

The Significance of Shinjin

Prior to Shinran, it was taught that in order to attain birth one must have sincere trust in the Vow. For Shinran, however, to realize genuine entrusting or shinjin is for the working of a person's mind and the wisdom-compassion of Amida to become one; it is Amida's mind that is real and sincere. With the realization of shinjin, one becomes able to see into the depths of one's own existence, and the perception of it as pervaded by falsity and fierce, delusional attachments is, in itself, the manifestation of the true and real mind of the Buddha. Thus Shinran states:

When a foolish being of delusion and defilement awakens shinjin,
He realizes that birth-and-death is itself nirvana.
(Practice, 102)

Amida's wisdom-compassion, which is the working of enlightenment or nirvana, is given to or realized in beings as shinjin. Therefore shinjin itself may be said to be the Buddha's mind: "Great shinjin . . . is the ocean of entrusting that is itself suchness or true reality" (Shinjin, 1).

True reality completely transcends our ordinary apprehension of the world. Out of an anxious need to conceive of the self as permanent and independent, we cast our experience into the frameworks of time and space, in which all things, including the self, are conceived as objects and imparted enduring identities. In the Buddhist understanding, however, such splintering and objectification of reality is an illusory construct. Actual reality lies in the immediate present, not in conceptions of a past or future, and is completely beyond the dichotomies that divide things into objects and separate them from the self. It is therefore said to be timeless, neither arising nor perishing, and formless or inconceivable.

The person of shinjin does not, like other Buddhists, seek to eradicate delusional thinking through meditative practices and awaken directly to timeless, formless reality. Nevertheless, reality beyond time and conception takes the form of Amida Buddha and the Name and, through these embodiments of wisdom-compassion, enters into the lives of beings by awakening shinjin in them. It is in this way that true reality fulfills and actualizes itself as the nonduality of samsara—the world of time and forms—and nirvana.

Temporal Implications

To realize shinjin is for the being, who until then has lived solely in the stream of time, to awaken to that which transcends time. Shinran states:

After long waiting, we have been able to encounter the moment
When shinjin, firm and diamond-like, becomes settled;
Amida's compassionate light has grasped and protects us,
So that we have parted forever from birth-and-death.

*Kongo kengo no shinjin no
Sadamaru toki o machi-ete zo
Mida no shinko shogo shite
Nagaku shoji o hedatekeru. (Koso wasan, 77)*

While living in this world, one's heart and mind, as great compassion established through the transformation of one's blind passions and evil acts, has broken forever the samsaric bonds of birth-and-death. One does not part from one's physical existence in the flow of time, which continues until death. In fact, by perceiving one's own existence as thoroughly dominated by the demands of the false self, one apprehends the course of time not as simply linear—progressing from past to present and present to future—but rather as cyclical and repetitive. Temporal life is not merely historic, but samsaric, for the very nature of one's personal existence dooms one to further acts of ignorance. Nevertheless, while within such time one experiences that which transcends time and breaks the grip of its inevitability.

Shinran therefore teaches that the realization of shinjin takes place in “one thought-moment” (*ichinen*, Passage 2). One thought-moment is the briefest possible instant of time, a moment at once part of the stream of time, but also without duration and thus outside time. The realization of shinjin occurs in the course of the practitioner's life, but it is not simply a temporal event. It is the point at which that beyond time—the wisdom-compassion of the Vow—breaks into and fills the life of the practitioner. Hence, at this instant one's life solely as samsaric time comes to an end. From this point on, each moment of life is transformed as it arises into the virtue of Amida, so that one lives both in samsaric existence and in the working of wisdom-compassion.

Immediate Attainment of Birth

Because realization of shinjin signifies entrance into the ocean of the Vow, which transcends samsaric existence, Shinran teaches that when it occurs, one attains the stage of non-retrogression. Moreover, he calls this “immediate attainment of birth.” This is one of the most striking aspects of his teaching, but it is entirely consistent with his understanding of shinjin as the mind of the Buddha.

