogression or Bodhisattvahood in this life and Enlightenment or Buddhahood in the Next

The identity of intention between Buddha and Man is the deeper sense of:  
Namu-Amida- Butsu.

## Mappo

Buddhism is the only religious doctrine which predicts its own disappearance. Currently, we are said to live in the Age of the Declining Dharma, the *Mappo*, which began 2000 years

after the physical demise of Shakyamuni Buddha and which is supposed to last for about 20000 years. This means that, according to Buddhist doctrine, these days ordinary beings are unable to attain enlightenment through their own efforts and this *Saha* world, as well as its denizens, are subject to irreversible moral and physical decadence. But Mappo is still a relatively luminous era, compared to the utter darkness of the Age of Extinct Dharma, in which there is no hope of escaping Samsara at all. In fact, even in the Mappo, we still may be saved by completely relying on Amida's Promise of Salvation.

However, this is only possible if the Dharma is presented in its pristine form, without any additions or distortions. But this is what is exactly happening nowadays. Religion, not only Jodo Shinshu, is presented in almost all modern writings not as a way of spiritual realisation and liberation, but as a form of psychological well-being and/or social hygiene. In an incredible distortion of the doctrine of Supreme Identity, the No- distinction of Samsara and Nirvana, which is only accessible to the Buddhas, ordinary people filled with hatred and greed and blighted with spiritual blindness are told that they are already dwelling in the Pure Land. It is true that for a Buddha, all beings are enlightened by anticipation, but this does not relieve us from the misery we are presently living in. Furthermore, the Doctrine of Other Power has been distorted into the delusion that one does not even need to listen to the Dharma.

All these delusory teachings are the result of an ever-increasing secularism and materialism that has become the fundamental dogma of our time. Not only Buddhism, but other major spiritual traditions as well contain the prediction that such a time of spiritual darkness in which any transcendental truth is negated would come. In such an epoch, the mind has to be cleansed from its materialistic and scientific dross before it can approach any religious teaching whatsoever. This is particularly true for Pure Land Buddhism which, in its original form, is particularly revolting to the modern mentality.

A good way to put the contemporary materialistic mindset into perspective would be to read the works of Traditionalist writers such as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Marco Pallis or E. F. Schumacher. Only a traditional outlook with its humility before spiritual truths inaccessible to the ordinary rationalistic mind is appropriate for studying the Pure Land Scriptures such as to be captured by their message of Salvation.

## **Duality and Non-Duality in Shin Buddhism**

There is much ado about duality and non-duality in Jodo Shinshu and whether Rennyo Shonin emphasised the duality between bombu and Amida more than Shinran Shonin would have done. I have no stake in exegesis, which I leave to more learned persons. But it seems to me that Chapter 15 of the Tannisho quite clearly rejects the idea of enlightenment in the present life, though in Letter 3 of the Mattosho it is conceded that the heart of a person of shinjin already dwells in Amida's Pure Land.

This question is not merely exegetical, as it is decisive for what it means to be saved by Amida's Vow. Indeed, if one could not be said to have received Shinjin without having thereby attained Buddhahood, Shin Buddhism would be absolutely worthless to me and many ordinary folks. Indeed, Shinran Shonin's experience of salvation just consisted in the

fact that no practice or realization in this life is necessary to being embraced by Amida's Light. If Shinjin meant enlightenment in this life, Buddhahood would become a litmus test which nobody could pass instead of a promise. The truly wonderful message of Jodo Shinhsu is that we are grasped just like we are and that nothing is requested by Amida from us in order to deserve Birth in the Pure Land.

Salvation in the present just means to be assured of enlightenment in the next life, to be equal to a 10th-stage bodhisattva like Maitreya, a Buddha-to-be, while being still ridden with defilements (*bonno*). Frankly, what more do we want? Is it not enough to rejoice and be grateful to Amida Buddha?

It is true that, in the present life, we remain stuck in duality. But let's envisage it positively: does the provisional and relative divide between bombu and Buddha not allow for an I-Thou relationship to obtain, which is rightly perceived by the religious philosopher Martin Buber to be the essence of religion? According to Buber, the 'I-Thou' relation is initiated by the eternal Thou and indeed Shinjin can be viewed as an I-Thou relation between bombu and Amida initiated by the Other Power of Amida's Vow.

There is, of course, a certain non-duality which consists in the co-intentionality of bombu and Buddha, the fact that the bombu's heart is attuned to Amida's Heart. Though not tantamount to Perfect Enlightenment, this co-intentionality or solidarity anticipates the latter. However, this is something for each person of shinjin to experience individually. Where words fail, the silence is filled by: *Namu-Amida-Butsu*.

## On Encountering Amida

The life of a person of shinjin is underpinned by gratitude for Amida's free gift of bodhisattvahood. This gratitude is purely spontaneous and may express itself more or less intensely through feelings and acts of worship. Though one may consider such an expression of gratitude as a litmus test for shinjin, it is by no means meritorious nor a condition for attaining Birth in the Pure Land and thus Perfect Enlightenment.

Nonetheless, true gratitude pragmatically implies the belief in the reality of the gift and that of the giver. Even allowing for the fact that the Western notion of 'reality' has to be qualified in the light of Dependent Co-origination, it should be obvious that one cannot sincerely be grateful to, nor truly worship something one considers a mere fiction like Santa Claus. This is not even a matter of doctrine, but of psychological plausibility.

Besides the general psychology of religion, it is basic Buddhist, doctrine shared by all schools, that should tell us that the account of the career and realization of Dharmakara cannot be merely fictional. Indeed, if we accept the Law of Karma, the Pure Land as well as Birth within it must have a Cause. Without cause, no effect; without karma, no realisation. This means that without the (transfer of) accumulated merits, there can be no Pure Land nor Birth whatsoever. Hence, by denying the truth of the story about Dharmakara/Amida, Shin Buddhists would cut off the branch on which they are sitting.

Of course, there are aspects of the Pure Land Scriptures that are clearly allegorical; even traditional exegesis recognizes that some attributes of the Pure Land as described in the Shorter Sukhavati Sutra are intended to evoke the spiritual qualities of the Perfectly Enlightened Mind. But some contemporary Shin Buddhist scholars would go as far as to regard the account about Dharmakara/Amida as an allegory of our own Buddha potential and its fruition. Personally, I find this interpretation wholly implausible, since it clashes with the doctrine and experience of Other Power: if Dharmakara/Amida were only an idealized version of myself, Salvation would be a simple matter of Self-Power. This is a perfectly legitimate Buddhist doctrine but why bring Shin Buddhism into it in the first place?

No doctrinal argument can replace the truth of experience. By taking refuge in Amida Buddha and His Vow, we simply encounter Him as the Other, a Thou who is even more real than all the denizens of scientifically-objectivized reality. Indeed, the Buddha encountered through shinjin is the Acme of Reality in virtue of the (karmically) transforming power of His Vow.

There is nothing we can do to earn the Encounter with the transforming Power of Amida's Vow, but we can strive for simplicity of the heart and mind. It is with this simplicity and modesty that we have to approach the Pure Land Scriptures and the Writings of Shinran Shonin and Rennyo Shonin. Maybe this is the hardest thing to achieve since we always want to dispute and to interpret before listening to what is actually said. If we silence our cerebral intellect and rely on the intelligence of the Heart, we may be able to accept the Pure Land scriptures just as they are intended, namely as true accounts of the Origin and Realization of Dharmakara's Vows and of Birth in Amida's Pure Land as the sole way of salvation in this Age of Mappo.

And it is with the simplicity of the Heart that we acknowledge the encounter with Amida and His Vow by saying *Namu-Amida-Butsu*.

## On Faith and Dharma

Without Faith, no realisation - this holds not only for Jodo Shinshu but for Buddhism in general. Faith or trust (*shraddha*) into the Three Jewels is the condition for entering into the current, i.e. for setting out on the Path to Liberation. In a sense, shinjin is the culmination of shraddha, since it is the immediate cause for realisation, with the decisive twist that, to Shinran's mind and experience, Shinjin is not ours but is entirely Amida's, namely His Trust in the Efficacy of His Vows.

Ultimately, neither shraddha nor shinjin are separable from the Dharma, be it the Buddha Dharma in general or the particular teaching of the Pure Land Canon. Both shraddha and shinjin presuppose listening to and accepting the Dharma, which is not only intellectual assent to something understood, but also whole-hearted reliance.

This seemingly- simple shinjin comprises the whole of the Buddha Dharma, as Rev. John Parasvekopoulos rightly insists:

"We urge readers to examine the following essentials because, when viewed in isolation from them, a skewed view of Shin Buddhism will result: the Four Noble Truths; the Three Signata, namely, *anatman* or 'non-self', *anitya* or 'impermanence' and *dukkha* or 'suffering'; and, finally, *Nirvana*, which - as we have seen earlier - in Shin Buddhism is synonymous with Amida Buddha and the Pure Land. These are the teachings upon which Buddhism is grounded." (*A Primer of Shin Buddhism* - [www.nembutsu.info/primshin.htm](http://www.nembutsu.info/primshin.htm))

In the same vein, Zuiken Inagaki writes:

"In order to 'truly hear (believe in) the Name', one should fulfil the following conditions:

1. One should believe in the law of causation.
2. One should believe in the Three Treasures - the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha."

(*The Essence of the Larger Sutra* - [www.nembutsu.info/largersutra.htm](http://www.nembutsu.info/largersutra.htm))

The Law of Causality is of prime importance for Buddhism in general - and Jodo Shinshu in particular - since it underlies the doctrine of merit transference which is essential for the Shinshu way of salvation, as D. T. Suzuki points out:

"The miracle of Shin faith is that when ordinary-minded people are confirmed in their faith ... all the merits Amida has accumulated during his infinite lives of self-training are given freely to the devotee, This is technically known as the doctrine of transference (*parinamana*)."

