

The Realization of Shinjin

At the foundation of the realization of shinjin lie two interrelated elements: the dissolution of self-power, which is attachment to one's own will and capacity to determine and do what is good, or what accords with truth and reality; and the emergence of Other Power in one's existence, which is expressed as entrance into the ocean of Amida's Vow, or being grasped by Amida. These two elements are in fact two faces of a single religious awakening. It is not that one rids oneself of self-power in order to be grasped by Amida's light; as Shinran states, "Other Power means to be free of any form of calculation" (*Letters of Shinran*, p. 39). Thus, becoming free of attachments to one's own designs has two discontinuous phases. First, one awakens to the failure of one's own intellectual and volitional powers to know and perform good, and to the futility of one's own efforts to achieve emancipation. Here, if there occurs a transformation in which one cannot but abandon the powers of one's own wisdom, love, and goodness and give oneself over to the power of the Vow, then shinjin becomes settled, and one becomes completely free of self-power. One becomes aware that one already is, and always has been, within the working of great compassion, just as one is.

The Dissolution of Self-Power

Shinran advises his followers, "Simply entrust yourself to the Tathagata" or "Simply entrust yourself to the power of the Vow," yet in his writings there is no instruction concerning how one should do this and no description of a general process that results in realization of shinjin. This is to be expected; were there some course of action to be fulfilled in order to attain shinjin, it would become our own practice, subject to our deliberation and designs. "Shinjin and joy" would be another condition of awareness that we achieved, and not the mind of Amida.

Nevertheless, although one might wish to cast off the pain and self-attachment of one's life and entrust oneself to the Vow, this is not easily accomplished. We are told to eliminate all our desperate clinging to the goodness and worth of our selves and rely on Amida, but though we might wish to do so, since "the power of the Vow" cannot be perceived, wholehearted trust is impossible.

Shinran gives no concrete advice; this is a special characteristic of his thought—a difficulty not encountered in other forms of Buddhism. When we look to such representative Mahayana masters as Nagarjuna, Asanga and Vasubandhu in India, or Chih-i and Fa-ts'ang in China, we find that the central issues of their teachings revolved around the nature of the enlightenment they attained and the practices that should be performed in order to reach it. Thus, we can accept that if the path of action they expound is executed, one can attain the same realization. The method of practice is clearly presented, and the basic problem for us is whether or not we follow their guidance.

All this is different with Shinran, for he states that practice is given to beings. In his teaching, even the fundamental question that forms the center of

the Pure Land tradition—how a person comes to be in accord with the Primal Vow—is reconsidered so that all traces of self-power are eliminated.

The terms “self-power” and “Other Power” were first employed to distinguish the difficult practices accomplished by great masters and the practice of the Pure Land path, undertaken with the support of Amida Buddha. For Shinran, however, it is within the context of the Pure Land way itself that the crux of the problem of self-power becomes apparent, and he broadens the scope of the fundamental attitude termed “self-power” to encompass all the manifestations of a person’s desires and impulses to bring himself to enlightenment, including even saying the nembutsu. As long as this attitude persists, entrusting to the Vow is impossible:

Sages of the Mahayana and Hinayana and all good people, because they take the auspicious Name of the Primal Vow as their own root of good (say the nembutsu out of their own will to gain spiritual benefit), are incapable of giving rise to shinjin or apprehending the Buddha’s wisdom. (Transformed Buddhas and Lands, 67)

Those who strive to make themselves objects of the Vow by doing meritorious acts or purifying their minds rely on their own designs and capacities. If one feels that one must make oneself worthy of attaining birth—through moral uprightness, personal sincerity, or acts of charity and compassion—then one labors in self-power. Even self-reflection on failings of nerve, will, or comprehension, when deliberately undertaken to bring oneself closer to Amida, only acts to impede the free working of the Vow.

Calculation

Shinran’s terms for aspects of self-power—doubt, double-mindedness, calculation—point deep into the mind of beings, where the fundamental problem of attachment to a false self is encountered. Doubt is not simply intellectual questioning; it is the refusal of the delusional mind to relinquish the possibility that one can guide oneself to liberation. It is the fragmented will that turns to Amida Buddha but also seeks to recognize traces of Buddhahood in oneself.

Perhaps Shinran’s broadest, most incisive term for the active endeavor of self-power is “calculation” (*hakarai*). *Hakarai* means to deliberate, to judge, to form a plan or design. It is one of the few major terms in Shinran’s writings that is a native Japanese word and not drawn from Buddhist texts in Chinese, but if an equivalent is sought in Buddhist terminology, it would probably be the “discriminative thinking” (*vikalpa*) of self-attachment that stands opposed to wisdom. For Shinran, it indicates all the activity of the intellect and will to determine and fulfill a course for making oneself the object of the Vow. Calculation is, in other words, the self-defeating effort to break the bonds of ignorance arising from delusional attachment to one’s own imagined religious goodness.

