

enlightenment immediately at the end of this life and birth in the Pure Land, without the arduous progression through other stages. This development of the Pure Land path was made possible through a fundamental revision of the conception of the nembutsu. Shinran sees it not as the minimal act required of beings, but removes it altogether from the framework of traditional practice.

## NOTES

1. See Maitreya's *Mahāyāna-sūtrālamkāra*, 1, 4, and Vasubandhu's commentary.

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## 4 THE STRUCTURE OF SHINRAN'S THOUGHT

### Shinran's Reformulation 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 worshiping 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 Mahāyāna 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 Mahāyāna thought, in which each step along the way is nondual with the goal of suchness or true reality.

#### *Practice as Given*

The nondualistic Mahāyāna 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 Mahāyāna Buddhism, but its ultimate fulfillment, the true Mahāyāna. 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 Mahāyāna or the Hīnayāna, 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 Mahāyāna thinking but is transformed into the single authentic Mahāyāna 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 awaken-

ing, 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 (*ekō*).

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 Mahāyāna 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. Hōnen, 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 *ekō*, for it arises directly from the nature of true reality in Mahāyāna 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 *ekō*. *Ekō* 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 Mahāyāna 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.

### Shinran's Concept of Practice

Shinran follows the Pure Land tradition in viewing the Eighteenth Vow as the heart of the teaching; however, he sets forth an understanding of it that differs markedly from the interpretation of the preceding masters. As we have seen, the Eighteenth Vow states that those beings will attain birth who “with sincere mind entrust themselves, aspire for birth, and say the Name ten times (*jū-nen*).” “Sincere mind,” “entrusting,” and “aspiration” were considered to be three aspects of the proper attitude of the practitioner, and the term *nen* was interpreted by Shan-*tao* and Hōnen to mean “say the nembutsu.” Thus, the Vow was understood to require the three minds and *nen* or utterance of

the nembutsu; these characterized the essential aspiration and practice of the Pure Land way. However, the significance of practice and the relationship between the proper attitude and the utterance of the nembutsu remained problematic.

Shinran's major contribution to the Pure Land path was to show that both the entrusting of oneself to the Vow and the saying of the Name are given—unfolded in beings—through and as the activity of the Buddha and to delineate the significance of this for the practitioner's life. At the beginning of "Chapter on Practice," Shinran makes two major statements concerning practice. First, after terming the practice in the Pure Land path "great practice," he states, "Great practice is to say the Name of the Tathāgata of unhindered light" (Practice, 1). Second, he states that this practice arises from Amida's Seventeenth Vow that the Buddhas throughout all worlds say and praise his Name.

In understanding the practice of the Pure Land way to be utterance of the nembutsu, Shinran follows his teacher Hōnen and Hōnen's interpretation of Shan-tao. As to why simply saying Amida's Name should be the cause of attaining the Pure Land and eventual enlightenment, which is difficult to realize even through aeons of self-purification and compassionate action, Hōnen again follows Shan-tao: "Saying the Name unfailingly brings about birth, for this is based on the Buddha's Primal Vow" (Practice, 68). In other words, it results in birth because it is the easy practice selected by Amida and prescribed in the Vow. Nembutsu, then, presupposes an attitude of faith in the Vow and Dharmākara's fulfillment of it.

Shinran's view concerning the effectiveness of nembutsu is superficially similar. Saying the Name is the cause of birth precisely because it is "great practice," "great" meaning that it "embodies all good acts and possesses all roots of virtue." It holds all the merit of the authentic and pure practice performed by Dharmākara Bodhisattva to fulfill the Vow. Shinran goes on to stress, however, that nembutsu is not the calling or invoking

of Amida Buddha by beings, but activity arising from enlightenment or reality itself. In other words, nembutsu emerges from the Vow in a very different sense from Hōnen's. Great practice is not an exercise that beings undertake in order to accord with the Vow or attain birth; it is the practitioner's saying of the Name, but in essence it is Amida's activity to awaken beings, to transform their existence so that it embodies the virtues of enlightenment, and to bring about their attainment of birth.

We can, of course, recite "Namu-amida-butsu" any time it occurs to us to do so. The utterance of the Divine Name is a form of spiritual cultivation in many religious traditions, and in various Buddhist schools the recitation of Amida Buddha's Name is performed in conjunction with other types of practice. Even in the Pure Land tradition, Amida's Name has been recited as a contemplative exercise as well as a means of gaining merit. But even though we say Name, if our utterance is not great practice fulfilled by the Buddha, it is no more than an ordinary human exercise and not the cause unfailingly resulting in birth in the Pure Land.