(*Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, Chapter 9: 'Rennyō's Letters')

Indeed, the person of shinjin will attain Birth in Amida's Pure Land and subsequently Buddhahood in virtue of the transfer of Amida's merits through the Nembutsu of Faith. Everyone who knows the basic tenets of the Buddha Dharma will understand and accept this. For this reason, one will not succumb to the error of subverting the existence of Amida and His Pure Land (except on the level of Ultimate Reality according to Nagarjuna's Doctrine of the Middle Way), since this would mean to deny merit transference and the law of causation (karma). Actually, belief in the existence of the Buddhas of the Present is part and parcel of Mahayana Buddhism.

Shinjin, then, is not some mushy pious feeling but the spontaneous, uncalculating trust in a clear Promise and the One who gives it; this entrusting is spontaneous, since it is only the reflection, as it were, of Amida's Good Faith and Faithfulness. Shinjin, as the Nembutsu of Faith, is thus truly the union or adequation between *ki*, the bombu or ordinary-minded person, and *ho*, Amida Buddha.

Given this very clear and precise doctrinal context, it is astonishing that some Shinshu scholars, priests and communities tend to separate shinjin from the Buddha Dharma under the pretext of 'updating' or 'modernising' Jodo Shinshu. That salvation through the Other Power of Amida's Vows and Merits is beyond a devotee's calculation, and given that we cannot measure the Ocean of Amida's Merits, does not mean that salvation in Shinshu is a miracle happening outside or even in spite of the law of karma. That the intellectual sphere

is polluted in this Age of Mappo does not mean that we should discard the Dharma - on the contrary, the Dharma is left to us as the sole lamp in this age of spiritual darkness, the standard by which to separate truth from error.

Even in the Age of the Declining Dharma in which neither realisation nor practice based on self-power are possible, the Dharma remains fully valid: Honen Shonin and Shinran Shonin have testified to this by writing substantial doctrinal works which remain a guide and a reference for us Shin Buddhists. Of course, Buddhism has always adapted to the historical, geographical and cultural circumstances, but only by adopting re-interpretations that confirmed the Dharma, never by rejecting or even slandering it. The 84000 ways of salvation have 'One Taste', namely Nirvana.

Certainly there are deviations of various degrees of gravity. For example, the denial of Amida's existence or of the principle of causality would amount to a slander of the (Mahayana) Dharma. However, identifying Amida with one's Buddha potential and the Pure Land with this Saha world as seen through the Eye of an Awakened Mind, while being incompatible with the Other Power Faith of Jodo Shinshu, would be a perfectly legitimate doctrine in a different school of Buddhism. Besides, such a heterodoxy would not prevent one from being born in the Pure Land, if only in the Borderland.

Furthermore, though the Dharma is our Lamp and Refuge, it is only so for us ordinary beings, just as a medicine or remedy is only for those who are sick. Indeed, Shakyamuni Buddha himself has advised us:

"[T]he Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping." (From: *Majjhima Nikaya, Alagadduupama Sutta* M22, 13)

This is not to encourage us to discard the Dharma, but to warn us against any form of clinging which turns a truth to be experienced into a blindly-adopted dogma. That is the true meaning of the most shocking (non-) affirmation of the Madhyamika; namely, that on the level of Ultimate Truth, even the Four Noble Truths are only provisional.

Finally, when having been granted shinjin, but of course not before, we can relax and let go, leave all the certainties to Amida Buddha. Just as you have to forget everything you've learned about music in order to be able to play or enjoy a piece of music, thus you may put into perspective what you have 'learned' about Buddhism and Jodo Shinshu when you have been embraced by Amida's Light. In the words of Zuiken Inagaki:

"What is shinjin I don't know. Oyasama does everything; Oyasama does everything."  
(From *Anjin: Zuiken's Sayings*)

Or in the verses of Saichi Asahara:

"Saichi has nothing - which is joy. Outside this there's nothing. Both good and evil - all's taken away, Nothing's left.  
To have nothing - this is the release, this is the peace. All's taken away by the Namu-amida-butsum!"

## On the Palliative Function of Practice

Since a person of shinjin wholly relies on Amida's Primal Vow, it may seem that any self-powered practice is not only unnecessary, but even to be abandoned. Now, on the one hand, given the 19th and 20th Vows, even persisting self-effort is no hindrance to eventually obtaining Birth and Realisation, even though the 18th Vow represents the true intention of Amida Buddha according to Shinran Shonin. On the other hand, though self-power practice is said to have no curative value anymore in the Age of Mappo, it still retains a palliative function.

Indeed, though we leave it to the Great Arhat to carry us to the Realm of the Unconditioned at the point of death, and accept to live out our karma until then, there is no reason why we should do nothing to allay our day-to-day suffering as well as that of our fellow living beings. Certainly, we cannot cure ourselves, but we may reduce the pain of daily existence.

In this sense, the careful application of the Four Noble Truths, and primarily the recognition of the Three Seals of Conditioned Existence, namely Impermanence, Selflessness and Suffering, should be maintained in our daily life. Especially acknowledging Anatta, the absence of self in all phenomena, helps us to get on with this last run through the Wheel of Samsara by literally not taking anything personally and thus weakening attachments.

In point of fact, the realisation of the truth of no-self is not only compatible with, but even implicitly contained, in the embrace by the Light of Amida's non-discriminative Wisdom and Compassion. The heart of a person of shinjin, being one with the Heart of the Tathagata, already resides in the Pure Land, i.e. in Nirvana. The myokonin, though still burdened by all sorts of passions, sees herself and this world of Saha through the Eye of the Enlightened One. Having been conferred Amida's Insight, she recognises the wretchedness of her existence, which precisely consists in the three marks of selflessness, impermanence and suffering. By accepting Amida's Gift of Salvation, namely to be carried to the Pure Land which actually is Nirvana as the Realm of the Unconditioned, the person of shinjin also wills - through the Will of Amida - the End of Suffering.

In Saichi's words:

"The sea is just full of water; there is the seabed that sustains it. Saichi is just full of evil karma; there is Amida that sustains it. How happy I am!  
Namu-Amida-Butsu. Namu-Amida-Butsu."

## On Returning into the House in Flames

Sukhavati, the Pure Land of Amida Buddha, could be mistaken for a lasting post-mortal abode, while it really is only the stepping-stone for the Return (*eko*) to Saha, this World of Pain. Far from being an escapist deviation from Mahayana Buddhism, the Pure Land School in general and Jodo Shinshu in particular are firmly rooted in the Bodhisattva ideal, not only as far as the account (*innen*) of Dharmakara/Amida is concerned, but also pertaining to the destiny of each individual person of shinjin.



As soon as we have been grasped by the Other Power of Amida's Vow, we are not only determined to become Perfectly Enlightened Beings in Amida's Buddha Realm, but also to start our own activity of coming to the rescue of all beings chained to the wheel of birth-and-death. Indeed, Perfect Realisation means to 'see' that Nirvana and Samsara are not distinct and to be able to dwell in both realms indifferently. A Buddha is traditionally referred to as a 'biped', firmly standing on both shores - in Nirvana through Wisdom (*Prajna*) and in Samsara through Compassion (*Karuna*).

So, strictly speaking, the return of a Perfectly Enlightened Being is not the same as the return of a being still bound to the Wheel of Karma. It is a Return and a No-Return at the same time, since through His Realisation, the Buddha dwells in Nirvana and, through his Compassion, He is turned towards the Sea of Suffering. His Compassion partakes of the non-dual nature of His Realisation, since it is a Compassion that both transcends and embraces the divide between the Rescuer and the Rescued.

One may concur with Prof. Tokunaga's view\* that the debate around the existence and nature of Sukhavati may overshadow the issue that is really at stake, namely the return to this burning house and coming to the Rescue of all beings with whom we have acquired affinities during our lives in the realm of birth-and-death. Nonetheless, it would not do to undermine the status of Sukhavati as a truly transcendent reality altogether and assume, as is suggested by Rev. Unno in his popular works, that the Return already takes place in our present life. Attractive as this stance may be and, in spite of the transforming power which Amida's Vow may have already on us now (to which stories of past and present myokonin may bear testimony), our limitations in providing efficient support and help to other people is only all too obvious. Not only does the idea of Return in this life possibly lead to a blindness, not to say arrogance, with respect to our weaknesses - which would be wholly contradictory with respect to acknowledging our weaknesses in Light of Amida's Wisdom - but also the expectation of a this-worldly *eko* would only result in despair given that, in the end, we are not able to attain the Perfect Compassion of a Buddha while still dwelling on this shore.

Therefore, we are well advised to accept our total lack of power as regards to our own salvation and that of others and accept, in meek gratitude, the Buddha's Gift of Going into Sukhavati at the end of our ultimate round through birth-and-death, and of swiftly returning back to this *Saha* world, embracing all suffering beings in Unlimited Compassion. Until then, our gratitude for the Tathagata's incomprehensible generosity expresses itself spontaneously in the recitation of the Virtuous Name: *Namu-Amida-Butsu*.

\*[www.nembutsu.info/tokumaha.htm](http://www.nembutsu.info/tokumaha.htm)

## On the Moment of Birth

Modern essays of Shin Buddhist doctrine often conflate the moment when Birth into Amida's Pure Land is settled with the moment when Birth happens. This conflation goes together with the (traditionally) heterodox view that Amida exists in the mind only (*yuishin no Mida*) or that the Pure Land exists only in our heart (*koshin no jōdo*). Now, the Tannisho is extremely clear on distinguishing the moment when we enter into the State of



Non-Retrogression, being grasped by the Power of Amida's Vow through the Faith he grants us, and the moment we are actually born into the Pure Land and consequently attain Enlightenment, namely at the point of death.

