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Shinran's View of *Shin* (Awakening)

—The Buddha Views Human Beings as Both Unsavable and Savable—

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Introduction

Shinran views *shin* as the most important thing that all human beings should experience in their lives. Among the several meanings the Chinese character *shin* contains (which I will discuss later in this essay), Shinran believes that its most important meaning is “understanding” or “awakening.” He says that *shin* belongs to the sphere of the Buddha and we deluded human beings cannot realize it by ourselves. It is realized only by “the supportive power” of the Buddha. He says that *shin* is the starting point in true Buddhism. If one attains it, one’s attainment of Buddhahood, the ultimate goal of Buddhism, is absolutely assured because *shin*, the starting point, already contains in it the goal of Buddhahood.

Although the word *shin* is used universally in all Buddhist traditions, the way Shinshu (Shin Buddhism) uses it is different from the non-Shinshu use. In non-Shinshu teachings, *shin* has the meaning of “trusting,” “entrusting,” “faith,” or “believing.” It means trusting a teacher and his teaching. Thus it is what a practitioner is required to do in the initial stage of Buddhist learning. The *shin* stage precedes the stage of practice; it prepares a practitioner for the stage of practice. In the stage of practice a practitioner puts into practice the teachings that he has learned by trusting his teacher and his teaching.

But in Shinshu, *shin* refers to the experience that a person has after he has already engaged in various practices to attain Buddhahood. After having performed various practices, he recognizes his inability to accomplish his goal by that means. He recognizes the existence of the ineradicable self-love that persists through all his practices. This recognition makes him recognize their futility and give them up. When he experiences this spiritual crisis, he meets with a teacher who embodies the power of the Buddha’s wisdom, or the spirit of a dynamic seeker that Bodhisattva Dharmakara (i.e., the hero of the story that is told in the *Larger Sutra*) symbolizes. This meeting starts the *shin* experience that Shinran considers the most important thing in Buddhism. According to Shinran, the *shin* experience consists of five phases: (1) meeting with a teacher, (2) listening to his teaching, (3) thinking about it, (4) understanding it, and (5) attaining awakening.

In this essay I will first discuss Shinran’s emphasis on the exclusive importance of *shin* in Buddhism. Second, I will discuss the several meanings contained in the Chinese character *shin* and how *shin* should be translated into English.

Third, I will discuss the twofold content of *shinjin* (i.e., the term that refers to the fourth and fifth phases of the *shin* experience). This twofold content of *shinjin* is called “the twofold deep understanding (*nishu-jinshin*)” and it consists of “deep understanding of the self (*ki-no-jinshin*)” and “deep understanding of the Dharma (*Ho-no-jinshin*).” The twofold deep understanding is the most important part of the *shin* experience. Here I will first discuss Shan-*tao*’s definition of *shinjin* as the twofold deep understanding—deep understanding of the self and deep understanding of the Dharma. Next, I will discuss Shinran’s view that the twofold deep understanding is the Buddha’s twofold deep understanding, not our deluded human beings’ twofold deep understanding that relies on dualistic human wisdom. Shinran viewed the twofold

deep understanding as a command coming from the Buddha. Fourth, I will explain the content of Shinran's *shinjin* as a paradoxical experience.

Fifth, I will discuss the sadness in confession and the joy-gratitude in liberation. The former is connected with deep understanding of the self and the latter with deep understanding of the Dharma. Deep understanding of the self means one's insight into the fact that one is absolutely unsavable. This insight is a confession that is accompanied with a sense of sadness. Deep understanding of the Dharma means one's insight into the fact that one is absolutely saved. This insight is accompanied by a sense of great joy and gratitude. In discussing gratitude, I want to point out that Shinran's expression of gratitude is unique.

Throughout this essay I want to emphasize that the *shin* (or *shinjin*) that Shinran talks about is an understanding (or wisdom) that belongs to the sphere of Buddhahood. It is something that deluded human beings cannot generate in themselves; it becomes reality only when they seriously hear the words of the Buddha and their spiritual predecessors and understand the deep meanings contained in them.

I. Shinran's Emphasis on the Exclusive Importance of *Shin*

Shinran's view that *shin* alone is important and necessary is based on his personal experience as a Buddhist practitioner. Now let me discuss Shinran's life and explain how he reached his view that *shin* alone was important and necessary.

Shinran talks about two types of Buddhism: provisional Buddhism and true Buddhism (*shinshu*). He identifies the former as a Buddhism that is based on self-power (or dualistic human wisdom). He identifies the latter as a Buddhism that is based on the Power Beyond the Self (or the Buddha's nondualistic wisdom).