The nature of great practice is clarified in the statement that it "arises from the Vow of great compassion, . . . the Vow that all Buddhas say the Name" (Practice, 1). That practice arises from Amida's Vow means that it is directed to beings. Thus, Shinran states that "the nembutsu of Amida's Primal Vow is not our practice, it is not our good" (*Letters of Shinran*, p. 64). While Hōnen stated that directing our saying of the nembutsu toward birth was unnecessary, Shinran developed the concept of "not directing merit" even further:

The nembutsu is not a self-power practice performed by foolish beings or sages; it is therefore called the practice of "not directing virtue [on the part of beings]." (Practice, 69)

For Shinran, there is no directing merit by beings because they

have no merit of their own, even in saying the nembutsu. Rather, practice must be given.

While it is easy to accept that the teaching may be “directed” or given to us, the idea that practice is given is perplexing. In other forms of Buddhism, practice is activity that, when intensively performed as instructed, enables us to break the bondage of ignorance and attain enlightenment. According to Shinran, practice is to say the nembutsu, but this act is not something we perform through our own efforts and aspiration; it is given to us by Amida. As long as we have not received it from Amida, however much we may exert ourselves, what we do is not “great practice.” It will not lead unfailingly to enlightenment, but is merely another act of self-power as limited in effectiveness as any other religious activity we might undertake. That Amida gives the practice resulting in birth means, from the reverse perspective, that beings contribute nothing to their own enlightenment. How do we come to receive this practice, and in what sense can this practice hold the significance of transforming our existence and emancipating us from the constrictions of a false self? It is in answer to these questions that the issue of *shinjin* or true entrusting arises.

The word *shinjin* 信心 (or *shin* 信) is a basic, widely used Buddhist term and has often been translated “faith.” For Shinran, however, this term signifies the central religious awakening or experience in the Pure Land path, and his entire teaching revolves around the clarification of its nature and significance. In order to alert the reader to the uniqueness of Shinran’s use of this term and its importance in his thought, we have generally used the transliteration “*shinjin*,” though at times we also translate it “entrusting.”

#### *Shinjin: the Core of Great Practice*

As we have seen, Shinran presses the dichotomy between sentient being and Buddha in Pure Land thought to its extreme. The essential distinguishing element is the working of the mind.

While the Eighteenth Vow specifies “three minds” or aspects of the practitioner’s attitude in performing nembutsu, and although the entire tradition prior to Shinran stressed the importance of the practitioner’s attitude of faith and devotion, Shinran states, “From the very beginning sentient beings, who are filled with blind passions, lack a mind true and real, a heart of purity” (Passage 1). In other words, it is impossible for beings to accord with the Vow through their own resolution and devices, which are invariably manifestations of egocentric attachments and concerns. As long as we seek to bring ourselves into correspondence with the Vow—to make ourselves worthy of being saved by it—we are clinging to our own powers, and our saying the nembutsu is not great practice.

Shinran discovered the means by which practice is given to us taught in the *Larger Sutra*. After presenting the story of Bodhisattva Dharmākara and reiterating his Vows, Śākyamuni declares that Dharmākara has accomplished his practice to become Amida Buddha and describes in detail the features of the Pure Land. Then, in passages that correspond to certain of the major vows, Śākyamuni indicates that these vows have been fulfilled. In two sentences that teach the fulfillment of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Vows respectively, the sutra states:

The Buddha-tathāgatas throughout the ten quarters, countless as the sands of the Ganges, are one in praising the majestic power and the virtues, inconceivably profound, of the Buddha of immeasurable life.

All sentient beings, as they hear the Name, realize even one thought-moment of *shinjin* and joy, which is directed to them from Amida’s sincere mind, and aspiring to be born in that land, they then attain birth and dwell in the stage of non-retrogression. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma. (Practice, 4; *Shinjin*, 4, 61)

For Shinran, this passage provides the key for understanding

the Eighteenth Vow, for it discloses how our saying of “*Namu-amida-butsu*” becomes genuine practice that is received from Amida and that, being the activity of the Buddha’s wisdom-compassion, possesses “all roots of virtue” and the power to bring about birth in the Pure Land.

