

The Life of Shinjin

The aim of the Pure Land path is to break the bonds of samsaric existence—of the power of the past that carries one compulsively and meaninglessly from birth to death and death to birth, and of the fears of the delusional self for its fate in the future. This is accomplished when one ceases to cling to one's imagined self as true and real and entrusts oneself to the activity of Amida Buddha. Shinran reveals this path as available to all by showing that such entrusting is accomplished not through our own nature or insight, but rather through the working of the Primal Vow; the hold of self-attachment is broken by the Buddha.

Moreover, though all our judgments of our own worth or unworthiness and all resolve based on our capacities are seen to be at bottom circumscribed and hollow, the world that emerges when we come to take refuge in the Vow, is not one of nihilism and darkness, where the only possibility is escape. As Shinran states:

The compassionate light of the Buddha of unhindered light always illumines and protects the person who has realized shinjin; hence the darkness of ignorance has already cleared, and the long night of birth-and-death is already dispelled to dawn. (Passage 3)

Shinran characterizes the status of the person who has realized shinjin in various ways. He or she has attained the stage of non-retrogression or the truly settled. He is the true disciple of the Buddhas, the genuine friend of Sakyamuni. He has attained the equal of perfect enlightenment, and is the same in status as Maitreya, the bodhisattva of kindness who will become the next Buddha in this world. All of this signifies that the mind dominated by the passions of attachment and aversion has been pervaded by the activity of wisdom-compassion, so that he has transcended samsaric life and death. While carrying on his present life, he has gone out from aimless, repetitive existence conditioned by past evil and entered the vast dynamic of wisdom-compassion, the activity arising from true reality. Or more accurately, he has become aware that he has never been separate from it.

Moreover, when a person attains birth and realizes enlightenment, "with great love and great compassion immediately reaching their fullness in him, he returns to the ocean of birth-and-death to save all sentient beings" (Passage 16). Here we glimpse the cosmic drama of compassion that lies at the heart of Shinran's religious understanding. The Pure Land path is not merely a means of personal salvation; it leads above all to entrance into the reality of enlightenment that acts to awaken all living things—even "grasses, trees, and the land itself." The person of shinjin reaches the Pure Land through the action of Amida's Vow unfolding in his life, but through that working naturally returns at once to the world of samsara, acting as a bodhisattva to emancipate all beings. To realize shinjin, then, is to discover oneself within a dynamic process of liberation that pervades and transcends the self.

The Ocean of the Vow

The person of shinjin, looking to the past, perceives the immense burden of his own existence, lived solely in the delusion of self-attachment. At the same time, he realizes that Amida's Primal Vow to liberate him has been fulfilled in the infinite past, and has always been working to grasp him. Looking to the future, he recognizes that his samsaric existence in the past and present can lead only to further wandering in ignorant clinging to self; he is one whom Sakyamuni describes as "difficult to cure" (Shinjin, 114), one destined for hell, as Shinran said of himself: "I am one for whom any practice is difficult to accomplish, so hell is to be my home whatever I do" (*Tannisho*, 2). At the same, his attainment of birth in the Pure Land in the future has been settled, and looking toward it, he "rejoices beforehand at being assured of attaining what he shall attain" (Passage 2).

This past and future, each with a dual, contradictory structure that includes both samsaric existence and the working of the Vow, is established in the present with the realization of shinjin. At that moment, the Primal Vow fulfilled in the infinite past, while remaining in the past, present, and future evil karma is transformed into good." Further, his attainment of birth in the Pure Land in the future, while remaining in the future, becomes completely settled in the present; Shinran states that he "immediately attains birth." The fulfillment of the Vow in the past and birth in the Pure Land in the future are aspects of the transtemporal working of the Vow that, while continuing to encompass the practitioner's entire existence from the directions of the past and the future, becomes one with it in the immediate present and radically transforms it.

The present that we ordinarily experience is no more than a fleeting instant, a barely perceptible point at which the past extends itself into the future, or the promise of the future fades and turns into the past. Such a present is not the authentic present in which we live and act, but a present robbed of all significance by the framework of objective time we construct. By clinging to the imagined self, we forge its identity and permanence against the flow of time into the past, and look anxiously to a future plotted by self-centered hopes and designs. Here, there is only repetition. True time, however—time as self-aware, impermanent existence free of the domination of the egocentric will—holds the potential for life that is new and fresh. Such time emerges as the present when the fulfillment of the Vow and birth in the Pure Land fuse with and transform the samsaric past and future. Although samsaric time merely stretches on endlessly, the time experienced in the awareness of shinjin, while flowing, does not flow, and while moving, is still. It is time, and it is timelessness.

In the present, one still has one's existence as a human being possessed of blind passions and devoid of truth and reality. But because one has realized shinjin and entered the ocean of the Vow, one's life has fundamentally parted from the world of birth-and-death and come to be pervaded by immeasurable light and life. In the Vow to save the person who is evil, beings awaken to that which transcends samsaric existence, and in their passions and delusions being

transformed without disappearing they apprehend what is true and real. Moreover, such existence is experienced not as fraught with contradiction, but as harmonious and whole:

When one has boarded the ship of the Vow of great compassion and sailed out on the vast ocean of light, the winds of perfect virtue blow softly and the waves of evil are transformed. (Practice, 78)

When we have entered the world of the Primal Vow, the waves of evil, which up to then had raged furiously in us, become one with the calm winds of wisdom and compassion.