Genuine entrusting of oneself to the Vow is the falling away of calculation or self-power. Since this is the realization of shinjin that is given by Amida, nothing is taught concerning a method for achieving it. Nevertheless, when a person comes to recognize that he cannot do other than evil, however much he might strive to do good, he realizes that he lacks any means to extricate himself from samsaric existence. This awareness is born when he experiences the limitations of his resolve to act in accord with what he understands to be good and true, and further, comes to see that even his very judgment of good and evil is poisoned by self-attachment.

Shinran is recorded as saying:

Know that the Primal Vow of Amida makes no distinction between people young and old, good and evil; only the entrusting of yourself to it is essential. For it was made to save the person in whom karmic evil is deep-rooted and whose blind passions abound.
(*Tannisho*, 1)

Two statements are made here concerning good and evil in relationship to the Vow. First, the Vow does not discriminate between the good and the evil; in other words, human goodness or evil—whether judged from a moral perspective, or with respect to religious attainment—is of no relevance to the Vow’s activity to liberate beings. However evil a person may be, he will be saved, and however virtuous he may be, or diligent in religious practice, such good is of no aid or significance to the working of the Vow. That is, human judgments of good and evil hold no meaning from the deeper standpoint of the Primal Vow. Second, the Vow was made to save those who are completely evil. In the world of the Primal Vow, there is only the Buddha—who alone is good (true and real)—and evil beings; and the “good” cannot enter.

These two statements may appear inconsistent, but they both reflect the same vision of human existence. Human acts may be judged from the stance of social ethics or religious precepts to be good or bad, but from the perspective of enlightened wisdom, they are all evil if they arise from egocentric thinking. “Good” people in the ordinary sense—people who believe their actions to be ultimately good and who strive to make them so—cannot entrust themselves to the Vow, for they cling instead in their own will and capacity to do good. They stand within the realm of intellect and morality—the realm of ordinary human life—and cannot encounter that which transcends such life.

Thus, the realization of shinjin is not a personal decision or commitment—an act of resolution of “calculation”—but neither is it assent to personal powerlessness or a self-cultivated awareness of relative evil based on our ordinary judgments. Shinran calls the realization of shinjin the most difficult among all things difficult, for it comes about only when we relinquish the very foundation of all our judgments of good and evil as invariably distorted by self-attachment. He states:

I know nothing of what is good or evil. For if I could know thoroughly, as is known in the mind of Amida, that an act was good, then I would know the meaning of “good.” If I could know thoroughly, as Amida knows, that an act was evil, then I would know “evil.” But in a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are lies and gibberish, totally without truth and sincerity. The nembutsu alone is true and real. (*Tannisho*, “Postscript”)

Here, Shinran professes his own ignorance of genuine good and evil—good as action that is in accord with truth and reality and evil as delusion. Such knowledge would enable one to bring oneself toward enlightenment by performing good and ceasing from evil. But he has come to see himself as a “foolish being full of blind passions,” the very tissue of whose life must be said to be “lies and gibberish, totally without truth and sincerity.”

Believing ourselves capable of knowing and choosing good over evil, we value as essentially worthy our aspirations to perform good as best we can. But our transformation can occur only when we become free of our own devices and calculation, and this comes about through an awakening to our final inability to determine and will true good. Such self-awareness cannot arise through simple reflection, for the intellect alone lacks a standard by which to judge and discern its own profound ignorance and falsity. However, if we exert ourselves in seeking what is good and true in our everyday lives and in our relationships with others, our calculative thinking—our conviction that we can guide ourselves constantly and unerringly by what is good, and our resolve to make ourselves morally and spiritually worthy—will at some point reach a total impasse and all room for design and effort will vanish. Then, if we have listened to and engaged the Pure Land teaching in earnest, we will awaken to the unhindered light of wisdom that has always been present, and a conversion or turnabout will occur. Here, it may be said that we become evil and experience samsaric existence for the first time. Our intellect, will, and feelings are transformed into true wisdom that knows—and great compassion that grasps—karmic evil as itself. (Passage 7)

Self-Awareness in Shinjin

As we know from Shinran’s letters, there were among his followers some who tended “to distort the teaching, having heard that no evil interferes with the attainment of birth” (Passage 14). It is easy to assume that his teaching of evil as karmic means that acts we normally judge as immoral are only “natural,” or are unavoidable as human beings. Such, however, is a wholly conceptual understanding of Shinran’s insight. Samsaric existence itself cannot sunder the bonds of samsara; it cannot even, without the Buddha’s wisdom, realize its true nature. But when one has been enabled through the Primal Vow to probe the true condition of the self, one does not respond by abandoning oneself to evil. Rather, Shinran states:

In people who have long heard the Buddha's Name and said the nembutsu, surely there are signs of rejecting the evil of this world and signs of their desire to cast off the evil in themselves. . . . When . . . their trust in the Buddha has grown deep, they come to abhor such a self and to lament their continued existence in birth-and-death; and they then joyfully say the Name of Amida Buddha deeply entrusting themselves to the Vow. (Passage 14)