"[T]he moment you entrust yourself thus to the Vow, so that the mind set upon saying the nembutsu arises within you, you are immediately brought to share in the benefit of being grasped by Amida, never to be abandoned." (*Tannisho*, Section 1)

"Attaining enlightenment in the coming life is the essence of the Pure Land teaching of Other Power; it is the principle actualized through the settlement of shinjin. (...) [A]t the moment shinjin becomes settled, we are grasped, never to be abandoned, and therefore we will not transmigrate further in the six courses. Only then do we part forever from birth-and-death. Should such awareness be confusedly termed "attaining enlightenment"? It is regrettable that such misunderstanding should arise." (*Tannisho*, Section 15)

Considering these clear statements, it would be astonishing that one could ever have devised an interpretation according to which shinjin is not only potential, but actual Enlightenment, if it were not for a very modern prejudice against any idea of an after-life, even though this prejudice does not apply to *Ojo*, since Birth into the Pure Land is strictly speaking No-Birth, i.e. "parting forever from birth-and-death". Hence, there is no after-life for a person of shinjin, since for her, Death is tantamount to Liberation from the Wheel of Life.

The issue of the moment of Birth is given an interesting twist by the following passage from the *Sutra of the Forty-Two Sections*, a collection of Buddhist teachings compiled by the monks Kashyapa Matanga and Gobharana during the reign of Emperor Ming of the Later Han Dynasty:

"The Buddha asked a monk, "How do you measure the length of a man's life?" He answered, "By days." The Buddha said, "You do not understand the Way." The Buddha asked another monk, "How do you measure the length of a man's life?" The monk answered, "By the time that passes during a meal." The Buddha said, "You do not understand the Way." The Buddha asked a third monk, "How do you measure the length of a man's life?" The monk answered, "By the breath." The Buddha said, "Very well, you know the Way."  
(*Sutra of the Buddha in Forty-Two Sections*, Section 38)

The late Rev. Jean Eracle, founder of the Swiss Shin Buddhist Society, commented on this passage as follows:

"The duration of a breath is that of a single thought. The meaning of this section is that, at each thought, we die for a given state and are born into another one. Chinese Buddhism understood this theme as follows: an angry thought means being born into Hell, a thought of passionate desire means being born into the state of hungry ghosts, a stupid thought means being born as an animal, a violent thought means being born amidst the revolting spirits (*asuras*), a joyful thought means being born

amidst the gods and an egocentric thought means a return to human existence. Study makes you equal to a Disciple (*Gravaka*), concentration (meditation) assimilates you to a Buddha-on-his-own (*Pratyeka-Buddha*) and compassion turns you into a Bodhisattva. Finally, a single thought without attachments suffices to turn you into a Perfectly Enlightened One (*Sammāsambuddha*)."  
(*Les Enseignements du Bouddha*, p. 85, note 54, my translation)

To deeply know the Dharma is to gauge impermanence to its full extent; namely that, strictly speaking, at each instant/thought a life ends and another begins. Thus, it is possible to perform a transmigration through all states of being in a single 'life', conventionally speaking. This perfectly orthodox view has the surprising consequence that the expressions 'Enlightenment in the Coming Life' and 'Enlightenment in This Life' are not contradictory, if the word 'life' means 'thought/instant' in the first phrase and 'life' in the conventional sense in the second. Hence it would seem perfectly consistent with Buddhist doctrine to maintain that a single thought of true entrusting actually means to be immediately born into the Pure Land and, thus transformed, to return into this Saha world as a Perfectly-Enlightened Being coming to the rescue of all suffering beings.

This is certainly an attractive idea, which to some degree reflects the actual experiences of transformation as manifested in the lives of the myōkonin. Also, did not Shinran write:

'What you inquire about in your letter is a passage from a sutra that states: "Those who attain shinjin and joy are equal to Tathagatas". This is from the Garland Sutra and means that the person who rejoices in shinjin is the equal of all the Tathagatas. This is also indicated in Sakyamuni's statement about those who realize shinjin and greatly rejoice: "The one who sees, reveres, and attains [the dharma] and greatly rejoices - that person is my excellent, close companion".' (*Mattosho*, 4)

'The person of true shinjin is said to be equal to Buddhas. He is also regarded as being the same as Maitreya, who is in [the rank of] succession to Buddhahood'. (*Mattosho*, 7)

However, the Tannisho, as quoted above, clearly states that the equality of a person of shinjin with a Buddha remains a virtual one until the demise of the present name-and-body (*nama-rupa*) or personality:

"Do those who speak of realizing enlightenment while in this bodily existence manifest various accommodated bodies, possess the Buddha's thirty-two features and eighty marks, and preach the dharma to benefit beings like Shakyamuni? It is this that is meant by realizing enlightenment in this life." (*Tannisho*, Section 15)

A Buddha's thirty-two physical features include a white curl of hair (*urnakesha*) on his mid-brow and a crown-protrusion (*ushnisha*) on his head. Shinran's request that 'those who speak of realizing enlightenment while in this bodily existence' exhibit, as a proof of their Buddhahood, those physical signs, is clearly ironical, and the all-important criterion that a Perfectly Enlightened Being is able to teach beings in such a way that they are able to attain enlightenment constitutes a serious challenge, to put it mildly.

In spite of having been granted the gift of faith, are we really able to save other beings, to help them to become Buddhas? If we are honest with ourselves, this is far from being the case. Even worse: we are not even able to sever our attachments to all sorts of objects of desire, hatred and fear. As Yuien-bo asked Shinran:

‘Although I say the nembutsu, the feeling of dancing with joy is faint with me, and I have no thought of wanting to go to the Pure Land quickly. How should it be [for a person of the nembutsu]?’ (*Tannisho*, 9)

One senses the despair of Yuien-bo and recognizes it in oneself. Is it not a bitter irony, that we should be ‘equal to Buddhas’ while we are still fettered by all sorts of anxieties and urges? Hence Yuien-bo's (and our) relief at Master Shinran's famous answer:

‘When I reflect deeply on it, by the very fact that I do not rejoice at what should fill me with such joy that I dance in the air and dance on the earth, I realize all the more that my birth is completely settled. What suppresses the heart that that should rejoice and keeps one from rejoicing is the action of blind passions. Nevertheless, the Buddha, knowing this beforehand, called us ‘foolish beings possessed of blind passions’; thus, becoming aware that the compassionate Vow of Other Power is indeed for the sake of ourselves, who are such beings, we find it all the more trustworthy.’ (*Tannisho*, 9)

The Good News is that we do not need to become Buddhist saints, let alone Sammasambuddhas, in this body. We do not need to pass any litmus tests to deserve Birth into the Pure Land, since Amida Buddha has already taken care of it by bringing about our trust as a reflection of His Trust in the Efficacy of His Vows.

Birth into the Pure Land is settled at the moment of being grasped by Amida's Vow, and thus before the time of death. In this sense, the heart of a person of shinjin already dwells in the Pure Land in that she is presently assured of Birth, Realisation and Return into Samsara to rescue all beings fettered to the Wheel of Suffering.

A deep, overwhelming gratitude springs forth of one's heart, and one cannot help but respond to Amida's Gift by uttering: *Namu-Amida-Butsu*.

## **On Personal Doubts and Amida's Faith**

Having been grasped by Amida's Vow, we may have doubt about ourselves, but never about Amida's Faithfulness. The essence of Shinjin according to Shinran is not a subjective faith reached by self-effort, i.e. the will to believe, but Amida's Faithfulness, His standing by His Own Word, which is tantamount to His having achieved Enlightenment. The question is not whether Amida exists (the whole Mahayana, both Dharma and Sangha, affirms it), but whether He has achieved Buddhahood. Since the latter is settled, what room can there be for any doubt?

The distinction between personal belief and Shinjin, as the reflection of Amida's Faithfulness, can be illustrated by a personal anecdote. When I first encountered the Shin Buddhist Dharma, I struggled with doubts not only about myself ('am I worthy of Amida's Salvation?') but also about the tenets of the Pure Land doctrine ('too good to be true', etc.). This struggle went on until it dawned upon me that it is exactly the person of weak personal faith that is the special focus of Amida's Compassion. Once I realised this, Amida instantly conferred His Gift of Shinjin to me - or better, since He had offered me this Gift all along, I was ready to receive it, not because of any personal effort, but due to the fruition of karmic affinities that allowed my karma to be drowned in the Infinite Sea of Amida's Merits.

My Birth into Sukhavati being thus settled, I can read the Pure Land Sutras without my intellect constantly bickering about the description of the attributes of Amida and His Land. I do not need a sophisticated exegesis in terms of a reduction to mere mythologies. Of course, the Sutras have to be read at different levels, but when you have been granted Shinjin, what is so difficult in accepting the account or cause-and-effect (*innen*) of Dharmakara's kalpa-long progression from Bodhisattva to fully-realised Buddha? The Mahayana accepts the notion of an infinite multitude of time-periods and universes, very much like some contemporary physicists, and thus there is really enough time and space for all this to have happened and for it to be still going on. All these are minor details that fall into place once you have realised the most difficult and the most basic thing: the State of Non-retrogression in virtue of the transfer of Amida's merits through the Nembutsu of Faith.

What more should one say? Once Faith has been granted, there really is nothing left but to utter, over and over again: *Namu-Amida-Butsu*.

## **On Taking refuge in Amida Buddha**

Judging from my previous experience and from the people I have encountered, nothing seems to be more contrary to human nature than to simply rely on the efficacy of Amida's Vow as to one's future realisation. It is one thing to endorse the statement that we have to become like children, but it is quite another to realise that there is no way we can ACHIEVE this state.

True entrusting is light-years away from mere flippancy. It is not carefreeness, nor is it a secular postmodern attitude towards the issue of salvation. It is the deep belief that Birth into the Pure Land and Enlightenment is ensured by the fact that the monk Dharmakara became Buddha Amida, thus bringing about the realisation of his Primal Vow.

One can only repeat and repeat again: just leave everything to the Buddha. Put all your karma - all your transgressions, your evil thoughts, your vices and your crimes - on His shoulders. As Master Rennyo used to put it:

'As for faith, then, what should our attitude be, and how should we entrust ourselves to Amida?'