The first paragraph of the passage indicates that the Vow that all the Buddhas praise Amida’s Name has been fulfilled. This Vow does not, of course, pursue self-glorification, but expresses Amida’s activity to save all beings in the world by making himself known as his Name. The Buddhas’ praise of Amida’s Name becomes the source of great practice in beings, for through hearing the Name, beings are awakened to the nature of Amida and his Vow of compassion. This awakening is *shinjin*, or true entrusting, and out of it beings spontaneously come to say the Name.

*Shinjin* is perhaps *the* central term in Shinran’s thought, so important that it is sometimes said that in his teaching, “birth through the *nembutsu*” became “birth through *shinjin*.” Such a statement is misleading, however, if realization of *shinjin* is thereby seen as an alternative to or substitute for practice, for it is inseparable from practice. His teaching is also sometimes construed as one of “salvation by faith,” but *shinjin* is not a means to birth. It is not an attitude assumed by practitioners, but Amida’s wisdom-compassion unfolding itself in them. For this reason, realization of *shinjin* itself holds the significance of attainment of birth. Shinran states that it is the “true and real mind” (*makoto no kokoro*); it is the Buddha’s mind opened forth in the minds of beings, and the awakening of beings to a transformed and liberated existence in the complete givenness of genuine practice that results in enlightenment.

The central text concerning the realization of *shinjin* is the passage on the fulfillment of the Eighteenth Vow (Passage 2). According to Shinran’s interpretation, this passage states first that as beings hear the Name, they awaken *shinjin* (entrust themselves to the Vow), and further that Amida directs (*ekō*)

this *shinjin* to them out of his own sincere mind. In other words, through his Name, Amida awakens his mind of wisdom-compassion in beings in the form of the realization of *shinjin*. Moreover, since this passage expresses the fulfillment of the Eighteenth Vow, which speaks of both the threefold mind and the *nembutsu*, we may take the awakening of *shinjin* to include the utterance of the Name. In the realization of *shinjin*, beings are given the Buddha’s mind not only as *shinjin*, but also as great practice, for their saying of the Name is the natural manifestation of the Buddha’s mind in them. Thus, Shinran teaches that the Buddhas throughout the cosmos, in praising the Name, also praise those beings who utter it, for the Name emerges from Amida’s enlightenment or Buddhahood within them.

Prior to Shinran, the Eighteenth Vow was understood to mean that beings should say the *nembutsu* relying on the power of the Vow. As long as faith and practice are understood as requirements fulfilled by the practitioner, however, they inevitably fall into a tension between personal effort in practice and reliance on the Buddha. Trust is cultivated as belief that practice is easy and even a single utterance sufficient, yet because of the inconstancy of the human mind, one is encouraged to reaffirm that trust and say the *nembutsu* as often as possible. At the same time, if reciting the *nembutsu* is not accompanied by belief that one utterance is enough, it is not genuine however many times one may say it.

For Shinran, genuine utterance of the Name and *shinjin* are not generated out of human will, but emerge together as manifestations of the Buddha’s working. They are always inter-fused. Because the Name is given—is spread throughout the universe by all the Buddhas—sentient beings are able to hear it and come to know Amida’s Primal Vow. Through hearing the Name—not just grasping it intellectually, but being penetrated by the dynamic reality of compassion that it embodies—*shinjin* is awakened in them. This *shinjin* is therefore also “given,” and

is itself the Buddha's wisdom-compassion turning itself over to beings. Further, this shinjin expresses itself in utterance of the Name, which is true practice, and which therefore results in attainment of birth.

Here, Shinran's statement that "great practice is to say the Name of the Buddha of unhindered light" becomes clear. The utterance of "Namu-amida-butsu" is not merely an ordinary act but an act given by the Buddha because it arises from the Buddha's mind in beings. Precisely by recognizing the absolute dichotomy between sentient beings and Buddha, Shinran breaks through the earlier ambiguity in which self-power and Other Power are mingled and articulates instead a nonduality of being and Buddha that emerges when beings enter the ocean of the Vow.

#### The Structure of Shinjin or True Entrusting

In Shinran's thought, those who realize shinjin and perform great practice—whose utterance of the Name arises out of the Buddha's mind that has been awakened in them as shinjin—enter into a complex relationship with Amida. On the one hand, they have become aware of themselves as beings whose ignorance, egocentricity, and delusional perceptions prevent them from performing any act that is genuinely good, that moves them in the direction of Buddhahood and not in the direction of further samsaric entanglement. Thus, the practitioner and the Buddha come to stand in total, mutual opposition. In traditional Mahāyāna terms, this is the opposition between samsara and nirvana, or blind passions and enlightenment.

