

Shinran's Concept of Practice

Shinran follows the Pure Land tradition in viewing the Eighteenth Vow as the heart of the teaching; however, he sets forth an understanding of it that differs markedly from the interpretation of the preceding masters. As we have seen, the Eighteenth Vow states that those beings will attain birth who “with sincere mind entrust themselves, aspire for birth, and say the Name ten times (*ju-nen*).” “Sincere mind,” “entrusting,” and “aspiration” were considered to be three aspects of the proper attitude of the practitioner, and the term *nen* was interpreted by Shan-tao and Honen to mean “say the nembutsu.” Thus, the Vow was understood to require the three minds and *nen* or utterance of the nembutsu; these characterized the essential aspiration and practice of the Pure Land way. However, the significance of practice and the relationship between the proper attitude and the utterance of the nembutsu remained problematic.

Shinran's major contribution to the Pure Land path was to show that both the entrusting of oneself to the Vow and the saying of the Name are given—unfolded in beings—through and as the activity of the Buddha and to delineate the significance of this for the practitioner's life. At the beginning of “Chapter on Practice,” Shinran makes two major statements concerning practice. First, after terming the practice in the Pure Land path “great practice,” he states, “Great practice is to say the Name of the Tathagata of unhindered light” (Practice, 1). Second, he states that this practice arises from Amida's Seventeenth Vow that the Buddhas throughout all worlds say and praise his Name.

In understanding the practice of the Pure Land way to be utterance of the nembutsu, Shinran follows his teacher Honen and Honen's interpretation of Shan-tao. As to why simply saying Amida's Name should be the cause of attaining the Pure Land and eventual enlightenment, which is difficult to realize even through aeons of self-purification and compassionate action, Honen again follows Shan-tao: “Saying the Name unfailingly brings about birth, for this is based on the Buddha's Primal Vow” (Practice, 68). In other words, it results in birth because it is the easy practice selected by Amida and prescribed in the Vow. Nembutsu, then, presupposes an attitude of faith in the Vow and Dharmakara's fulfillment of it.

Shinran's view concerning the effectiveness of nembutsu is superficially similar. Saying the Name is the cause of birth precisely because it is “great practice,” “great” meaning that it “embodies all good acts and possesses all roots of virtue.” It holds all the merit of the authentic and pure practice performed by Dharmakara Bodhisattva to fulfill the Vow. Shinran goes on to stress, however, that nembutsu is not the calling or invoking of Amida Buddha by beings, but activity arising from enlightenment or reality itself. In other words, nembutsu emerges from the Vow in a very different sense from Honen's. Great practice is not an exercise that beings undertake in order to accord with the Vow or attain birth; it is the practitioner's saying of the Name, but in essence it is Amida's activity to awaken beings, to transform their existence so that it embodies the virtues of enlightenment, and to bring about their attainment of birth.

We can, of course, recite “Namu-amida-butsu” any time it occurs to us to do so. The utterance of the Divine Name is a form of spiritual cultivation in many religious traditions, and in various Buddhist schools the recitation of Amida Buddha’s Name is performed in conjunction with other types of practice. Even in the Pure Land tradition, Amida’s Name has been recited as a contemplative exercise as well as a means of gaining merit. But even though we say Name, if our utterance is not great practice fulfilled by the Buddha, it is no more than an ordinary human exercise and not the cause unfailingly resulting in birth in the Pure Land.

The nature of great practice is clarified in the statement that it “arises from the Vow of great compassion, . . . the Vow that all Buddhas say the Name” (Practice, 1). That practice arises from Amida’s Vow means that it is directed to beings. Thus, Shinran states that “the nembutsu of Amida’s Primal Vow is not our practice, it is not our good” (*Letters of Shinran*, p. 64). While Honen stated that directing our saying of the nembutsu toward birth was unnecessary, Shinran developed the concept of “not directing merit” even further:

The nembutsu is not a self-power practice performed by foolish beings or sages; it is therefore called the practice of “not directing virtue [on the part of beings].” (Practice, 69)

For Shinran, there is no directing merit by beings because they have no merit of their own, even in saying the nembutsu. Rather, practice must be given.

While it is easy to accept that the teaching may be “directed” or given to us, the idea that practice is given is perplexing. In other forms of Buddhism, practice is activity that, when intensively performed as instructed, enables us to break the bondage of ignorance and attain enlightenment. According to Shinran, practice is to say the nembutsu, but this act is not something we perform through our own efforts and aspiration; it is given to us by Amida. As long as we have not received it from Amida, however much we may exert ourselves, what we do is not “great practice.” It will not lead unfailingly to enlightenment, but is merely another act of self-power as limited in effectiveness as any other religious activity we might undertake. That Amida gives the practice resulting in birth means, from the reverse perspective, that beings contribute nothing to their own enlightenment. How do we come to receive this practice, and in what sense can this practice hold the significance of transforming our existence and emancipating us from the constrictions of a false self? It is in answer to these questions that the issue of *shinjin* or true entrusting arises.

The word *shinjin* (or *shin*) is a basic, widely used Buddhist term and has often been translated “faith.” For Shinran, however, this term signifies the central religious awakening or experience in the Pure Land path, and his entire teaching revolves around the clarification of its nature and significance. In order to alert the reader to the uniqueness of Shinran’s use of this term and its importance in his thought, we have generally used the transliteration “*shinjin*,” though at times we also translate it “entrusting.”