In realizing faith, we simply cast off the sundry practices and disciplines and the evil mind of self-power and, without any doubts, single-heartedly and deeply take refuge

in Amida. This we call true and real faith. Amida Tathagata, fully knowing the sentient beings who single-heartedly and steadfastly entrust themselves in this way, graciously sends forth rays of light, receives these beings within the light, and enables them to be born in the Land of Utmost Bliss." (Rennyō Shōnin's *Ofumi*, Fascicle 5, Letter 15)

Simple trust is the essence of liberation from Samsara. Nothing else is required. But it is exactly this simple trust that we cannot produce. It can only be brought about through the Working of Amida's Primal Vow; it is the echo of His Call.

So, really, there is nothing we can do and nothing we have to do, except to carefully listen to the Shin Buddhist Dharma - everything else really is Amida's business, as Master Rennyō said:

'If even those without shinjin listen to the teaching of Buddha-dharma from the bottom of their minds/hearts, they will absolutely receive shinjin because of the power of the Buddha's Great Compassion that is added. All we need do is expend our efforts in listening to the honorable teaching.'  
(*Kikigaki* ('*Heard and Recorded*'), 193).

Accordingly, in a recent article, Professor Eiken Kobai has emphasised the all- importance of listening as a necessary, if not sufficient, step to attaining Shinjin:

'The way to receive shinjin in the Jodo-Shinshu teaching is by "hearing" (*chomon*). Today, that would include studying the doctrines of Jodo-Shinshu'. (<http://amida-jiretreat-temple-romania.blogspot.com/2010/10/i-wish-to-share-with-you-most-recent.html>)

Indeed, 'listening' does not mean some flabby contemplative attitude, but has the precise sense of studying the real significance and import of Amida's Primal Vow, as mediated by good friends in the Dharma whose faith (shinjin) is already settled:

'Hearing the Name' is not hearing the six-character Name 'na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu' unreflectively; it means that when we meet a good teacher, receive his teaching, and entrust ourselves (*namu*) to the Name (*namu-amida-butsu*), Amida Buddha unfailingly saves us'.  
(Rennyō Shōnin's *Ofumi*, Fascicle 1, Letter 15)

The question is, then, where and by whom the true Shin Buddhist Dharma is expounded in a plain and authentic manner. Well, reading and re-reading the original writings of the Masters of our Tradition, especially Yuien-bo's *Tannishō* and Rennyō Shōnin's *Letters*, are the best way to prepare the ground for attaining faith for one's future liberation from samsara through the saving Power of Amida's Primal Vow. Furthermore, seeking the fellowship of good friends in the Dharma, namely people whose Birth has been settled, is helpful, if not mandatory.

The seeker should not force himself or herself to believe anything; all that is required is to listen with an open mind and heart. Indeed, if the karmic conditions are right, i.e. if the seeker is attuned to receive the Dharma by his previous karma, he or she will inevitably take refuge in Amida Buddha and be embraced by His Light, never to be abandoned. Then, all that remains is to express our gratitude for the Tathagata's free Gift of Buddhahood: *Namu-Amida-Butsu*.

## On Calculation

The essence of Shin Buddhism is simple - just leave everything to the Buddha. But the very simplicity of this teaching is also the reason why it is so difficult to grasp. Take the concept of calculation (*hakarai*) for instance. How often does one hear that absence of calculation means the letting go of reasoning and learning, the ideal of a simple soul abandoning itself to pure feeling.

This view is both superficial and misleading. It is superficial because it just considers the very secondary and contingent aspects of shinjin or true entrusting. And it is misleading because the Buddha-Dharma in which the True Pure Land School is rooted is totally ignored, resulting in a cheap and arbitrary form of spiritual well-being which is Buddhist in name only.

True, more often than not a merely intellectual approach is an obstacle to spiritual progress (whatever that may be). Nonetheless Right Thinking is part of the Eightfold Way, and thus a precondition of entering any Buddhist path. Moreover, emotions are just as elements of the mind as intellections, and are likewise 'calculating' in a psychological sense. Finally, if our thoughts are irrelevant for being embraced by Amida's Light, then so are our feelings, too.

Strictly speaking, calculation is the commitment to various religious practices and moral actions with the goal of attaining Ultimate Enlightenment. As such, it is perfectly appropriate for the exercise of *jiriki* or '-power' in the sense of self-reliance with respect to spiritual realisation. With the advent of Mappo, the Age of Decadent Dharma, however, realising Buddhahood through self-powered practice is no longer an option, at least not for ordinary people like us.

Thus, the only calculation that remains effective with regard to our liberation is go-*hakarai*, the *hakarai* of Amida Buddha, more precisely: the kalpa-long reflection of Dharmakara on the optimal means of compassion, as well as His aeon-long practice resulting in immeasurable merits, the fruition of which is Dharmakara's realisation of Buddhahood, the establishment of His Pure Land and the means by which Birth into Sukhavati, being tantamount to Realisation, can be achieved by ordinary beings.

Ultimately, the Buddha's *hakarai* is the absence of *hakarai* of ordinary beings, in other words, Amida's Intent is that ordinary people completely rely on His Vows with a view to attaining Nirvana. This is the true sense of the famous phrase: 'working is non-working' and 'sense is non-sense'. The Buddha has done all the work, accumulated all the merits necessary and sufficient for us to abstain from any attempt at accumulating questionable merits of our own. Calculation, in our case, would mean to presume that we are capable of

fathoming the Ocean of Amida's Merits, and thus to doubt the efficacy of His Vows. Calculation, in short, is absence of true entrusting, since we still feel that we cannot wholly rely on the Buddha.

Indeed, we are guaranteed to become Buddhas ourselves just as we are, on the point of Birth into Amida's Pure Land. Hence we do not need to do or to become something other than we presently do or are to be grasped by the Other Power of Amida's realised Vows and Merits. We do not need to become learned, nor do we need to un-learn what we know (besides the fact that our learning may be one of the Buddha's compassionate means to lead others onto the Shin way). We do not need to become morally or intellectually sophisticated, but neither do we need to become callous simpletons. We just need to rely on the fact that Dharmakara has indeed become Amida Buddha.

Shinjin does go together with simplicity of the heart - the Heart of Amida Buddha, not ours. Even faith is effectuated by the Other Power of Amida's Vows, since it reflects, like a mirror, the Great Faith of the Buddha, the *shradda* that made Him enter the Path of a Bodhisattva many, many kalpas ago. The Diamond-like Heart of Shinjin is that of the Tathagata: this is the Essence of Other-Power Faith.

## On Listening to a Requiem by Schütz

This evening I have listened again to the *Musikalische Exequien*, a requiem composed by the 17-th century German composer, Heinrich Schütz. This extraordinary piece, like all of Schütz' compositions, is filled by a profound Christian devotion typical of the early Reformation.

Though as a Buddhist, I do not share Schütz' theistic belief in a Creator, I can relate to the acute sense of the misery and transience of human existence as well as to the hope for forgiveness, salvation and everlasting bliss that shine through each note and word of this remarkable and moving mass.

Indeed, the Buddha's teaching about impermanence is echoed by the pithy statement of the Psalmist:

"The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away." (From: *Psalm 90:10*)

Despite the fact that the concept of sin and guilt is unknown in the Buddha Dharma, as a follower of Honen and Shinran I can sympathize with the sense of karmic defilements and the feeling of being destined to hell (though for a disciple of the Buddha, both heaven and hell are transient). The idea of redemption as a vicarious sacrifice may seem strange to non-Christians, but again I do recognize the same gesture of putting one's destiny into the hands of an Other who has already done all the work of accumulating merits, the fruits of which are freely offered to all believers, independently of their vices and virtues, benefactions or crimes.



Of course, the restored paradise which a Christian hopes to resurrect into, is a state of existence that is as impermanent as any other destiny, whether hellish, ghostly, animal, human, or divine. A Buddhist, by contrast, strives to attain the permanent abode of Nirvana (if there is striver or something to be attained at all).

Many Western converts to Buddhism have a strong dislike for their Christian roots and may even tend to be opposed to any form of religious devotion. Now, one may wonder whether somebody can fruitfully enter a fresh spiritual path while not having made peace with the one (s)he has left. The much criticized pragmatism of Japanese followers of Buddhist schools, in particular of the Pure Land tradition, who easily accommodate Buddhist practice and Shinto or Confucian piety, should be an example to the contrary.

Of course, if we put our trust in Amida's Vow, we need not and cannot rely on other Buddhas and divinities as regards our salvation. Our Birth having been settled through the transfer of Amida's Diamond-like Shinjin, we should accept things as they come and endure our last run through Samsara without resorting to the aid of anyone else than Amida Buddha. Like Master Rennyo said:

'Abandoning your inclination toward all sundry practices and discarding your tendency to avoid certain things, entrust yourselves single-heartedly and steadfastly to Amida and, without concerning yourselves with other buddhas, bodhisattvas, and the various kami, take refuge exclusively in Amida, with the assurance that this coming birth is a certainty'.

(Rennyo Shonin's *Ofumi*, Fascicle 1, Letter 10)

Nonetheless we should be able to recognize the relative value of other religions with respect to ensuring a rebirth in a better condition, whether human or paradisiac, and see the unlimited Compassion of Amida (personified by Kannon Bosatsu) at work in different religious forms that are like saving ropes thrown at those beings that are not yet ready to accept the Buddha Dharma and enter the Way of True Entrusting. Again, this is nothing other than what Master Rennyo taught:

'By kami manifestations, we mean that [buddhas and bodhisattvas] appear provisionally as kami to save sentient beings in whatever way possible; they lament that those who lack faith (shin) in the Buddha-Dharma fall helplessly into hell. Relying on even the slightest of [related past] conditions, they appear provisionally as kami through compassionate means to lead [sentient beings] at last into the Buddha-Dharma.

Therefore sentient beings of the present time [should realize that] if they rely on Amida and, undergoing a decisive settling of faith, repeat the nenbutsu and are to be born in the Land of Utmost Bliss, then all the kami [in their various] manifestations, recognizing this as [the fulfillment of] their own fundamental purpose, will rejoice and protect nenbutsu practitioners. Consequently, even if we do not worship the kami in particular, since all are encompassed when we rely solely on one buddha, Amida, we give credence [to them] even though we do not rely on them in particular'.

