

## 4 THE STRUCTURE OF SHINRAN'S THOUGHT

### Shinran's Reformation of the Pure Land Path

IN the Pure Land tradition prior to Shinran, the conception of practice tended to be twofold. It was taught that through the Pure Land path, one enters the realm established by Amida after death in this world and there accomplishes the practices leading to one's own enlightenment. Thus, on the one hand, genuine practice resulting in Buddhahood—one's practice as a bodhisattva—was to be performed in the Pure Land. On the other hand, to attain the Pure Land, one brought oneself into a relationship with Amida in the present life and received the benefit and support of his virtues. This was done by worshipping and contemplating the Buddha or saying his Name with faith in his Vow. Practice in this world did not necessarily, as in other Buddhist paths, have the direct aim of eradicating blind passions and accumulating merit for oneself and others through virtuous action; its goal was birth in the Pure Land through the working of Amida's Vow. It required sincerity, wholehearted devotion, and genuine aspiration on one's own part; nevertheless, its effectiveness rested on Amida's practice embodied in the fulfillment of his Vows and in his Name and light. Practice in the Pure Land path involved a person's own efforts and resolution on the one hand, and the power of Amida's Vow on the other, and was to be performed both in the present life and in the next world.

As Pure Land Buddhism developed into a path that embraced all people, and as insight into the pervasiveness of defiling passions arising from self-attachment deepened, attention came to be focused on the extreme case—the limit situation—of salvation, represented by the lowest grade of practitioner in the *Contemplation Sutra*. If Amida's wisdom-compassion could reach even the person who had been motivated throughout life solely by various cravings, egocentricity, and inner rage, and who was incapable of any traditional form of mental purification, what was it that was minimally, essentially required? As we have seen, less and less was considered necessary on the part of human beings in this life. But as coming into accord with the Primal Vow and gaining the support of Other Power became simpler, the divide between this world and the Pure Land loomed larger in significance, for the moment of death became the final opportunity and the critical bridge on the path toward Buddhahood. It was in one's final moments that one's future was determined, and even the vilest of evil-doers could, at that sobering time when the distractions of a lifetime proved hollow and the heavy karmic bonds of the present were shed, attain the Pure Land through Amida's aid. In other words, death took on part of the role of breaking the cycle of samsaric existence, which was played by meditative practice and meritorious action in other forms of Buddhism.

Thus, the Pure Land tradition came to emphasize the dichotomy between this defiled world and the Pure Land, and going from this world to the other—signifying decisive entrance into the sphere of Amida's compassionate activity and expressed as attainment of the stage of non-retrogression—occurred only with the end of the present life. In this context, practice in this life came to hold

the significance of preparing one for the final moment and ensuring that one would be in a proper relationship with Amida at death.

Shinran's role in the development of the Pure Land teaching is best seen not as the clarification of particular elements, but as a thorough re-casting of all the major concepts, bringing them into new alignment and imparting new significance. On the one hand he adheres closely to the terminology of the tradition and takes as his basis the Pure Land sutras and the texts of the great masters. On the other hand, however, he brought about a basic change in the Pure Land path by rooting it in fundamental Mahayana thinking concerning the complex relationship between this world and the realm of enlightenment.

The Pure Land stands as the goal on the path leading from samsara to nirvana; when this life ends, people who possess the cause of birth in the Pure Land find that the karmic bonds working out their consequences in this life are sundered through the Buddha's power, and they enter Amida's land. The sphere of Amida's activity, however, being in essence the field of wisdom or nirvana, does not simply stand in dichotomous opposition to samsaric existence but also transcends that dichotomy. While it lies beyond this world, it further holds within itself the nonduality of samsara and nirvana, of blind passions and enlightenment. Life in this defiled world, then, does not intrinsically divide us from the Buddha; hence, it is not physical death itself that signifies entrance into the sphere of enlightenment. Shinran delved deeply into the nature of the Pure Land way as the means by which the person who is evil—devoid of any seed of awakening in himself—can realize Buddhahood. Based on his own experience, he asserts that it is possible to enter the activity of Amida's enlightenment while carrying on the samsaric existence of this world, so that our every act, while arising from profound ignorance and self-attachment, is transformed into the Buddha's virtues in the present. Thus, he delineates a path of attainment that fully accords with general Mahayana thought, in which each step along the way is nondual with the goal of suchness or true reality.

### *Practice as Given*

The nondualistic Mahayana mode of perception manifests itself in all aspects of Shinran's thought, and in particular, in his clarification of the nature of practice. As we have seen, prior to Shinran, the nature of practice had become subject to the dualisms of this defiled world and the Pure Land, or one's own efforts and Amida's aid. Shinran, however, asserts that practice, in order to be genuine, must be the activity of a mind in accord with reality, free of blind passions and delusional perceptions, and he firmly adopts, as the first of two organizing principles of his teaching, the general Buddhist analysis of the path as comprising three pillars: teaching, practice and realization.<sup>1</sup> In this scheme, practice occupies a pivotal position, for it holds the significance of incorporating into one's very existence the truth one has heard as the teaching. In Buddhism, an intellectual grasp of doctrine or devotional faith is never sufficient for enlightenment, for one must eradicate the egocentric stance underlying such perceptions and attitudes—a stance of conceptualization and objectification. The

eradication of the illusory self means to become the reality embodied in the teaching, and this is the genuine realization of self and all things. The Pure Land way, as a development of the core of the Buddhist path, rests like the entire tradition on these three pillars.

