

1. What Is Shin Buddhism?

The more ripe a cluster of rice becomes,
the lower it bows down its head.

—A Japanese proverb

Shin Buddhism, or the teachings of Shinran (1173-1262), teaches us the importance of humility, the most important universal virtue. Many people think that the ultimate goal in Buddhism as well as human life is to become *good*. But according to Shinran, it is to become *humble*. Being *good* is not good enough; we must become *humble* persons. We must know our evilness, the existence of our ineradicable egoism. We must know our ignorance, the limitations of our intellects. We must become humble persons who can say, “I’m evil and ignorant.”

In order to explain that Shin Buddhism teaches us the importance of humility, let me first discuss the two stages of life that Shinran experienced.

Two Stages in Shinran’s Life

The most important event in Shinran’s life was his meeting with Honen (1133-1212, the founder of the Jodo [Pure Land] School), when Shinran was twenty-eight. This event divided his life into two stages: the period before the meeting was the first stage and the period after it was the second stage.

When Shinran met Honen, Shinran realized that he had had a shallow view of Buddhahood. His thoughts on the subject went through a total transformation. Before Shinran met Honen, Shinran thought that a Buddha was a *good* and *wise* person—a holy person who was possessed of wonderful virtues. In order to become such a Buddha, Shinran attempted to purify himself by eliminating evil passions. But he could not attain Buddhahood. Not only was he unable to become a Buddha, he was feeling more and more depressed and miserable. His goal of Buddhahood seemed far away. He could not understand what was wrong.

When Shinran met Honen, Shinran saw a Buddha in him. But the Buddhahood that he saw in Honen was totally different from what he had anticipated. More than anything else, Shinran was moved by the fact that Honen was a humble student. Honen identified himself only as a student of Shan-tao (613-81, the fifth Shin patriarch). Honen said that the only important thing for him was to learn from his teacher. Thus Honen embodied the spirit of a Buddha by the name of *Namu Amida Butsu* (Bowling Amida Buddha). *Namu* (Bowling) is a part of the Buddha’s name. The Buddha’s name symbolizes the humblest human spirit. Before Shinran met Honen, he had thought that a Buddha was a teacher, a respected and worshipped person. But now, having met Honen, he realized that a Buddha was actually a student, a respecting and worshipping person.

Further, before Shinran met Honen, he had thought that a Buddha was a *good* and *wise* person. But now Shinran realized that such an understanding of Buddhahood was a shallow one. He realized that he had been seeing Buddhahood only objectively, from the outside. He had not known the subjective reality of Buddhahood—what a Buddha would say about himself. Although people would see a Buddha from the outside and describe

him by saying, “He is good and wise,” a Buddha would describe himself by saying, “I’m evil and foolish.” Having met Honen, who had deep insight into his own evilness and ignorance and said, “I’m evil and foolish,” Shinran realized that the true essence of Buddhahood was humility—deep insight into one’s own evilness and foolishness.

Thus in the first stage, i.e., before he met Honen, Shinran thought that a Buddha was a *good* and *wise* person and made efforts to become such a Buddha. But in the second stage, i.e., after he met Honen, Shinran realized that the essence of Buddhahood was humility—studentship and insight into one’s own evilness and ignorance.

Thus, having been moved by Honen’s humble spirit, Shinran also became a humble student. He recognized that he had ineradicable egoism at the basis of his being and that he had no goodness that he could rely on as the basis of his liberation. Thus he stopped all practices designed to transform himself into a holy person. He realized that a wonderful spiritual tradition represented by Honen had already been given to him and that the only thing necessary for him was to listen to it. This realization was his liberation.

Growing and Maturing

Let me further discuss the two stages, calling the first stage “the growing stage” and the second stage “the maturing stage.”

Human beings must grow up first; we must learn and experience all kinds of things. We must strive to be good, better, and best; we must pursue infinite possibilities. But when our growing stops, we must enter the maturing stage. We must reflect upon ourselves, know our evilness, ignorance, and ineradicable egoism, and become humble. The growing stage is the stage of self-betterment and self-enhancement; it is a stage of self-affirmation. The maturing stage is the stage of self-reflection and self-understanding; it is a stage of self-negation.

Shin Buddhist teachings concern the maturing stage. Shin Buddhist terms such as “evil” and “ignorant” are all connected with the discovery of our ineradicable egoism, with our becoming humble. Terms such as “evil” and “ignorant” should be understood only within the context of our individual self-understanding. They should be used only within the grammatical context of the first person singular, as in “I’m evil,” or “I’m ignorant.” The evilness or ignorance of other people is not an important issue in Shin Buddhism.