On the other hand, Amida's mind has been given to them, so that the working of their minds and the Buddha's are one. This oneness is rooted in the nonduality that characterizes true reality in Mahāyāna thought, and does not obliterate the mutual opposition between sentient beings and Buddha. Shinran states:

When the rivers of blind passion have returned to and entered

The ocean waters of the great compassionate Vow  
Of unhindered light filling the ten quarters,  
They become one in taste with that sea of wisdom.

*Jinjippō mugekō no*

*Daihi daigan no kaisui ni*

*Bonnō no shuryū kishinureba*

*Chie no ushio ni ichimi nari. (Kōsō wasan, 42)*

When we take refuge in the Vow, our delusional mental activity comes to be pervaded by great wisdom-compassion, just as the waters of rivers flowing into the sea take on the taste of salt. The blind passions we harbor—the entire working of our minds and bodies, including all our thoughts, feelings and perceptions—become one with the working of the Primal Vow. Since we still possess such passions, we are not yet enlightened; nevertheless, we have realized the "equal of enlightenment" (Passage 3) and been transformed into beings who are "equal to the Tathāgatas" (Passage 13), and our eventual attainment of complete Buddhahood is settled.

In other forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, beings perform practices in order to eliminate delusional thinking and passions, and in this way they liberate themselves from samsaric existence and realize nirvana. This nirvana is nondiscriminative wisdom that, on the one hand, transcends the dualism of samsara and nirvana, and on the other hand, perceives sentient beings undergoing pain in samsara and devises means to act within samsara to save them. Thus, samsara and nirvana, or blind passions and enlightenment, stand in opposition, so that bodhisattvas free themselves from the former to reach the latter, and at the same time they are one, so that bodhisattvas perceive all beings as themselves.

The realization of shinjin shares a similar structure; it is the self-awareness of samsaric existence that is possible only



through transcendent wisdom becoming one with it. In Shinran's thought, however, this realization is attained without passing through the complete negation of samsaric existence or deluded passions. Thus, emptiness—a cardinal element in the meditative practice of Mahāyāna bodhisattvas—is not a crucial term in Shinran's teaching. The transformation of self and of all things is experienced not as the eradication of dichotomous mental activity, and with it all objects in the world and the perceiving self, but rather as discovering oneself wholly devoid of any quality or capacity that can lead to enlightenment, and further being known and grasped by the enlightened activity of the transcendent Other while carrying on one's existence. Shinran states that, while continuing to live in this world, one enters the vast "ocean of wisdom" that is the Primal Vow, or that the "great treasure ocean of virtues"—the virtues of enlightenment or nirvana—becomes full within one. Thus, although the path of attainment is different, the structure of transformed existence, in which samsara and nirvana are brought to stand simultaneously in mutual opposition and in identity, is the same.

It may be said that Shinran delineates the nature of shinjin chiefly in terms of two broad, interrelated areas of religious concern: the awareness of evil or unenlightened existence, and the transcendence of such existence, including the delusional perceptions of the self caught within the temporality and finitude of samsaric life. In the remainder of this chapter, we will consider the first in relation to self-knowledge, and the second in relation to the significance of shinjin for the practitioner's emancipation and attainment of enlightenment.

### *Transformation*

In a verse similar to the one above, Shinran delineates the transformation that is inherent in the realization of shinjin:

When the waters—the minds, good and evil, of foolish beings—

Have returned to and entered the vast ocean  
Of Amida's Vow of wisdom, they are immediately  
Transformed into the mind of great compassion.

*Mida chigan no kōkai ni*

*Bombu zen-aku no shinsui mo*

*Ki-nyū shinureba sunawachi ni*

*Daihishin to zo tenzu naru. (Shōzōmatsu wasan, 40)*

Shinran annotates this verse: "Transformed means that the evil mind becomes good." The use of "evil" here is precise. Human good is not elevated and made better; the transformation at the core of the Vow's activity involves only evil. In the context of the verse, we see that the "evil mind" refers to all our mental activity and embraces what we judge as morally or ethically good as well as what we think of as evil; that is, both "good and evil" acts of the "foolish" or unenlightened mind (line 1) are evil that is transformed into good. This good is Amida's wisdom (line 3) or great compassion (line 4).

