

from **SHINRAN: AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS THOUGHT**

by Yoshifumi UEDA and Dennis HIROTA

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SHINRAN

AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS THOUGHT

**With Selections from the
Shin Buddhism Translation Series**

by YOSHIFUMI UEDA and DENNIS HIROTA

HONGWANJI INTERNATIONAL CENTER

Kyoto

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A NOTE TO THE READER

Shinran (1173–1263) is widely recognized as one of the most important and innovative religious thinkers in Japanese history. As D. T. Suzuki states concerning the Shin Buddhist path that he forged:

The Japanese may not have offered very many original ideas to world thought or world culture, but in Shin we find a major contribution the Japanese can make to the outside world and all the other Buddhist schools. (*Shin Buddhism*, New York, 1970, pp. 13–14)

Over the past several decades, a number of attempts have been made to introduce Shinran's thought to Western readers through translations of his writings. Although a direct reading of his words remains the surest means to an accurate grasp of his thought, his writings have seemed problematic for many contemporary readers. There are three general sources of difficulty: the literary forms in which he wrote, the general Mahāyāna Buddhist thought of which his path is an expression, and the terms and concepts of the Pure Land tradition in which his teaching is cast. These difficulties are further complicated by the very character of his contribution to Buddhist thought as a reformulation of the tradition. As the philosopher NISHITANI Keiji incisively notes:

Shinran's significance lies in his unprecedented accomplishment of rooting up the whole set of previous Pure Land concepts from their mythological foundation and transplant-

ing them in the ground which had been common to the other Mahāyāna schools since Nāgārjuna. ("Foreword," D. T. Suzuki, trans., *The Kyōgyōshinshō*, Kyoto, 1973, p. xi)

This book is intended to aid the general reader by considering each of these difficulties, and by providing an annotated selection of passages from Shinran's writings to illustrate his basic methods and major themes. The introductory section is divided into four chapters, and the selections into two parts.

CHAPTER ONE Shinran: Life and Works

Probably the first problem encountered by readers of Shinran is a sense of unfamiliarity with the forms in which he wrote. He left behind no general exposition of his thought such as we might expect of a Western thinker. Rather, he saw himself as the recipient of a long tradition stemming from Śākyamuni Buddha and transmitted by masters in India, China, Korea, and Japan. Out of his sense of gratitude for the writings and insights of his predecessors, he presented the teaching chiefly by collecting, arranging, translating, and interpreting passages from their works.

Chapter One first presents an outline of Shinran's life, considering various influences on his thought and writings, and then clarifies the methods of explanation and literary forms that he employs.

CHAPTER TWO The Mahāyāna Mode of Thought

Shinran's thought is often said to bear close resemblance to elements of certain Christian teachings: an emphasis on trust or faith, a concern with evil, and a concept of salvation as given through the compassionate activity of the transcendent Other. Emphasis on such similarities can be misleading, however, for Shinran's use of such general Mahāyāna terms as nirvana, dharma-body, suchness, wisdom, and true reality reflects a clear

awareness of basic Mahāyāna teachings as the foundation of the Pure Land path.

Chapter Two discusses central terms and formulations of Mahāyāna thought and provides a groundwork upon which to view the developments of Pure Land Buddhism and Shinran's teaching. The exposition focuses on early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, which forms the wellspring for the later traditions.

CHAPTER THREE Emergence of the Pure Land Path

Because a number of special terms and concepts were developed in Pure Land Buddhism, it is sometimes assumed to be merely a devotional offshoot divorced from the rationality or the austere meditative practice of the original religion. In Chapter Three, we delineate the perspective from within the Mahāyāna tradition, showing how the features and concepts of the Pure Land teaching developed naturally from the bodhisattva-ideal and the wisdom-compassion that lie at the heart of all Mahāyāna thought.