The essence of Shin Buddhism is the discovery of the evilness, ignorance, and ineradicable egoism in our beings. In the sphere of religion, people usually believe that they deserve liberation or salvation and seek it. But Shin Buddhism teaches us that we, being helplessly egoistic and having no goodness as any basis for liberation, cannot possibly deserve liberation.

Having discovered the ineradicable egoism in his being, Shinran said, “Since I am incapable of performing any religious practice, hell is my only home.”ⁱ He also identified himself as an *icchantika* (one who is totally devoid of any good).ⁱⁱ However, the discovery of his impossible reality was his liberation. This experience of liberation is a paradox that can be described only with the expression, “No liberation is liberation.”

When Shinran recognized that he had no goodness that he could rely on as the basis of his liberation, his religious self-reliance was totally shattered. However, this total negation of self-reliance was actually his liberation. Now he became a totally humble person, which was his liberation. Rev. Haya Akegarasu (1877-1954, a Shin teacher) described this paradoxical experience of liberation: “Our liberation does not exist in our becoming liberatable and liberated; it exists in our knowing that we are totally unliberatable.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In his article, “Self-Despising and Self-Respecting,” Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa (1863-1903, a Shin teacher) described the liberation of the humble person by saying:

The person who has entered the gate of religion sees “zero” value in himself. Far from slighting or respecting the self, he does not recognize any value in the self. Generally speaking, our anguish and grief exist because of our sense of self-importance. If we have already lost our sense of self-importance, we do not feel anguish and grief. If we have already lost it, we do not mind whether others despise or honor us, or whether they slight or respect us. We can do all things calmly, leaving others to respect or despise us as they like.^{iv}

Once a Buddhist Sunday school teacher asked me, “Can children comprehend Shinran’s deep self-awareness?” I answered, “No, I don’t think children can fully comprehend Shinran’s deep self-awareness, because it belongs to the maturing stage. Children are still in the growing stage.”

Growing must come first. We must let children grow up first. It is only after they finish growing up that they start to mature. When they enter the maturing stage, they can understand what Shinran says about himself. It is exactly the same with academic education. No matter how important graduate education may be, we cannot skip grammar school and junior high school. Thus Shinran called the growing stage the “Necessary Gate (*yo-mon*).”^v It is a preparatory stage. It is only after we go through the growing stage that the maturing stage can begin.

Another Buddhist Sunday school teacher asked me, “Is it all right for children to have ambition? Should we Sunday school teachers encourage or discourage children’s ambition?” I answered, “There is nothing wrong with children having ambition. It is important that they have ambition.”

Let children have as much ambition as possible. Let them pursue whatever goals or ideals they have. Let them strive to become great scholars, scientists, artists, and sportsmen. If, after having pursued their ambition and become adults, children start to reflect upon themselves and see their limitations, then their maturing stage has begun. While they are attempting to realize their ambitions, their arrogance will grow, too. But if they start to recognize their own arrogance, then their maturing stage has begun. Let them grow up first. Let them grow up as big as possible. We should not make *bonsai* trees—miniature Shinran trees—out of children. In a photo such a *bonsai* tree may look like a huge Shinran tree. But it is not the real Shinran. Shinran was a gigantic tree. In his growing-up stage, Shinran grew up to be a huge tree. If a ten-year old boy says, “I’m evil

and ignorant,” there is something wrong with him. If Sunday school teachers are attempting to make children say that, they are creating monsters.

Then what can Sunday school teachers do for children? The only thing they can do is to prepare children for the maturing stage in their future. The teachers must tell them that becoming good is not good enough—that the ultimate goal in human life is to become humble. They must tell them that humility is the most important universal virtue and that only a humble person can have the greatest happiness and joy.

More than anything else, Buddhist Sunday school teachers themselves must learn to be humble; they must learn to gain insight into the pettiness of their being and have deep respect for the Dharma (“truth” or “teaching”). If Sunday school teachers simply attempt to teach ideas and concepts to children, they fail to be good teachers. But if they can manifest humility, deep respect for the Dharma, they are good teachers. Children will eventually forget most of the ideas and concepts that their teachers have taught them, but they will remember the humble attitude and respect that they have seen in their teachers.

An American Girl and Paderewski

There is a story about an American teenage girl who was sightseeing in Germany. One day she visited Beethoven’s house. When she saw the piano that was used by Beethoven, she, being an accomplished pianist, could not resist her desire to play it. Thus she sat on a chair in front of the piano and played one of her favorite numbers. Since she played well, some tourists in the room clapped their hands. She was proud of herself.