Shinjin: the Core of Great Practice

As we have seen, Shinran presses the dichotomy between sentient being and Buddha in Pure Land thought to its extreme. The essential distinguishing element is the working of the mind. While the Eighteenth Vow specifies “three minds” or aspects of the practitioner’s attitude in performing nembutsu, and although the entire tradition prior to Shinran stressed the importance of the practitioner’s attitude of faith and devotion, Shinran states, “From the very beginning sentient beings, who are filled with blind passions, lack a mind true and real, a heart of purity” (Passage 1). In other words, it is impossible for beings to accord with the Vow through their own resolution and devices, which are invariably manifestations of egocentric attachments and concerns. As long as we seek to bring ourselves into correspondence with the Vow—to make ourselves worthy of being saved by it—we are clinging to our own powers, and our saying the nembutsu is not great practice.

Shinran discovered the means by which practice is given to us taught in the *Larger Sutra*. After presenting the story of Bodhisattva Dharmakara and reiterating his Vows, Sakyamuni declares that Dharmakara has accomplished his practice to become Amida Buddha and describes in detail the features of the Pure Land. Then, in passages that correspond to certain of the major vows, Sakyamuni indicates that these vows have been fulfilled. In two sentences that teach the fulfillment of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Vows respectively, the sutra states:

The Buddha-tathagatas throughout the ten quarters, countless as the sands of the Ganges, are one in praising the majestic power and the virtues, inconceivably profound, of the Buddha of immeasurable life.

All sentient beings, as they hear the Name, realize even one thought-moment of shinjin and joy, which is directed to them from Amida’s sincere mind, and aspiring to be born in that land, they then attain birth and dwell in the state of non-retrogression. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma. (Practice, 4; Shinjin, 4, 61)

For Shinran, this passage provides the key for understanding the Eighteenth Vow, for it discloses how our saying of “Namu-amida-butsu” becomes genuine practice that is received from Amida and that, being the activity of the Buddha’s wisdom-compassion, possesses “all roots of virtue” and the power to bring about birth in the Pure Land.

The first paragraph of the passage indicates that the Vow that all the Buddhas praise Amida’s Name has been fulfilled. This Vow does not, of course, pursue self-glorification, but expresses Amida’s activity to save all beings in the world by making himself known as his Name. The Buddhas’ praise of Amida’s Name becomes the source of great practice in beings, for through hearing the Name, beings are awakened to the nature of Amida and his Vow of compassion.

This awakening is shinjin, or true entrusting, and out of it beings spontaneously come to say the Name.

Shinjin is perhaps *the* central term in Shinran's thought, so important that it is sometimes said that in his teaching, "birth through the nembutsu" became "birth through shinjin." Such a statement is misleading, however, if realization of shinjin is thereby seen as an alternative to or substitute for practice, for it is inseparable from practice. His teaching is also sometimes construed as one of "salvation by faith," but shinjin is not a means to birth. It is not an attitude assumed by practitioners, but Amida's wisdom-compassion unfolding itself in them. For this reason, realization of shinjin itself holds the significance of attainment of birth. Shinran states that it is the "true and real mind" (*makoto no kokoro*); it is the Buddha's mind opened forth in the minds of beings, and the awakening of beings to a transformed and liberated existence in the complete givenness of genuine practice that results in enlightenment.

The central text concerning the realization of shinjin is the passage on the fulfillment of the Eighteenth Vow (Passage 2). According to Shinran's interpretation, this passage states first that as beings hear the Name, they awaken shinjin (entrust themselves to the Vow), and further that Amida directs (*eko*) this shinjin to them out of his own sincere mind. In other words, through his Name, Amida awakens his mind of wisdom-compassion in beings in the form of the realization of shinjin. Moreover, since this passage expresses the fulfillment of the Eighteenth Vow, which speaks of both the threefold mind and the nembutsu, we may take the awakening of shinjin to include the utterance of the Name. In the realization of shinjin, beings are given the Buddha's mind not only as shinjin, but also as great practice, for their saying of the Name is the natural manifestation of the Buddha's mind in them. Thus Shinran teaches that the Buddhas throughout the cosmos, in praising the Name, also praise those beings who utter it, for the Name emerges from Amida's enlightenment or Buddhahood within them.

Prior to Shinran, the Eighteenth Vow was understood to mean that beings should say the nembutsu relying on the power of the Vow. As long as faith and practice are understood as requirements fulfilled by the practitioner, however, they inevitably fall into a tension between personal effort in practice and reliance on the Buddha. Trust is cultivated as belief that practice is easy and even a single utterance sufficient, yet because of the inconstancy of the human mind, one is encouraged to reaffirm that trust and say the nembutsu as often as possible. At the same time, if reciting the nembutsu is not accompanied by belief that one utterance is enough, it is not genuine however many times one may say it.

For Shinran, genuine utterance of the Name and shinjin are not generated out of human will, but emerge together as manifestations of the Buddha's working. They are always interfused. Because the Name is given—is spread throughout the universe by all the Buddhas—sentient beings are able to hear it and come to know Amida's Primal Vow. Through hearing the Name—not just grasping it intellectually, but being penetrated by the dynamic reality of compassion that it embodies—shinjin is awakened in them. This shinjin is therefore also "given," and is itself the Buddha's wisdom-compassion turning

itself over to beings. Further, this shinjin expresses itself in utterance of the Name, which is true practice, and which therefore results in attainment of birth.

Here, Shinran's statement that "great practice is to say the Name of the Buddha of unhindered light" becomes clear. The utterance of "Namu-amida-butsu" is not merely an ordinary act but an act given by the Buddha because it arises from the Buddha's mind in beings. Precisely by recognizing the absolute dichotomy between sentient beings and Buddha, Shinran breaks through the earlier ambiguity in which self-power and Other Power are mingled and articulates instead a nonduality of being and Buddha that emerges when beings enter the ocean of the Vow.