No Pure Land master prior to Shinran had taught that one attains birth in the present. In the traditional usage beginning with Indian scriptures, birth meant to be born in the Pure Land at the end of life in this defiled world. Further, throughout most of the tradition, it was taught that in the Pure Land, one attains the stage of non-retrogression and thereafter continues to perform practices until one realizes Buddhahood. In other words, it had been usual to understand reaching the Pure Land and later realizing enlightenment to lie in a temporal line along which the practitioner progresses from samsaric existence to Buddhahood.²

Shinran fundamentally shifts the perspective in accord with his understanding of the activity of wisdom-compassion as directed to the being. The practitioner is never the source of progress toward enlightenment, but becomes

the locus of the Buddha's activity. Thus, instead of maintaining temporal and spacial conceptions of the practitioners' movement to enlightenment, Shinran breaks through such frameworks and brings Pure Land thought into correspondence with basic Mahayana insight, in which samsara and nirvana are nondual.

With the teaching that beings can go to the Pure Land—the realm of nirvana—upon leaving this samsaric world at death, it is easy to assume that nirvana lies entirely in one's future. The future, however, along with the present and the past, is part of the Buddhist concept of the "three times," and these three times together comprise the world of samsara. Since nirvana transcends birth-and-death, it transcends the human conception of time itself. It does not lie in the future. Of course, neither does it lie in the present or the past. Where, then, do we find nirvana? Shinran states:

The realm of nirvana refers to the place where one overturns the delusion of ignorance and realizes the supreme enlightenment. . . . Nirvana is called extinction of passions, the uncreated, . . . and Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is none other than Tathagata. This Tathagata pervades the countless world; it fills the hearts and minds of the ocean of all beings. (Passage 17)

Nirvana is the realm of enlightenment "where one overturns the delusion of ignorance"; it "fills the hearts and minds of all beings" wandering in birth-and-death. It lies, in other words, precisely in the samsaric world where sentient beings have their existence. In temporal terms, nirvana (timelessness) fills the immediate present of time that spans the conceptions of past, present, and future; it is transtemporal. Hence, it is not appropriate to say merely that nirvana transcends time. Uncreated nirvana fills the karmically created world of birth-and-death, so that the eternal is one with the world of impermanence. These two realms are not, of course, simply identical; they also stand in a relationship of mutual exclusion. This opposition of time and timelessness is, from another perspective, the opposition between supreme enlightenment and ignorance, or eternal bliss and suffering. While they stand in these relationships of mutual contradiction, nirvana fills samsara.

Since the timeless fills the hearts and minds of all beings, one does not leave the world of samsara and go to a place where there are no beings of samsara. Rather, precisely within the realm of samsara one enters the timeless—the ocean of the Primal Vow, which transcends birth-and-death. Thus, without departing from samsaric existence, "the heart of the person of shinjin already and always resides in the Pure Land" (*Letters of Shinran*, p. 27). Based on this understanding, Shinran rejects notions of the Pure Land way as a future-oriented religion in which the moment of death, rather than the present, is crucial, and manifests it as a path fundamentally in accord with Mahayana thought.

First he stresses that birth into the Pure Land at the time of death, when the karmic bonds of this life have come to an end, signifies realization of supreme, perfect Buddhahood. The Pure Land, established through the

fulfillment of Amida's Vow, is such that upon birth there a being immediately—without having to perform practices—attains the Buddhahood of dharma-body as suchness; thus, it is above all the realm of enlightenment or nirvana. This is its fundamental meaning in the Pure Land sutras, but the tendency to view it as possessing geographical features and standing apart from this defiled world led in much of the tradition to a conception of it as an intermediary, ideal world for continued practice. For Shinran, however, the Pure Land, like Amida Buddha, is in essence the light of wisdom; it is formless, transcending all conceptions of time and space. Thus to enter the Pure Land means to realize enlightenment.