CHAPTER FOUR The Structure of Shinran's Thought

To illuminate Shinran's radical transformation of the Pure Land tradition, Chapter Four discusses the basic vision underlying his reformulation of the teaching and the implications it holds for the practitioner's life.

It is hoped that each of the four chapters may be read independently. An index of topics is included for crossreference.

Selections from the Letters and Commentaries

Twenty passages from Shinran's Japanese writings have been selected to illuminate central terms and concepts. Headnotes provide minimal background information, and notes and commentary have been appended where useful.

Numbers are indicated in the margins of the selections to iden-

tify the sentence beginning on the same line. Notes and index references are keyed to these sentence numbers, which we have also included in the Japanese texts at the end of the book.

Many of the passages are close commentaries, including sections in which Chinese characters are individually defined in Japanese. In English translation, the necessity for such commentary has often disappeared. We have therefore abridged some sections, usually indicating ellipses. The Japanese originals, however, have been reproduced intact.

Selections from Teaching, Practice and Realization

Forty-two passages have been selected from the first four chapters of Shinran's major work, *Teaching, Practice and Realization* (popularly known as *Kyōgyōshinshō*). Headnotes provide information concerning the context and significance of the selections, but for discussions of important concepts, the reader is referred to the passages from the letters and commentaries.

Japanese Texts of the Selections

Original texts of the selected passages are included as an appendix. Passages from *Teaching, Practice and Realization* have been rendered into Japanese according to Shinran's reading notes. Modern characters have been used, and *furigana* has been provided. The text follows that published in *Jōdo Shinshū Seiten (Chūshaku-ban)*, Kyoto: Hongwanji Shuppan-bu, 1988, except in the case of *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone,'* where the translation follows a variant text. For detailed notes on the texts used for the translations, see the individual volumes of the Shin Buddhism Translation Series.

Acknowledgments

This book was planned and drafted by Dennis Hirota and reviewed throughout by Yoshifumi Ueda. Chapters Two and Four in particular are largely based on Ueda's numerous books and ar-

ticles in Japanese. Material has also been drawn from published translations of Ueda's articles (see "Suggestions for Further Reading"). These articles are themselves composites based on a number of different sources in Japanese, and include bibliographic references.

We would like to thank Prof. Minor L. Rogers, who read an early draft of several chapters and encouraged us to continue; Kimiko Hirota, Dennis Yoshikawa and John Iwofara, who lent aid in the production stage; and Yoshiharu Wake, who made the index to the selections.

Y. U.
D. H.

Abbreviations

J.	Japanese.
Passage	Selections from Letters and Commentaries in Part Two of this book.
S.	Sanskrit.
SSZ	<i>Shinshū shōgyō zensho</i> [Collected Shin Scriptures], Kyoto, 1941.
T	<i>Taishō shinshū daizōkyō</i> , Tokyo, 1922-34.

In reference notes, the chapters of *Teaching, Practice and Realization* are referred to as:

- Teaching (Chapter 1)
- Practice (Chapter 2)
- Shinjin (Chapter 3)
- Realization (Chapter 4)
- True Buddha and Land (Chapter 5)
- Transformed Buddha-Bodies and Lands (Chapter 6)

500 Śākyamuni (c. 560–480 BCE)

400

300 Aśoka (r. 268–232)

200

100

1 Pali record of Buddhist teachings
First Mahāyāna sutras (early Prajñāpāramitā sutras)

100 Pure Land Sutras, Garland Sutra, Lotus Sutra

200 Nāgārjuna

300

400 Asaṅga
Vasubandhu

500 T'an-luan (476–542)

600 Tao-ch'o (562–645) Prince Shōtoku (574–621)
Shan-tao (613–681)

700 Tz'u-min (680–748)

800 Fa-chao (766–822) Saichō (767–822)

900

1000 Genshin (942–1017)

1100

1200 Hōnen (1133–1212)
Shinran (1173–1263)

PART ONE
AN INTRODUCTION TO SHINRAN'S THOUGHT