Moreover, Shinran asserts that the “true teaching, practice, and realization of the Pure Land way” is not merely another form of Mahayana Buddhism, but its ultimate fulfillment, the true Mahayana. He states that it is the “One Vehicle,” meaning that it is the single, genuine path, the only way by which all beings may attain enlightenment (Passage 18). Although the Buddha taught various methods to attainment, the others are only provisional and temporary teachings accommodated to the capacities and temperaments of different listeners; they are meant to guide all beings to the Pure Land way, which affords the only means for their liberation:

Since there are none—among either the wise of the Mahayana or the Hinayana, or the ignorant, whether good or evil—who can attain supreme nirvana through their own self-cultivated wisdom, we are encouraged to enter the ocean of the wisdom-Vow of the Buddha of unhindered light. (Passage 4)

How, then, does Shinran reformulate the Pure Land conception of practice so that it not only conforms with general Mahayana thinking but is transformed into the single authentic Mahayana way? Paradoxically, he accomplishes this by pressing the Pure Land attitude toward practice—the turn from self-power to Other Power—to its very limit. By probing deeply into the pervasive nature of self-attachment, he finds that human existence is inevitably dominated by delusional thinking and feeling, so that even activity usually considered beneficial in the cultivation of spiritual life is tainted by an intractable egocentricity; thus, he brings the rejection of self-generated acts to totality.

At the core of Shinran’s thought lies the existential awareness of the passions that permeate human life, and at the same time of the working of Amida’s Primal Vow to grasp precisely those who are incapable of performing any genuinely good act—any act that would turn them even slightly away from the delusions of greed and aversion—or fulfilling any practice. In Buddhist terms, Amida directs his unhindered compassion to those who commit the five grave offenses, slander the dharma, or lack any seed or cause within themselves that might be nurtured into Buddhahood. Such people are completely bound to samsaric existence—to the deepest of hells—and they revile the sole means by which their pain might be alleviated. Shinran saw himself thus, and it was precisely as such a person that he experienced Amida’s compassion. For him, the extreme case of salvation described in the sutras—the person given entirely to acts of ignorance and incapable of practice—did not stand chiefly as an admonition, and it afforded no comfort—no sense that “if even such a person is saved, then so am I.” In his religious awakening, Shinran discovered that he himself was the person of evil transcending ordinary judgments and

appearances, the person destined by his acts for hell even as he listened to and sought to accord with the teaching.

Thus he swept away both the ambiguity of traditional Pure Land thinking, which viewed practice as a fusion of one's own efforts and Other Power, and also its indecisiveness and inherent uncertainty whether one's practice was genuine and effective or not. True practice—practice in accord with the Primal Vow and resulting in birth in the Pure Land—must not be tainted by worldly preoccupations and the motives of the delusional self. Were it otherwise, the Pure Land way would not be a Buddhist path, but a form of petitionary worship. Self-power practice was entirely negated, and practice became wholly Other Power, wholly the true and real practice of the Buddha. Once again, it was essentially activity manifesting wisdom, as in the bodhisattva path.

Then, according to Shinran, how do beings become capable of such practice? The answer lies in the second large organizing concept at the heart of his teaching—the concept of the directing or transference of merit (*eko*).

An essential feature of the bodhisattva path is that one does not seek merely to reap the fruits of one's spiritually beneficial acts; rather, one directs any merit or virtue that may result to two ends: one's own realization of enlightenment, and the enlightenment of all beings. Because the directing of merit informs the fundamental attitude in practice, efforts toward self-benefit (attainment of enlightenment) and efforts toward benefiting other beings fuse and become one; thus, directing merit expresses the compassion that permeates the Mahayana path.

In Shan-tao, directing merit is an intrinsic part of genuine aspiration for birth; its central meaning for the practitioner lies in dedicating the merit resulting from saying the Name or worship toward attainment of the Pure Land. Honen, however, stressed that such effort to direct one's merit toward attainment of birth was unnecessary with the nembutsu, for saying the Name was from the outset the practice selected for beings by Amida. That is, even the directing of merit, which had been considered an essential part of the bodhisattva path, was not required of the Pure Land practitioner.

Shinran reasserts the significance of *eko*, for it arises directly from the nature of true reality in Mahayana Buddhism. He deeply experienced the actuality of such activity; however, he experienced it as the Buddha's compassion. Thus, he completely reverses the perspective of the working of *eko*. *Eko* is not an aspect of the practice that beings perform; rather, it is the action of Amida Buddha. According to Shinran, then, the Pure Land way, like all Buddhist paths, is composed of teaching, practice, and realization; it is distinct, however, in that each of these elements is given—or “directed”—to beings through the Buddha's activity. Employing the concept of directing or transferring of merit, Shinran declared for the first time in the history of Mahayana Buddhist thought that practice itself—the transformative activity by which existence is pervaded by truth and reality—is opened forth in beings by the Buddha.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of shinjin or true entrusting is sometimes regarded as a fourth “pillar,” but its role is essentially to clarify the nature of practice.