(Rennyo Shonin's *Ofumi*, Fascicle 2, Letter 3)

The religious music of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries represent the best of a European Christian tradition of which we should not be ashamed as Western followers of Shinran Shonin and Rennyo Shonin. Rather, we should feel deepest gratitude for Amida's infinite ways of coming to the rescue of all beings lost in Samsara.

## On Engaged Buddhism

There is a tendency to present traditional Shin Buddhism as escapist, and to stress the need for some sort of "engaged Buddhism". This phenomenon is not new nor limited to our school.

A person of shinjin may express her gratitude to Amida Buddha not only by saying the Name, but also by trying to alleviate suffering around her. However, as a Buddhist she knows that the fundamental causes of political, social or ecological disasters are the three roots of Ignorance (Blindness), Desire and Anger (Hatred), which are so many aspects of the same error, namely the belief in, and attachment to, the illusion of a substantial ego.

These causes cannot be eliminated by social or political reforms. Indeed, every attempt to realise utopia in this corner of Saha (our universe of Suffering) has created a hell instead, and the profound reason for this is that the basic problem remains unsolved.

Buddhism offers 84000 ways of tackling this problem. They all savour of one thing, namely Nirvana. But, in this last Age of the Dharma, it has become practically impossible for us ordinary beings to realise Buddhahood on our own. It is to such beings dispersed throughout Saha that Amida comes to the rescue.

Everyone who wishes to alleviate the suffering that surrounds us, should do so. But we will only be able to help our fellow sufferers completely after having become Buddhas in virtue of our Birth into the Pure Land. As Shinran Shonin said:

‘The compassion in the Path of Pure Land is to quickly attain Buddhahood, saying the nembutsu, and with the true heart of compassion and love save all beings completely as we desire.

In this life no matter how much pity and sympathy we may feel for others, it is impossible to help another as we truly wish; thus our compassion is inconsistent and limited. Only the saying of nembutsu manifests the complete and never ending compassion which is true, real, and sincere’. (*Tannisho*, Section 4)

That is, we will be only able to end suffering, not only our own, but also that of our fellow beings, when we have become Perfectly Enlightened Beings, returning into Samsara in order to proclaim Amida's Name and to invite all beings to take refuge in Him, as all Buddhas in the Ten Directions do.

## On Being a Bombu

There is a tendency to misunderstand the term *bombu* as referring to an un-learned and stupid person, with the implication that if one does not become such a person, one will not gain shinjin.

However, the term just means an ordinary person having not yet reached Buddhahood yet, and therefore, in the Age of Mappo, a person incapable of realising Buddhahood by herself. Such a person is indeed blind and ridden with passions and karmic defilements. But this is a statement of fact rather than a moral judgement: even if you have reached one of the Bodhisattva stages, as long as you are not a Buddha, you are subject to the limitations of Samsara.

Now, in this respect even a fully omniscient person who would know everything that there is to know about the world would still remain on this side of the Shore. Total ignorance is an obstacle to enlightenment, but total knowledge alone does not amount to enlightenment, which is beyond conceptual understanding.

Even a person that has reached some kind of *kensho*, a brief glimpse of non-duality or a short experience of the Deathless (especially in situations of extreme emotional stress, e.g. when confronted with death) has still her karmic defilements - i.e. the good or bad effects of actions in her past - to deal with. Such experiences may lead us unto the Buddhist path, but they actually only stress the infinite distance that separate us from a truly liberated being. Thus, on the one hand, knowledge and non-dual experiences do not suffice to ensure enlightenment - they only emphasise the distance to the Ultimate Goal. On the other hand, neither is there a need to abandon knowledge, intelligence or insight and to become a callous and unsophisticated moron instead. The truth is, as far as enlightenment is concerned, moron and genius, criminal and saint are on the same par: without Shinjin, they are both destined to hell and with Shinjin they both will become Buddhas at the moment of birth.

The Message of the Buddha is: "Remaining as you are, just trust Me". There is no need of change except the change of heart effected by Amida's Light, resulting in True Entrusting and thus immediately ensuring the Tenth Bodhisattva-Stage and Perfect Enlightenment in the future.

Neither exalting nor humiliating yourself, just leave everything to the Buddha. Hence also, an obsession with karmic guilt is equally unnecessary. It is sufficient to know oneself as powerless as far as liberation from Samsara is concerned. This consciousness of utter powerlessness, a reflection of the Light of Amida, is the necessary condition for being able to entrust oneself to Amida alone, totally and without any equivocation. This is Shinjin, and Shinjin is Buddha Nature granted by Amida, the Diamond-like Heart conferred by the Tathagata, our entry ticket to the Pure Land and Nirvana.

## On Waiting for Sukhavati

What is the most exhilarating about the True Doctrine of the Pure Land is also what is the most frustrating about it, namely that strictly nothing remains to be done once you have been grasped by Amida's Vow; that is, once you have gained confidence in the efficacy of His Primal Vow as to your liberation and that of all living beings.

A person who has not yet been granted Shinjin still must intently listen to the essence of the Buddha Dharma as it is contained in the Canon of the Three Sutras, until her karmic dispositions and the Other Power of the Vow interlock and Faith as the seed of deliverance is sown in her heart.

As a natural reaction, we rejoice and humbly give thanks to the Buddha. And since His Merits are boundless, so our gratitude should be abiding. This gratitude is expressed by reciting the Name and/or the Sutras, in solitary reclusion or by participating in faith gatherings at the local or virtual dojo during which the Joy of Faith may be shared. However, after a while, the Saying of the Nembutsu as a token of gratitude may become silent and wordless in the coincidence of the heart of the devotee and the Heart of the Buddha.

Now, especially Western people or those influenced by the rather ambivalent Western mentality, in which narrow rationality and shallow sentimentality are joined together, are uneasy about such a 'quietist' attitude. Though our heart resides in Sukhavati, the karmic defilements and attachments, as well as the resulting ego-affirmation, are still taking their toll until our final demise. It is therefore not entirely surprising that some people feel that the devotion/thanksgiving to the Buddha should be complemented by social, political or cultural activities. Nothing is wrong about such commitments, though by their very nature they tend to be partial and they may constitute a diversion from what is essential: being granted the confidence that is the key to Ultimate Deliverance. Also we should never forget that, until we have become Buddhas as soon as we are born to No-Birth in Amida's Pure Land, we are strictly unable to do anything really useful for our fellow-beings, and very often only increase harm by trying to diminish it. Of course, this should not prevent us from exercising *Metta* or *Dana* as a token of gratitude for Amida's free gift. Nonetheless, the necessary and sufficient condition for Liberation is gaining Faith.

Nothing remains to be done, not even teaching the Dharma. This is not to denigrate or even criticize those that try to spread the Buddha Dharma in this Age of Decadent Dharma. But precisely because of the Age of Relativism and Materialism we are living in, and because of our unenlightened nature, we should be aware that even as far as teaching the Dharma is concerned, our abilities to communicate Truth are seriously impaired. The only Teacher is the Buddha, as well as the Masters that have been inspired by His Faith, being Shinran Shonin and Rennyo Shonin. Thus we should painstakingly and strictly refer to their writings and humbly abandon any attempt to add anything of our own.

Finally, since the only True Teacher is the Buddha, we should refrain from evangelizing our fellow-beings. While it is mandatory to point out errors in a matter-of-fact way, our innate tendency towards ego-affirmation inevitably leads to proselytic and self-righteous

behaviour, which harms the exposition of the Dharma. In particular, we should bear in mind that all 84000 teachings grounded on the Sutras have One Flavour, that of Deliverance. We followers of the True Doctrine of the Pure Land simply believe that at least as beings like us are concerned, the only promising way out of Samsara is totally confiding in the realization of Dharmakara's Vows, which is the Enlightenment of Amida Buddha in the past and our Enlightenment in the future.

Nothing remains to be done, except giving thanks: *Namu-Amida-Butsu*.

## **On Concessions to the modern mentality**

A commonplace complaint about the contemporary world is that is secular and materialist. Like all clichés, this affirmation cannot even claim to be a half-truth, especially if we disregard the exception of Western Europe. Nonetheless it is true that many, if not most Westerners, who come to Buddhism are anti-religious or at least have a strong resentment against their religious upbringing, which is usually Christian in the case of Europeans and Northern Americans. This fact constitutes a considerable challenge to the transmission of a genuinely religious tradition such as Shin Buddhism, which is quite explicitly devotional. It is a particularly grave problem for Jodo Shinshu since many of its clergy and clerics are influenced by Liberal Theology, which would be unthinkable in Tibetan Buddhism which seems to resist such deviations much better due to its stronger reliance on religious or doctrinal authority.

The permeation of Shin Buddhism by theological approaches that are quite alien to Buddhism has become so overwhelming that it is difficult to find English presentations of Jodo Shinshu that are not affected to some degree by a tendency to reduce religion in general, and (Shin) Buddhism in particular, to a set of guidelines for the fulfillment of a this-worldly existence. Often, not even the slightest attempt is made to outline and explain the basic tenets of Mahayana Buddhism and how Jodo Shinshu is firmly rooted in it, and if elements of traditional Buddhist doctrine are mentioned, they are interpreted as metaphors for the unwholesomeness of our present existence and the need for healing.

This take goes down well with the general public, as is evidenced for example by the popularity of the writings of the late Rev. Unno, which certainly have their literary merits, but have to be complemented by the more traditional writings of Rev. Inagaki and Rev. Kobai that provide a more rigorous approach to Jodo Shinshu doctrine. Rev. Unno has the great ability to engage his readers with every-day examples of human suffering and its transcendence. However, one gets the impression that Rev. Unno makes undue concessions to a certain modern mentality that is resilient to anything that is other-worldly or transcendent by implying that the account of Dharmakara's career and enlightenment is a metaphor for our own transformation in our present existence.