After playing, she moved from the chair and started to look at the things, such as lamps and books, which were used by Beethoven. Then an elderly gentleman came into the same room. When he came to Beethoven’s piano, he sat on the chair where the girl had played music a little while before. The elderly gentleman sat there quietly. He looked as if he were meditating.

The girl was curiously watching him. Then a tourist approached her and whispered into her ear, “Do you know who that gentleman is? He is Paderewski, a famous Polish pianist. He is probably the greatest pianist alive today.”

She had heard much about Paderewski, but she had never seen him before. She was very excited to see such a famous pianist before her eyes. She thought that Paderewski would play music on the piano just as she had done a little while before. She waited and waited, but he did not start playing. Minutes passed. But he did not play.

The girl became impatient. She finally approached Paderewski and said, “Mr. Paderewski, aren’t you going to play?” The master answered, “No.” She said, “Mr. Paderewski, it would be a great honor for us if you would let us listen to your music.” Paderewski answered, “No, Miss, I am sorry. I won’t play now. As a matter of fact, I cannot play. I cannot play music on this piano. This is the piano of Beethoven, my teacher. Miss, I am nothing before this piano, before my teacher. I am totally worthless. I am not worthy even to touch this piano.” When she listened to his words, she was deeply moved.

Let me comment on this story. The two pianists in this story, the American girl and Paderewski, show us two different stages in human life—the growing stage and the

maturing stage. The girl represents the growing stage and Paderewski the maturing stage. Both were excellent pianists. But there was a considerable difference between them. The girl was a *good* pianist—a capable and skillful pianist; but Paderewski was a *humble* pianist, a great pianist.

The difference was that Paderewski had deeper respect for Beethoven than the girl did. The girl certainly had some respect for Beethoven; but her respect could not be compared with Paderewski's. He had tremendous respect for the great composer. He knew his limitations, smallness, and worthlessness before him. He was nothing before him. He was completely bowing down his head before him.

It is one thing to be *good*. But it is quite another to be *humble*. Being *good* is not good enough. We must know the limitations, smallness, and emptiness of our being. A *good* person must become a *humble* person. The girl must become a Paderewski.

Besides deep understanding of the pettiness of our being, besides humility, besides deep respect for the Dharma, what else do we need in our lives? If we are truly bowing our heads before the Dharma, that is itself our liberation. Shinran's view of liberation is fully expressed in his words at the end of his "Verses of True Entrusting (*Shoshin-ge*)," "Just entrust yourself to the words of these [seven] great monks."^{vi} He says that if we can *truly* respect and bow our heads before our teachers, that is all there is to Buddhism; nothing else is necessary. Our liberation is fully realized there.

Many people think that Buddhism means a practice or efforts to perfect themselves. But the most important thing in Buddhism is not practices or efforts to perfect ourselves; it is the realization that something perfect—a wonderful Dharma tradition—is already given to us. We need only to receive it, to listen to it.

Thus the most important thing in Buddhism is not *whatness*—not what we can do or achieve. It is *howness*—how humbly we are respecting the Dharma and how deeply we are bowing our heads before it. Our lives' focus must shift from *whatness* to *howness*, from becoming a good person to becoming an evil person—a humble person.

ⁱ Junjiro Takakusu and Kaikyoku Watanabe, eds., *Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo* (henceforth *Taisho*) (Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan-sha, 1924-34), vol. 83, p. 728, c3-5. Cf. *Collected Works of Shinran*, Vol. 1 (henceforth *CWI*) (Kyoto: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 1997), p. 662

ⁱⁱ For a discussion of *icchantika*, see Shuichi Maida, *The Evil Person: Essays on Shin Buddhism*, trans. by Nobuo Haneda (Los Angeles: Higashi Honganji North American Translation Center, 1989), pp. 77-83.

ⁱⁱⁱ Haya Akegarasu, *Akegarasu Haya Zenshu* [Complete Works of Haya Akegarasu] (Ishikawa, Japan: Myotatsu-ji, 1956-60), Part II, Vol. 8, pp. 560-65.

^{iv} Manshi Kiyozawa, *Kiyozawa Manshi Zenshu* [Complete Works of Manshi Kiyozawa] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2002-3), Vol. 6, pp. 125-26.

^v *Taisho*, Vol. 83, p. 629 b22. Cf. “Essential” gate in *CWI*, p. 221.

^{vi} *Taisho*, Vol. 83, p. 600 c7. Cf. *CWI*, p. 74.