This transformation is not one in which our mental activities cease to be blind and defiled, so that they wholly become the Buddha's wisdom and compassion. Being transformed, they "become one in taste with the sea of wisdom," but this means that they do not simply disappear. He explains elsewhere:

To be transformed means that evil karma, without being nullified or eradicated, is made into good, just as all waters, upon entering the great ocean, immediately become ocean water. (Passage 8)

Our evil acts and the ignorance and passions from which they arise, while remaining just as they are, are transformed into the Buddha's virtue. In order to understand this transformation, we must clearly grasp Shinran's concept of evil.

In other Buddhist schools, it is taught that by performing

practices one can thoroughly rid oneself of the egocentric attachments and aversions that defile one's perceptions and thereby attain Buddhahood. Shinran, however, takes the position of one incapable of ridding oneself of these deep-rooted impulses of clinging and fear. They include even the cherishing of one's own life, and thus form the core of one's very existence as a human being; one has possessed them from the beginningless past and will continue to harbor them however long one lives. Shinran describes these passions, and the acts they motivate, as "evil," meaning that they lead only to further samsaric existence and block the realization of enlightenment. Thus, while the term "evil" has moral and ethical implications in his thought, its chief significance is religious; it points to the inability to fulfill any religious practice because of the inveterate self-attachment that pervades all one's acts. In other words, whatever moral or ethical "good" one may perform, and however pure and spiritually disciplined one may make oneself, every thought that one has, words that one utters, and deed that one does can result only in entangling one further in samsara.

Thus he states, "A foolish being is by nature possessed of blind passions, so you must recognize yourself as a being of karmic evil" (Passage 5). This view of human existence as evil is not, however, to be accepted intellectually as doctrine, and it cannot be the product of ordinary self-reflection. Evil, for Shinran, describes the nature of the self that one becomes aware of only at that level at which one can encounter Amida's working, and only within the light of the Buddha's wisdom. It is on the basis of this self-awareness that he speaks of the transformation of evil, while remaining evil, into good.

#### *The Mind of Shinjin*

The heart and mind in which blind passions and wisdom-compassion have become one has two aspects. First, it is the activity of the Buddha's enlightenment. Our delusional minds, on entering the ocean of the Vow, become the "mind of great com-

passion." Second, this mind of good or wisdom-compassion is not good alone, but at the same time embraces within itself our "evil minds," our self-centeredness and ignorance. Thus wisdom-compassion and blind passions, while they stand opposed as pure and defiled, form the single "good" mind—shinjin that is true, real, and sincere.

From the stance of shinjin, delusional thoughts and feelings are not something other than itself. Having been established through the oneness of Amida's wisdom and the unenlightened mind, it functions as the awakening to oneself as possessed of blind passions. Stated conversely, the mind that has been able to awaken to itself as blind passions is the same as Amida's wisdom-compassion.

The following two verses articulate the whole of what we have seen above: Buddha's mind and the mind of the practitioner becoming one, and the complex structure of the one mind—the mind of shinjin—thus realized:

Through the benefit bestowed by unhindered light,  
One realizes the shinjin of vast transcendent virtues:  
Unfailingly the ice of blind passions melts  
And immediately becomes the water of enlightenment.

Obstructing evils have become the substance of virtues;  
It is like the relation of ice and water:  
The more ice, the more water;  
The more hindrances, the more virtues.

*Mugekō no riyaku yori  
Itoku kōdai no shin o ete  
Kanarazu bonnō no kōri toku  
Sunawachi bodai no mizu to naru.*

*Zaishō kudoku no tai to naru  
Kōri to mizu no gotoku nite  
Kōri ōki ni mizu ōshi  
Sawari ōki ni toku ōshi. (Kōsō wasan, 39-40)*

Through the working of the Vow, we realize shinjin and our blind passions become the Buddha's great wisdom and great compassion (first verse). According to this hymn, blind passions disappear, becoming the waters of enlightenment. In the second verse, however, we find that in this mind, blind passions and Amida's mind make up one, interfusing whole ("obstructing evils have become the substance of virtues"). While delusions and attachments turn into virtues, they remain as they are, standing in opposition to good; hence, not only are virtues abundant, but so are the hindrances to enlightenment: "The more ice, the more water;/ The more hindrances, the more virtues."

Our passions, while remaining just as they are, have become one with great wisdom, and in addition, through the working of that wisdom, they are gradually transformed like ice melting to become water. As they melt to become the same as the Buddha's wisdom, the evil pervading the very existence of the self, which had been hidden because of ignorance, is brought to light; hence, one's evils are said to increase. Moreover, as obstructing evils increase and one's awareness broadens and deepens, one naturally repents, and at the same time is filled with gratitude for Amida's compassion. In this way, acts arising from ignorance continue to be transformed into virtue. Thus, all our acts—the roots of our existence itself—come to be seen as characterized by evil, so that all possibility of living as a person free of delusional self-centeredness vanishes, and at the same time, this evil is transformed into good.