Here, there is both repentance and joy. The repentance is not a regret or remorse that, stemming from a particular act, focuses on the possibility of moral betterment in the future. The counterpart of such regret is forgiveness, but as we have seen, forgiveness plays no part in Shinran's teaching, for the Buddha does not pass moral judgment on human acts, whether to condemn or pardon. Repentance is rather a radical and pervasive sense of shame that transcends the moral and ethical dimensions of human life and goes to the core of one's personal existence. Shinran states:

With malice and deceit—a mind like a poisonous snake or scorpion—
It is impossible to fulfill good acts through self-power;
And unless we entrust ourselves to Amida's directing of virtue,
We will end without knowing shame or self-reproach.

*Ja-katsu kansa no kokoro nite
Jiriki shuzen wa kanau maji
Nyorai no eko o tanomade wa
Muzan mugj nite hate zo sen. (Shozomatsu wasan, 99)*

This profound sense of shame arises when even our ability to determine good has fallen away. It is not guilt or regret that is sparked by our conscience, nor is it shame in the face of the judgments of others. It is the perception of our personal existence by the Other, the Buddha, but a perception that, having arisen together with our true entrusting from the Buddha's wisdom-compassion itself, has become our own deepest self-knowledge.

One sees the self, not with the desperation of one clinging to what must inevitably be lost—what is from the beginning delusive—but with compassion that knows and wisdom that transcends the self. This is the actualization of the Buddhist insight of selflessness. The mind has become one with the mind of enlightenment, but it has not become good in the usual sense. Passions continue to manifest themselves:

Our desires are countless, and anger, wrath, jealousy, and envy are overwhelming, arising without pause; to the very last moment of life they do not cease, or disappear, or exhaust themselves. (Passage 9)

Moment by moment such thoughts and feelings arise, but with them there constantly arises also a deep self-reflection, for through Amida's wisdom that has been made ours, we perceive the self-attachment at their roots. At the same time, that wisdom is also compassion that embraces our evil acts; hence, our sense of shame is further transformed into gratitude and joy. "Obstructing evils," Shinran states, "have become the substance of virtues."

In awakening to one's karmic evil and at the same time entrusting oneself to the Primal Vow, so that one's life comes to manifest its working, one is able to act fully and freely in daily existence. While one is still bound by one's nature and circumstances—by karmic evil—one has also transcended them. Previously, the intellect and will had been bound to the egocentric self. Such will, though it imagines itself free, in fact only fetters one to the repetition of samsaric existence, so that only the assertion of the delusive self is possible, and no genuinely new and vital acts can arise. With the awakening to the nature and limitations of this self in shinjin, acts free of the egocentric will become possible for the first time.

The utterance of the nembutsu is the fundamental such act. Beyond this, no acts can be prescribed, for they must arise from the immediate circumstances of each individual, and from beyond the designs of the ignorant self. (The literature of Shin Buddhism includes many stories of *myokonin*, "wonderfully excellent people" of shinjin. These people, often of humble social status, manifest a selflessness that goes beyond even what is usually accepted as common sense, based on self-interest or the goodness and effectiveness of our acts.) As we have seen, however, Shinran does recognize that in the person of shinjin, there are signs of "awakening from the drunkenness of ignorance" and of "rejecting the three poisons" of greed, anger, and folly, and he asks, "Once the true and real mind is made to arise in us, how can we remain as we were?" (Passage 14). "Rejecting" here is not a willed renunciation, but a spontaneous turning of the heart from acts of blind passion in recognition of their nature. It is also the arising of "gentleheartedness and forbearance" (*Tannisho*, 16), for the awareness of one's own limitations leads to a sensitivity to and concern for the circumstances and perceptions of others. Thus, the awareness in shinjin does not give rise to resignation or acquiescence to committing evil.

Moreover, the profound shame and humility that Shinran speaks of is not an evasion of accountability for one's own deeds, but the fullest assumption of personal responsibility for each individual act. It may be a penetrating knowledge, as Shinran states, that one is destined for hell by the acts one commits (*Tannisho*, 2). Nevertheless, while each act that arises from the self-centered will entangles one further in samsaric existence, it is also tempered and transformed by the mind of wisdom-compassion through being known as it actually is.

Thus, Shinran states that the person of shinjin, while committing acts of blind passion to the end of life, also "constantly practices great compassion" (Shinjin, 65). Even with one's evil acts, "constant mindfulness of the Vow arises naturally" (Passage 8). At the same time, no act is tainted by a self-

consciousness of performing good. Thus, though people of shinjin “neither know nor seek it” (Passage 19), they are filled by wisdom-compassion, and have entered the working of enlightenment that will eventually enable them to manifest fully the compassionate activity of bodhisattvas.