Second, he further teaches that the person who realizes shinjin, because it is the Buddha's mind, reaches the stage of non-retrogression in this life. In other forms of Mahayana Buddhism, practitioners attain non-retrogression upon eradicating blind passions and delusional thinking; at this point, they are said to perceive or touch true reality and gain complete liberation from samsara, so that they will never fall back in their progress to Buddhahood. In Shinran's thought, attaining the stage of non-retrogression with the realization of shinjin means that birth into the Pure Land and realization of enlightenment at death have become completely settled, and will be brought about through the working of Amida's wisdom-compassion. For most of the earlier Pure Land masters, non-retrogression could be attained only in the Pure Land after death in this world. Thus, beings could not be certain of their attainment in this life, and the moment of death was widely regarded as decisive in determining one's future.

Third, he calls both of these attainments—going to the Pure Land at death, where one immediately realizes supreme Buddhahood, and attaining non-retrogression in this life on realizing shinjin—"attainment of birth." By using the single term "birth," Shinran points to their essential unity as the working of the Vow, which transcends the artificial temporal distinctions made from the perspective of the practitioner. Because one has realized shinjin and attained the stage of non-retrogression, bondage to the world of birth-and-death has been broken and one's realization of nirvana is settled. Nevertheless, one still possesses human existence fraught with blind passions and has not fully realized Buddhahood. One therefore lives in the causal stage of enlightenment facing outward from samsaric existence. At the same time, however, one has reached the point of nondifference with the goal; one has broken the bonds of samsara forever and "immediately attained birth." We find in Shinran's concept of birth, then, the simultaneous duality and nonduality of cause and result that characterizes the path of attainment in the Mahayana tradition. Birth signifies entrance into the realm of Buddhahood or nirvana, but nirvana both transcends samsaric existence and fills the hearts and minds of beings in this world.

Activity Arising from Formless Reality

Human beings dwell in samsara because they are unable to awaken to the supreme Buddha or nirvana that is one with samsara. For the person of samsara existence, nirvana "has neither color nor form; thus, the mind cannot grasp it nor words describe it" (Passage 17). It cannot be seen, heard, or even

conceived and named. According to basic Mahayana thought, however, it is not a quiescent void, but is active as nondiscriminative wisdom in which Buddha and sentient beings, nirvana and samsara are nondual. This wisdom, while maintaining its nondiscriminative character, naturally gives rise to discrimination, and when it does so, perceiving wisdom and its objects become distinct, and the supreme reality, which transcends conception, takes on forms so that it can be expressed in worldly terms. At that time, formless Buddha manifests the fulfilled and accommodated Buddha-bodies, and great compassion works to teach dharma and liberate beings.

Shinran discusses the process by which nirvana or Buddha becomes active in samsara by adopting T'an-luan's distinction between formless dharma-body as suchness, which is synonymous with nirvana or oneness, and dharma-body as compassionate means, which can be conceived through such concepts as Amida's Vow and Name:

From this oneness, form was manifested; this form is called dharma-body as compassionate means. Taking this form, the Buddha proclaimed his name as Bhiksu Dharmakara and established the forty-eight great Vows that surpass conceptual understanding. . . . This Tathagata has fulfilled the Vows, which are the cause of his Buddhahood, and thus is called "Tathagata of the fulfilled body." This is none other than Amida Tathagata. (Passage 17)

Since human beings have no means of grasping nirvana or true reality directly, the dharma-body as compassionate means, Amida Buddha, emerged from nirvana and manifested form in the temporal world of samsara. Were it not for Amida, beings would remain trapped in ignorance. Dharma-body as *compassionate means* "refers to manifesting form, revealing a name (Namu-amida-butsu) and making itself known to sentient beings" (Passage 18). Through hearing the Name and learning of the Vow, beings take refuge in Amida Buddha. Concerning Amida, however, Shinran states:

Appearing in the form of light called "Tathagata of unhindered light filling the ten quarters," [Amida, the dharma-body as compassionate,] is without color and without form, that is, identical with dharma-body as suchness, dispelling the darkness of ignorance and unobstructed by karmic evil. (Passage 17)

Although form is manifested, it is "the form of light"; in other words, Amida is none other than wisdom. Hence, he is also "without color and without form." The Buddha acts, radiating unhindered light (wisdom-compassion) throughout the cosmos and bringing beings possessed of blind passions to realization of shinjin. Moreover, since he is also formless and "identical with dharma-body as suchness," beings who take refuge in him enter a process by which they are brought to realize supreme enlightenment.

The nature of Amida as the form of formless reality or nirvana is reflected in the nature of shinjin. Shinran states that nirvana, or dharma-body, or Tathagata “fills the hearts minds of the ocean of all beings.” Further:

Since it is with these hearts and minds (filled by dharma-body as suchness) of all sentient beings that they entrust themselves to the Vow of the dharma-body as compassionate means, this shinjin is none other than Buddha-nature. This Buddha-nature is dharma-nature. Dharma-nature is dharma-body. (Passage 17)

On the one hand, dharma-body as suchness pervades the minds of beings, and with these minds they realize shinjin and entrust themselves to the Vow. On the other hand, through the Name and light of Amida, the dharma-body as compassionate means, sentient beings are brought to realize shinjin, and this shinjin is dharma-nature or dharma-body. These two activities are not independent, for the two dimensions of dharma-body—as suchness and as compassion—“differ but are not separable.”

Dharma-body as suchness always fills the minds of all sentient beings, and when beings realize shinjin—when their minds become one with the mind of dharma-body as compassionate means—for the first time this becomes known to them. Before realization of shinjin, they are unaware of it, for the unenlightened, delusional minds of beings and the dharma-body as suchness that fills them stand in absolute opposition and mutual negation. For this reason, the basic Mahayana teaching that all beings possess Buddha-nature is not a form of pantheism. Through the transformation that occurs with the realization of shinjin, this opposition is overcome, and the unenlightened mind becomes aware of dharma-body or true reality that fills it. Thus, to realize shinjin is to return to one’s fundamental reality.

For Shinran, there is no working of dharma-body as suchness apart from the working of Amida to grasp beings and bring them to realization of shinjin. Thus, to entrust oneself to the Vow—to be grasped by Amida—is none other than the working arising from supreme enlightenment. It is for this reason that shinjin signifies the awakening or wisdom born when “one overturns the delusion of ignorance,” that its realization is attainment of the stage of non-retrogression, and that people of shinjin “realize great, complete nirvana the eve of the moment of death” (Shinjin, 103). Although not yet supreme enlightenment, it is what arises when sentient beings, who had been completely immersed in samsara and incapable of knowing nirvana or suchness, have their ignorance swept away by unhindered light. It is wisdom “received from Amida,” and signifies having awakened, in the form of entrusting to the Vow, to the nirvana or true reality that fills one. In other words, the self-awareness or self-knowledge of one who has realized shinjin has delved to that dimension of one’s existence in which mutually opposing elements—samsara and nirvana, time and timelessness, form and formlessness, falsity and truth—fuse and interpenetrate.

True Reality as Jinen

Although there are many terms for formless true reality in Buddhist texts—emptiness, suchness, dharma-body, thusness, oneness—Shinran adopts yet another word, *jinen*, to express it. Literally, *jinen* is an adverb meaning “of itself,” “spontaneously,” or “naturally,” and also came to be used as a noun (“naturalness,” or nature in the sense of “mother nature”). In using this term for suchness or supreme Buddha, he expresses the ultimate attainment of the Pure Land path, and also his broad vision of this reality as inherently active, giving rise to the working of wisdom-compassion. *Jinen* or naturalness is true reality that transcends all forms, and at the same time it is always in motion, functioning as the liberating force that encompasses the lives of ignorant beings. From the human perspective, he defines *jinen* to mean “being made to become so of itself”—that is, being brought to awakening through the Buddha’s working and not through one’s own designs. It is spontaneous activity of compassion free of human calculation and intention.