Shinran characterizes evil as "karmic" (in such terms as *akugō* and *zaigō*, literally "evil karma"). Karma signifies the law of cause and effect at work in human existence. In general Buddhist thought, past acts, whether good or evil, become causes manifesting their effects in the present, and likewise, present acts become causes of results that will appear in the future. Good acts necessarily result in circumstances favorable toward more good, and evil in unfavorable ones. For Shinran, all our acts, whether good or evil by moral or ethical standards, are evil

in a religious sense, being defiled by ignorance and passions. Moreover, this evil is karmic, meaning that it stretches back infinitely into the past. Since the beginningless past, all our acts have worked only to bind us to samsaric life. Because of aeons of repetition and habit, we harbor unknowable evil in the depths of our existence. Hence, to become aware of the roots of our existence is to know the basic nature of the self as pervaded by passions and ignorant clinging. This attachment traps us completely, and we cannot let go.

Amida Buddha, as the embodiment of wisdom-compassion, becomes one with the karmic evil and blind passions of beings in order that they awaken to authentic self-knowledge, that is, be brought to realization of no-self and to enlightenment. This oneness of Buddha and sentient being, of the virtues of wisdom and karmic evil, is the fundamental nature of Amida himself as Buddha, manifested as Amida's "grasping, never to abandon" the evil person. Since Amida's virtue is not simple goodness as opposed to evil but embraces evil and ignorance within itself, not only does a person's karmic evil not disappear, but it is illuminated by wisdom and compassion, and thus it comes to fulfill the activity of Amida's virtue. Hence, when a person takes refuge in Amida's Vow, "without his calculating in any way, all his past, present, and future evil karma is transformed into good." This is not to say that it is deprived of its own inherent action. One's evil, though it may have been committed in the distant past, is personal, and Amida does not redeem it. It works its effect in one's life according to the law of karma. One is grasped by great compassion just as one is, possessed of evil, so that one's evil at once follows the law of karma and is transformed by the power of the Vow. In this way, the person of shinjin, the essence of whose existence is karmic evil, is nevertheless filled with the Buddha's virtues, for his karmic evil is the very substance of the activity of wisdom-compassion.

### The Realization of Shinjin

At the foundation of the realization of shinjin lie two inter-related 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 Tathāgata" 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 Mahāyāna masters as Nāgārjuna, Aśaṅga and Vasubandhu in India, or Chih-i and Fa-ts'ang in China, we find that the central issues of their teachings revolve 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 Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna 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 the 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. (*Tannishō*, 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 or "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. (*Tannishō*, "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 ekō o tanomade wa*  
*Muzan mugī nite hate zo sen. (Shōzōmatsu 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 *myōkōnin*, “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” (*Tannishō*, 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 (*Tannishō*, 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.

### 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.

*Kongō kengo no shinjin no*

*Sadamaru toki o machi-ete zo*

*Mida no shinkō shōgo shite*

*Nagaku shōji o hedatekeru. (Kōsō wasan, 77)*

While living in this world, one's heart and mind, as great com-

passion 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 at-

tains 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 practitioner's movement to enlightenment, Shinran breaks through such frameworks and brings Pure Land thought into correspondence with basic Mahāyāna 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 Tathāgata. This Tathāgata per-

vades 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 Mahāyāna 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 Mahāyāna 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 Mahāyāna 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 samsaric 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 Mahāyāna 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 synony-

mous 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 Bhikṣu Dharmākara and established the forty-eight great Vows that surpass conceptual understanding. . . . This Tathāgata has fulfilled the Vows, which are the cause of his Buddhahood, and thus is called "Tathāgata of the fulfilled body." This is none other than Amida Tathāgata. (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-butsumi) 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 "Tathāgata 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 Tathāgata "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 Mahāyāna 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 the 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 (*Kōsō 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.

On the path extending from present life to formless, supreme Buddhahood, the final overcoming of form comes at the mo-

ment 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 on *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.

### 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 Śākyamuni. 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 pres-

ent 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 Śākyamuni 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” (*Tannishō*, 2). At the same time, 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, enters the temporal flow of his life, so that “all his 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.

#### NOTES

1. 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.
2. Nāgārjuna, 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.

## PART TWO SELECTIONS FROM SHINRAN'S WRITINGS