Now, intellectual honesty and fairness demands that one concedes that religion is *also* about healing the fractures of this-worldly human existence. Indeed, the first step in the Buddhist path is to realise the inevitability and generality of human (and non-human) suffering. Furthermore, Mahayana Buddhism has an intrinsic aversion against literalism

and does use metaphors to represent spiritual realities. For instance, the embellishments of the Pure Land in the Smaller *Sukhavati-vyuha Sutra* are meant to represent the qualities of the Perfectly-Enlightened Mind. Finally, and most importantly, a basic tenet of Madhyamika is the non-distinctness of Nirvana and Samsara, of the World of Enlightenment and the World of Birth-and-Death, according to the viewpoint of Ultimate Truth, which however is the viewpoint of a Perfectly-Enlightened Being, not that of a bombu or ordinary unenlightened person. The realisation of the non- distinctness of Nirvana and Samsara is not only the content of *Prajna* as Perfect Wisdom, but is also the lever of Perfect Compassion since it enables a Buddha to come to the rescue of suffering beings on This Shore while firmly standing on the Other Shore.

All this being granted, nevertheless, one has to insist that Jodo Shinshu adopts the viewpoint of the ordinary unenlightened person for which the Buddha is on the Other Shore while she is on This Shore. Only in this perspective does the doctrine of Other- Power Faith make sense, i.e. salvation by the transfer of Amida's Merits through the channel opened by the coincidence of the Buddha's saving intention and the bombu's intention to be saved solely in virtue of the Merits of the Buddha, the latter being a reflection or echo of the former. In the light of this fact, two caveats have to be made with respect to revisionary accounts of Jodo Shinshu doctrine.

Certainly a person of Shinjin is transformed by being grasped by the Light of Amida's Wisdom and Compassion. Indeed, the Buddha's Light operates a con-version in a bombu's heart that consists in turning away from self-centredness to Buddha- centredness, which is the Jodo Shinshu way of *Anatta*. The con-version of Other Power Faith constitutes the potentiality of Buddhahood, but it does not yet amount to Perfect Enlightenment which comprises Perfect Wisdom as the realisation of Suchness and Perfect Compassion as the realisation of the Means of Universal Salvation. It does not yet constitute the Going into Nirvana and the Returning into Samsara. Assimilating the transcendent state of Buddhahood to the other-centered and all-accepting attitude of the myokonin can only give rise to a cruel deception, since we remain unenlightened beings ridden with passions, hatreds and delusions in spite of being grasped by Amida's Vow and we have to live out our karma until our final demise. It is important to be aware of this, since this *simul justus et peccator*, this being both a Buddha-to-be and a karmically-shackled being is the liberating message of Jodo Shinshu: you simply do not need to be a Buddha or even specially holy in this life and your passions and delusions do not count against your ultimately realising Buddhahood in the Pure Land.

The second caveat with respect to modernist teachings is that you cannot consider the account of Dharmakara's bodhisattva career as being wholly mythical, since otherwise you are sawing the branch on which you are sitting. Jodo Shinshu as a school of Mahayana Buddhism is rooted in the doctrine of Karma, of Cause-and-Effect. Salvation by Faith is not a miracle of Pure Grace, but involves the strictly orthodox transfer of merits. The bombu's ultimate enlightenment is the consequence of her karma being drowned in the Unfathomable Sea of Amida's Merits, which are the karmic result of His kalpa-long practice as Dharmakara. This does not mean that we have to imagine that Dharmakara walking with creatures of the Precambrium. Indeed, conventional Mahayana wisdom is that this world of Saha is not the only universe in the present, past, or future, which leaves enough time and

space for Dharmakara's career having taken place many kalpas ago, or many Big Crunches and Big Bangs ago in the terminology of modern cosmology.

But aside from these rarified considerations, the simple fact remains that for a person of Shinjin, Amida/Dharmakara is a Thou to which she turns to in devotion and gratitude, which are due to a Real Person and not to a mere fiction. So the simplest is still saying: Namu-Amida-Butsu.

## On Sharing the Dharma

When sharing the Dharma with others, one should be constantly aware of the limitations that the present Age of Declining Dharma, the spiritual decadence of the human race, as well as the ego attachment that is our universal condition.

In particular, I perceive two diametrically-opposed dangers.

One danger is literalist proselytism and sectarianism. A person, say X, may have encountered the Shin Buddhist Dharma in a situation of extreme spiritual distress and have felt its enormous liberating power. It is natural that she may want to scream this message from the rooftops, which in the Age of Internet is tantamount to spamming. X may be horrified that numberless beings are headed for hellish afterlives, condemned by their own behavior to continuously erring for ages in Samsara before acquiring again the infinitely rare and preciously unique opportunity of being a human being that lives in an age when the Dharma-words of a Buddha can (still) be heard. X may feel that it is her duty as a person of Shinjin to drag people if necessary by the hair to listening to the Dharma. And for the same reasons, X may justifiably be appalled by the glib intellectualism of postmodern scholars, whom she must consider to be minions of Mara.

The worst thing about X is that, in a certain respect, she is absolutely right. But she forgets that, first, nobody, not even Amida Buddha himself, can change the karma of someone else. Second, since Samsara has an end, but no beginning, each one of us has wandered for countless ages in all sorts of existences, ranging from hellish to divine, such that the very worst has already happened to us before. Third, though we persons of Shinjin consider the Shin Buddhist Dharma as the Ultimate Dharma of our Age, we should keep in mind that there are, proverbially, 84000 ways of attaining Nirvana: neither do we claim to be enlightened, nor should we require others to exhibit their Buddha marks. Fourth, the Buddha Dharma is incompatible with literalism, especially in the Mahayana tradition: we should be aware that there is a certain leeway in interpreting not only the Three Sutra Canon, but also the writings of our Masters.

This brings me to the other horn of the dilemma: the attempt to adapt Shin Buddhism to a profane and secular world. A person, say Y, is a priest that encounters all sorts of people from all walks of life during his pastoral duties, the needs of which he has to respond to. Now, ordinary people are by necessity, or by affinity, utterly unspiritual. Ordinary people, including the most refined academics, only think of Nirvana when confronted with impermanence and death, and only inasmuch as these affect them materially as biological, not as spiritual beings. Otherwise, religion is considered by most people to be nothing more



than a set of instructions for psychological or social well-being: forget about the Buddha, they say, let us tackle life here and now, when and where there is so much to reform. And is social and political activism not the best way to honor the Buddha? Is Shinjin not tantamount to feeling in harmony with oneself and with others? Confronted with this mentality, and affected by it, our priest Y will try to conform the Dharma to the actual conditions of the Sangha instead of vice-versa.

But is Y not right in picking people up from where they are? Should one not start with those aspects of the Dharma that people can relate to in their own every-day experience and which may enable them to get on with it? Of course it is right to pick people up from where they are, depending on where you want to drop them. If, eventually, we do not encourage them to reflect on the nature of suffering, its origin, its cessation and the way to its cessation, and if we do not point out to them that the easiest way to realize Nirvana is Birth into Amida's Pure Land, and the way to ensure Birth is Other-Power Faith, then why should we bother telling them about Shin Buddhism at all? Of course, as I said earlier on, even the most superficially liberal reading of Shinran Shonin's writings may prepare the ground for hearing the Dharma that was preached by Shakyamuni Buddha on Vulture Peak. However, to alter the famous metaphor of the Tannisho, that there is the antidote of the Abiding Dharma is no reason to administer the poison of Fashionable Opinion.

The Middle Way between Literalism and Liberalism is not some compromise but quite simply the Dharma. That we are unable to fathom it, and that we inevitably deform it to some degree by expounding it, does not annul the fact that the Dharma is what it is. The Dharma is the yardstick of truth and error, and it is, according to the Buddha's final words, our only Lamp.

## **On Having No Head, Shinshu Fashion**

Douglas Harding's book, *On Having No Head*, provides a rather idiosyncratic, but actually highly effective, account of non-duality. Basically, Harding's method of provoking a non-dual in-sight is quite simply to attend to the vacuity that is right above your shoulders at the centre of the so-called 'first-person' perspective. This perspective should indeed be called a 'no-person' perspective because it obviously has no centre, or preferably, its Centre is an Absence of Self, or No-Self.

Right above your shoulders, if correctly attended to, is both an unsullied and serene Void, Nirvana, and the Samsara of conditioned phenomena, including cogitations, emotions, willings and bodily sensations. Void and Samsara are non-distinct, inseparable like background and foreground.

The Void is not (in) the mind, but rather the other way round: the nama-rupa is a flux of dharmas unfolding in the Void. Enlightenment belongs to nobody. It is not the self-lifting itself by its own bootstraps, it is the self-vanishing like mist on a mirror. To be more precise: the flux of dharmas still unfolds but the ghost or the spectre of a 'head' disappears, at the very least for an instant.

The Void is boundless, clear and blissful; it is Amida, Infinite Light, and the Pure Land. So Amida and the Pure Land are 'right here' but they are not in the mind, as pointed out earlier on.

The Vow is the potential of the Void to become apparent by making the ego transparent or translucent and finally vanish, every karmic momentum having been exhausted.

The Call is the ephemeral apparition of the Void which brings the ego-mechanism momentarily to a halt. It is the realization of the power of the Vow.

True entrusting is the self-effacing confidence that responds to the Call and is expressed by the recitation of the Name which is thus also the working of the Vow Power.

The spectre of a 'head', the ego, is still there, but has been driven out of the Centre it has usurped and that belongs to the Buddha alone. Left to its own devices at the periphery, and its engine broken, the ego will trundle on in virtue of the remaining karmic momentum or *tanha* until its final disaggregation.

The account above seems perfectly orthodox though it is clearly reminiscent of Suzuki's view expressed in his *Buddha of Infinite Light*. Indeed, neither does it affirm the error of 'the Pure Land in the Mind' nor that of 'Becoming a Buddha in this Life'. But does this not contradict the story told in the Larger Sutra? Well, why shouldn't this story be an allegory of a non-dual experience *and* a description of a transcendental, but nonetheless relative, reality that is a real analogy of the absolute truth which consists in the very same non-dual experience?