Shinran identifies various aspects of *jinen* in its active dimension. It works “to have each person entrust himself in Namu-amida-butsu”; thus, “there is no place at all for the practitioner’s calculation” in moving toward attainment of shinjin (Passage 20). On bringing one to realization of shinjin, it transforms all one’s past, present, and future karmic evil into good (Passage 8), and thereafter, “drawn with the Primal Vow as the karmic cause, one attains birth in the Pure Land naturally, by *jinen*” (Passage 11). Further, “*Jinen* is itself the fulfilled land,” the Pure Land (*Koso wasan*, 82). Every aspect of our liberation from samsaric existence, then, and our perfect realization of enlightenment, comes about not through our calculation, but “naturally, by *jinen*.”

Shinran further explains *jinen* as true reality in relation to the fundamental significance of the Vow:

[Amida’s] Vow is the Vow to make us all attain the supreme Buddhahood. The supreme Buddha is formless, and being formless, is called *jinen*. When this Buddha is shown as having form, it is not called the supreme nirvana (or Buddha). In order to make us realize that true Buddha is formless, it is expressly called Amida Buddha; so I have been taught. Amida Buddha is the medium through which we are made to realize *jinen*. (Passage 20)

Jinen signifies both formless, supreme Buddha and the working of Amida’s Vow, which arises from, and brings all beings to, “the supreme Buddhahood” that is formless.

One the path extending from present life to formless, supreme Buddhahood, the final overcoming of form comes at the moment of death. Birth into the Pure Land at the end of life means realization of perfect enlightenment. Nevertheless, the movement from the ocean of the Vow (dharma-body as compassionate means) to nirvana (dharma-body as suchness) occurs not through the effort and calculation of the being, but through *jinen*, the inconceivable working of the Buddha’s wisdom. We cannot know how or when

that movement takes place. It is impossible to determine a boundary line, such as the time of death, to that which is formless. From Shinran's comments of *jinen* above, written when he was eighty-six years old, it is clear that his religious awakening had matured so fully that it delved to dharma-body as suchness. In the experience he calls "realization of shinjin," he came to know *jinen*. Thus he speaks of "the ocean of shinjin that is itself suchness or true reality." In taking refuge in the Primal Vow, he also went beyond the Vow, and in deepening his experience of "hearing the Name" (realizing shinjin), he transcended the "form" of Namu-amida-butsu (its meaning or utterance) and came to carry on his life within the true and real existence (*jinen*) that works without forms. However, he concludes his comments on *jinen* with an admonition:

After we have realized that this is the way it is, we should not be forever talking about *jinen*. If one always talks about *jinen*, then the truth that Other Power is no selfworking will again become a problem of selfworking. This is the mystery of the wisdom of Buddhas. (Passage 20)

Once one has apprehended the nature of *jinen* intellectually, one should not continue to analyze it, for to seek to fathom it with the mind is to remain caught upon forms and concepts. It is precisely where the human intellect ceases to press its devices and designs that the world of *jinen* opens forth. Hence the phrase, "No selfworking"—no calculation and intentionality—"is true working." the dynamic of the Vow.

² Nagarjuna, in distinguishing difficult and easy practice, does teach the attainment of non-retrogression in the present life, as Shinran notes, but he does not teach birth in the Pure Land. Vasubandhu, in his *Treatise on the Pure Land*, does not state whether birth occurs in the present life or the next. The first clear statement of birth after death in this world occurs in T'an-luan's commentary on the *Treatise on the Pure Land*, and since the *Larger Sutra* teaches birth after death also, it is reasonable to view Vasubandhu's understanding as conforming to this.