Why, indeed, should Amida and Sukhavati not be both 'right here' and 'over there', or better: neither 'right here' nor 'over there' according to absolute truth, a truth which is not grasped by anybody but which nevertheless manifests itself in: *Namu-Amida-Butsu*.

## On Doctrine and Experience

Once you deepen your acquaintance with Shin Buddhism, you cannot fail to be surprised to learn that this deceptively simple form of the Buddha-Dharma actually is grounded on an elaborate doctrine, the milestones of which are summed up in the *Anjin Rondai*, the 'Topics of Faith', of the Nishi Hongwanji. This may seem especially strange for people who have come to know Shin Buddhism through popular introductions, which inevitably have the flaws of their merits. A very common reaction, which I once witnessed in a discussion forum, is to relegate the classics, i.e. the works and utterances of Shinran Sonin and Rennyo Shonin, to the study of historians, and to insist on the value of so-called 'personal experience' instead.

However, due to a widespread individualism and subjectivism, such 'personal experience' amounts mostly to a mere stirring of moral sentimentalism, and is part and parcel of exactly those things a follower of the Middle Way has to let go, namely passion (i.e. sympathy or antipathy) and opinion (i.e. error). In Shin Buddhism, this letting-go is the abandonment of *hakarai*, of ego-centered calculation, that is brought about entirely by the Other Power of

Amida's Saving Vow. The absence of calculation, on behalf of the person of Shinjin, the cause of which is the Ocean of Amida's Merits embodied in Namo- Amida-Butsu, is the Shin Buddhist approach to the Heart of the Buddha's Realisation, namely that everything is devoid of anything personal, i.e. the Realisation of Suchness.

Now, if passion, including the clinging to personal happiness, is to be foregone, so is also opinion. The 'intellectual' pendant of moral sentimentalism is positivist rationalism, of which secular humanism and religious fanaticism are the two inseparable facets. So a preoccupation with doctrine may ultimately lead to the error of dogmatic literalism or doctrinaire self-righteousness which also is a form of hakarai. This error can be avoided if Shin Buddhist doctrine is understood in terms of a spiritual therapy, the steps of which have to be followed until reconvalescence is ensured. It is a means - a necessary means, perhaps, but only a means - to the ultimate end of realisation, the seed of which is Amida's Trust.

Doctrine, then, is a ladder which can be discarded once it has been scaled, to use Wittgenstein's simile. This may appear utterly scandalous to someone who is obsessed by the 'pristine Buddha Dharma'. However, it has to be clearly understood that until Realisation has been achieved, i.e. until Enlightenment becomes actual, the ladder of doctrine is still required. And according to Pure Land Buddhism, Enlightenment takes place only at the point of dissolution of this last nama-rupa, and the consequent Birth into the Land of Bliss.

There certainly is an experience that is essential to Shinjin, but there is nothing personal to it, though it can be called Personal with a capital 'P', namely the Buddha's Realisation as it is distilled into: Namu-Amida-Butsu.

## **On Process Philosophy and Buddhism: a Personal View**

The distance that separates Western thought from Buddhism is a commonplace and shares with all commonly-held opinions the property of being merely half-true. The Buddhist stance that nothing is substantial (*anatta*) and everything is in flux (*anicca*) has its Western counterpart in process philosophy, an approach that has been advocated by various thinkers from Heraclitus to Alfred North Whitehead and, more recently, Nicholas Rescher. Process philosophy may help one to understand how identity or, if you wish, continuity is possible without any permanent qualities or parts. It is natural to say that we may step into the same rain, though its intensity and temperature have changed and we are hit by different rain drops. If we appreciate the fact that the unity of process is unaffected by the loss and gain of features and parts, and if we avoid the mistake of reifying processes into series of changeless stages, we stop to be confused by the doctrine of 'no-self'. Indeed, though there are no permanent features or parts in organisms like us, and though there is no distinction between an organism and its life, it can be stated that the very same repeatable life-process has occurred in the past, presently occurs, and/or will occur in the future. This 'brute identity' or unity of process is sufficient for karma to work, since any karmic consequences affect the same process at different times.

Against certain extreme Theravadin or Madhyamikan views, however, I am tempted to allow for holistic, that is, irreducible, powers of organisms as complex processes. In fact, without such non-supervening, though certainly not unconditioned powers, it would be wholly incomprehensible to me how any living being should be able to make the slightest step towards liberation from Samsara, if only by listening to the Buddha's teachings. But then, maybe that's just me.

In any event, process philosophy provides an excellent heuristic for understanding how Amida Buddha and His Pure Land relate to each other as well as to this world of suffering. Indeed, since Amida is the salvific activity grounded in the Primal Vow's Power, and *Sukhavati* (as Amida's *buddha-kshetra*) is tantamount to the range or extent of this Buddhist Activity, Amida Buddha and His Pure Land are just two aspects of the same Liberating Process. This Liberation as the Realization of the Primal Vow's Power on the one hand, and the Process of Samsaric suffering as the Realization of the Potential for *Tanha* or 'craving' on the other, simply interpenetrate without confusion. So it makes little sense to speak of a Samsara here and a Pure Land over there, but both are certainly distinct, though intervoven.

Finally, process philosophy illuminates the way in which Self-Power and Other-Power, the bombu's *hakarai* and the Buddha's *go-hakarai* (which is tantamount to the Primal Vow and the means of its realisation) interact. Again, both processes, the Buddha's extending His helping hand, and the bombu's gripping it, become locked in virtue of the fact that Amida's salvific activity and Samsara overlap without blurring into each other. This mutual permeation is present in each utterance of: *Namu-Amida-Butsu*.

Now, while I am convinced that some form or other of process metaphysics can be put to work as a fruitful hermeneutics for understanding the doctrinal presuppositions of (Shin) Buddhism, I feel obliged to also state some serious reservations concerning a wholesale adoption of Process Philosophy as it is presented today.

First, Process Philosophy is largely identified with the ideas expressed, and the terminology used, in the works of the British philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead. As a consequence, the bulk of process philosophizing done today is actually limited to an epigonal exegesis of Whitehead's words and thoughts. Furthermore, many 'dialogues' between process philosophers and Buddhist scholars tend to consist in attempts to solve the rather parochial problem of how to translate Buddhist concepts into Whitehead's terminology and vice-versa.

Second, and more importantly, most of contemporary process philosophy actually is *event* metaphysics, i.e. the view that the world consists in the flow of short-lived, even instantaneous, occurrences. True, process thinkers generally insist on the deeply relational character of events: each event grows out of a complex web of causal and functional relationships. Nonetheless, since according to the basic tenet of impermanence only the present really exists, while the past is no more and the future not yet, it is impossible to reconstruct processes or lives out of series of successive events, since all elements of such causal or functional chains except the presently occurring one simply do not exist. If you

take processes apart into events as their stages or slices, all the king's horses and all the king's men can't put them back together again.

However, for the logic of karma to work, there must be some unity of processes, amongst others, the lives as well as cycles of life-and-death. Otherwise, if what really exists merely is short-lived life-stages, then why should a presently occurring instantaneous personality (or *nama-rupa*) care about future consequences of its acts, since these consequences will affect a wholly different short-lived personality? Only if there is a single process that is repeated over time and is temporarily identical with a different bundle of events at each time it (still) goes on, will be there any sense in caring about karma at all.

This does not mean falling back into the error of positing a Self that persists unchanged through change (which not only is a contradiction in itself but also could not possibly be affected by karma). Indeed, as I have already pointed out, at each time of its (re-)occurrence, a process is strictly coincident with the sum of presently existing events which are co-located with it. And, in this sense, it is true that you cannot step twice in the same river. But nonetheless there is a continuity which is only possible if there is some numerical identity of process. The account defended here actually avoids both eternalism and annihilationism, which is precisely the view that there is no processual unity and hence no karma over and above a series of instantaneous events.

Maybe it is this careful course between the Scylla of eternalism and the Charybdis of annihilationism which the ill-famed Pudgalavadins tried to steer. If so, they certainly had a point and were unjustly attacked by Theravadins and Madhyamikans alike.

However, I should insist that the position described above is perfectly Madhyamikan. Indeed, T'an Luan in his *Commentary on Vasubandhu's Discourse on the Pure Land* points out that the entity we call human in this world and the one we metaphorically call 'born in the Pure Land' are neither the same nor strictly speaking different. Explicitly referring to Nagarjuna's *Twelve-Gate Treatise*, T'an Luan argues that if they were the same, there would be no causality, and if they were wholly different, there would be no continuity. This is exactly how process philosophy would describe the relations between two 'stages' of the same process.

Now, the reader may ask what all this has to do with Shinjin. At first sight, not very much I agree. But the Pure Land teaching rests on a doctrinal basis shared by all Buddhist schools, which includes the tenets of *anatta*, *anicca* and *karma*, and any contribution to clarifying these interrelated notions strengthens the ground from which one can take the leap of shinjin as true entrusting. In this sense, even through the perhaps unduly theoretical considerations above, wafts the perfume of: Namu-Amida-Butsu.

## On Tradition

When Modernism is opposed in the name of Tradition, it is important that the latter be understood on its own terms. For the secular, i.e. profane, mind, 'Tradition' merely denotes a set of unfounded beliefs and outdated customs to be debunked by science. However, materialist scientism, the basic dogma of the contemporary Western world, is just a

contingent 'philosophical map' (E. F. Schumacher) among many others, and a rather narrow one to boot. Indeed, just as Soviet city maps did not show the location of churches, so the knowledge map provided by secular materialism systematically ignores any kind of question that cannot be investigated by the standards of profane science, which of course leaves out most of what really matters to us as human beings (see Chapter 1 of E. F. Schumacher's *A Guide for the Perplexed*).

It is inevitable that a wholly secular and materialist mind is quite unable to understand the meaning of traditional religious teachings such as the famous dictum 'wisdom/sense is non-wisdom/non-sense' in the *Tannisho*. Contrary to modernist prejudice, this phrase has nothing to do with fuzzy mysticism; it is not a spurious paradox, since it simply means that the Buddha's Wisdom, i.e. the Intent of His Vow, is non-wisdom or non-calculation on the side of the bombu, i.e. the ordinary unenlightened person. It most succinctly sums up the letting-go of self-power induced by the Other Power of the Primal Vow. Now, of course, if traditional Buddhist doctrine does not make any sense to you, you will necessarily fail to grasp the meaning of the seemingly paradoxical identification of Wisdom with non-wisdom, which is simply the adequation or alignment between the bombu's faith in the efficacy of the Primal Vow and the Buddha's Faith in the realization of His Vow, the latter being the cause and the former the effect in strictly karmic terms.

To come back to the topic of this note, it should be emphasized that Tradition is not to be championed because of a sentimental attachment to the past (nostalgia being a purely profane attitude), but because of its greater completeness as compared to modern secularism. As mentioned before, the knowledge map offered by materialist scientism, which is the very heart of contemporary secularism, leaves out too many things relevant to a meaningful life. In particular, contrary to Tradition, it denies the existence of a vertical dimension (in the sense of E. F. Schumacher), namely the dimension of the Sacred, which allows for the distinction between the higher and the lower; that is, for a hierarchy of goods, with respect to which alone the question as to the ultimate good and the meaning of life can be answered.

When I use the word 'Tradition' with a capital 'T', I implicitly acknowledge a certain sympathy for the Perennialist stance (as adopted by René Guenon, Frithjof Schuon and Marco Pallis) that there really is only One Tradition which constitutes the esoteric common core of all exoteric religious forms, though the Vedantin account of this common truth given by the Perennialists themselves (with the notable exception of Pallis) has to be rejected from the Buddhist point of view of *anatta*, i.e. no-self. But we need not rely on Perennialism as such for a defense of Tradition with a capital 'T'. Instead, one can argue that there is one tradition that stands out among all spiritual traditions in virtue of its completeness and adequacy as to Ultimate Truth, namely Buddhism.

Not only does Buddhism provide an account of the virtues and limitations of all other spiritual paths, including those offered by the monotheistic religions, but it also avoids metaphysical partiality by steering the Middle Way between eternalism and nihilism (or better: annihilationism). Not only is its conception of the Ultimate Good, namely the Nirvana, the purest possible, being wholly negative and apophatic, but it also provides a virtually limitless array of methods or compassionate means to realize this Ultimate Good.

One of these numberless paths is the Pure Land tradition in general and the True Pure Land School (Jodo Shinshu) of Shinran Shonin and Rennyo Shonin, which is the most appropriate way of realizing Buddhahood in this Age of the Declining Dharma.

Having started with the observation that tradition should be understood on its own terms, we have arrived at the conception of Tradition as the Ultimate Truth that confers meaning to human existence, and have identified this Truth with Buddhism; in particular, with Shin Buddhism. In the remainder of this essay, I shall turn to a definition of 'Tradition' which, if not complete, certainly is richer than the one offered by secular humanism and I will suggest how it can be applied to Shin Buddhism.

A definition of Tradition that is more congenial to the latter's essence than the de-sacralised accounts provided by Modernism is given by the Perennialist and Buddhist Author, Marco Pallis:

"Wherever a complete tradition exists this will entail the presence of four things, namely: a source of inspiration or, to use a more concrete term, of Revelation; a current of influence or Grace issuing forth from the source and transmitted without interruption through a variety of channels; a way of "verification" which, when faithfully followed, will lead the human subject to successive positions where he is able to "actualize" the truths that Revelation communicates; finally there is the formal embodiment of tradition in the doctrines, arts, sciences, and other elements that together go to determine the character of a normal civilization."  
(*The Way and the Mountain: Tibet, Buddhism and Tradition*, Author's Preface)

For the sake of this discussion, Pallis' assay can be summed up into the four elements of Revelation, Grace, Method (i.e. 'way of verification') and Doctrine, leaving aside the problems related to the application to traditional arts and sciences. Revelation and Grace constitute the vertical, i.e. sacred, dimension of Tradition, while Method and Doctrine constitute the horizontal, i.e. human or mundane, dimension of Tradition. It should be pointed out that though these two dimensions can be distinguished, they are really inseparable, a transcendental truth that is hinted at by the symbolism of the Cross. Indeed, the fundamental Traditionalist stance is that there can be neither Method nor Doctrine (including what the profane mind calls 'science'), i.e. no Reason, in isolation from the Sacred, i.e. the Union of Revelation and Grace. Hence de-sacralisation ultimately leads to the destruction of Reason, as is evidenced and openly acknowledged by the postmodern relativism that reigns in modern academia.

I will illustrate below how the four elements mentioned above can be identified within Shin Buddhism. Indeed, in virtue of its insistence on the primacy of Other Power over self-power, it is perhaps the most traditionalist variant of Buddhism inasmuch as it implies a complete subsumption of the mundane under the Sacred.

*Revelation* in Shin Buddhism corresponds to the Dharma; in particular, Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching on Vulture Peak about Dharmakara / Amida Buddha and His Vows as to the establishment of His Pure Land. The relatively late date at which the Pure Land Sutras, in particular the Larger Sutra on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life, have been written down,



does not plead against the authenticity of these Scriptures, given that their content may have been revealed in samadhi, which is perfectly normal way of transmission accepted by Mahayana orthodoxy.

*Method* in Shin Buddhism is simply the preliminary practice of deep listening, which relates the Pure Land teaching to the personal situation of the listener who comes to realise that (s)he is the proper addressee of this Revelation.

*Grace* in Shin Buddhism is the Other Power of the Primal Vow as the Cause of the bombu's entrusting to the efficacy of the Nembutsu as to Birth into the Pure Land and Realisation of Buddhahood.

Lastly, *Doctrine* in Shin Buddhism is the final clarification of the Content and Intent of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow by Shinran Shonin and Rennyo Shonin. It should be pointed out that the Dharma itself provides the constraints of its own interpretation; in particular, the 'Three Seals' of Impermanence, Suffering and No-Self, as well as the Law of Karma. That is why Shinran Shonin's interpretation of the Pure Land scriptures really is a deepening of the Dharma, while any modernist teaching that Dharmakara is a fictional character amounts to a denial of the Law of Karma. Hence the fact that Shinran Shonin himself interpreted the Dharma is no justification for modern divergences from the Dharma.

The profoundly traditionalist spirit of Shin Buddhism shows itself most clearly in the deeply grateful attitude in which its true followers receive Amida's Call through the Pure Land teaching of Shinran Shonin and Rennyo Shonin, responding to it in utter simplicity by: Namu-Amida-Butsu.

## On Literalism

Recently I have come across a post by a well-known priest and scholar, in which the latter criticises so-called "fundamentalist" Shin Buddhists for viewing the Pure Land Sutras from a Western Christian perspective, thereby implying that these wayfarers have yet to emancipate themselves from their Christian upbringing.

Of course, it is timely and appropriate to warn against a too literal reading of the Jodo Shinshu scriptures. Clearly, Amida's Pure Land has to be taken not as a world in the astronomical sense but as a spiritual realm. The reference to the West, the direction of the sunset, is a metaphor for transience, and the rich imagery of Sukhavati's description is traditionally interpreted as denoting the qualities of the Perfectly-Enlightened Mind and of Nirvana.

Nonetheless, it has also to be pointed out that the 'mind-independent' existence of the Buddhas of the present, as well as of their Pure Lands, has always been accepted in the Mahayana tradition (except for the 'Zennist' interpretation of Amida's Pure Land as - potentially - being in the meditationer's own mind). And though the Madhyamika cautions us against taking words and concepts for the reality they only point to like fingers to the moon, T'an Luan in his *Commentary on Vasubandhu's Discourse on the Pure Land* explicitly excepts the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from this rule. Thus it is simply wrong to

use the Madhyamikan metaphor of the finger pointing at the moon as a way to understand the relation between the Buddha and His Name: in the case of Amida and all other Buddhas of the past, present and the future, the Name is the Reality it denotes. It is for this reason alone that saying the Name *is* Amida's Great Practice of transferring His Merits to the bombu, thus ensuring the latter's Birth in the Pure Land and her Realisation of Nirvana.

As to the reproach levelled against traditional Shin followers, namely of being entangled in Christian prejudices, it is quite perplexing if it is meant to be also directed against Japanese Shin Buddhist scholars and priests as Ryosetsu Fujiwara, Zuiken and Zuio Inagaki, or Eiken Kobai. The Horai Association rejects interpretations that are inspired by Protestant theology, such as the work of Paul Tillich, and positions itself solidly within the Mahayana tradition (Rev. George Gatenby, personal communication).

To conclude this post on a conciliatory note, I wholeheartedly agree with the view that it is totally improper and utterly opposed to the spirit of Jodo Shinshu to doubt the faith and thus the karma of another wayfarer, and to cause dissensions within the Sangha. It goes without saying that this holds for traditionalists and liberals alike.

## **On the Limitations of Modern People**

A common protestation against traditional Shin Buddhism is that it is beyond the reach of modern people, as if the latter were the standard against which any truth, and religious truth in particular, had to be measured. But would it not be truly compassionate to ask of our contemporaries that they cease to be 'modern'?

Ceasing to be 'modern' does not mean returning to all sorts of superstitions as they are part and parcel of New Age pseudo-spirituality. It certainly does not involve delving into sentimentality and literalism, which paradoxically are expressions of the same materialism. Ceasing to be modern means returning to 'Tradition' in the true sense, namely to the self-revelation of the Absolute.

This is the true meaning of 'deep listening': being receptive to the 'Call of the Infinite' (John Paraskevopoulos) and being responsive to the Call by saying the Name. Saying the Name, the Nembutsu, is the Echo of Amida's Call, which we hear with the Heart, and not just with our fleshly ears.