Let me first explain provisional Buddhism. Shinran identified provisional Buddhism with two stages of his life: the first stage was the twenty years (from age nine to twenty-nine) he spent on Mt. Hiei, the center of Buddhist learning of his time, as a practitioner who strove to attain Buddhahood through sundry practices. The second stage was a few years after he met his teacher Honen, during which he engaged in the exclusive practice of the nembutsu (i.e., saying *Namu Amida Butsu*).

Provisional Buddhism consists of the three stages: (1) the stage of teachings (*kyo*) and trusting and understanding (*shin*)—practitioners must trust teachings and understand them; (2) the stage of practice (*gyo*)—they must put their intellectual understanding of teachings into practice; and (3) the stage of realization (*sho*)—they must have the attainment of Buddhahood. In provisional Buddhism practitioners are responsible for all three things (i.e., trusting and understanding teachings [*kyo-shin*], practice [*gyo*], and realization [*sho*—the three basic components of Buddhism). They believed that the two stages, i.e., (2) practice and (3) realization of Buddhahood, are the most difficult part of Buddhism and concentrate their efforts on perfecting them.

After having spent twenty years on Mt. Hiei and a few years under Honen as a serious practitioner of sundry practices or the exclusive practice of saying *Namu Amida Butsu*, Shinran started to doubt the validity of the provisional Buddhism that focused on (2) and (3). This doubt made him seriously read the *Larger Sutra* that talks about the story of Dharmakara, who becomes Amida Buddha. One passage in the sutra says that only by hearing *Namu Amida Butsu* ("Come to the Buddha's wisdom," historical teachers' challenging voice) can all human beings attain *shin* (awakening), the starting point at which one is absolutely assured of attaining Buddhahood. Reading this passage led Shinran to the realization that what was required of deluded human beings who had ineradicable self-love was not practices such as meditation and chanting but *shin* (i.e. listening to the Buddha's words, understanding them, and experiencing awakening). Thus he came to the conclusion that it is not practices but *shin* alone that could liberate him. This way, he moved from provisional Buddhism to what he called *shinshu* (true Buddhism).

Shinran understood that practices that were based on dualistic human wisdom could not liberate him because dualistic human wisdom was based on self-love. If the basis of practices was self-love, these practices could not possibly liberate human beings. He realized that only *shinjin* (i.e., the Buddha's mind filled with wisdom) could liberate him. He also realized that deluded human beings could not awaken *shinjin* in themselves because it belonged to the Buddha; only the Buddha could awaken it in them. Thus Shinran says that among all difficult things awakening *shinjin* is the most difficult, which means that human beings cannot awaken it without the help of "the supporting power" of the Buddha and historical teachers.

Shinran says that practitioners of provisional Buddhism are responsible for trusting and understanding teaching (*kyo*), performing practice (*gyo*), and attaining realization (*sho*). But

followers of true Buddhism are responsible only for *shin*—for receiving the power of the Buddha’s words of wisdom. Shinran said that teachings (*kyo*), practice (*gyo*), and realization (*sho*) were all given to him by the Buddha. Since he had to strive to attain *shinjin*, *shinjin* initially did not look like a gift from the Buddha. But, Shinran said that when he actualized *shinjin* in himself, he realized that *shinjin* was also a gift because he could not have actualized it without the help of “the supportive power.”

According to Shinran, deluded human beings cannot solve their spiritual problems, no matter how much effort they may make, on the basis of their limited human wisdom. Only the Buddha could offer solutions to those problems. The Buddha clearly understood the nature of human problems and offered solutions to them even before deluded human beings became aware of the problems and started to seek their solutions. The Buddha already prepared all the things necessary for human liberation, such as teachings, practice (i.e., *Namu Amida Butsu* [“Come to the Buddha’s wisdom!”]—a powerful expression that challenges and transforms deluded human beings), and realization. Thus Shinran says that the only thing that the Buddha wants human beings to do is to receive the gift. Shinran calls this “receiving” the *shin* experience. Shinran talks about the exclusive importance of *shin* (or *shinjin*),

Know that the Primal Vow (or Innermost Aspiration) of Amida makes no distinction between people young and old, good and evil. Only *shinjin* is necessary... no other form of good is necessary, because no good surpasses the nembutsu.

(*CWS*, p. 661, with modification by N.H.)

II. The Meanings of the Chinese Character *Shin* and Its English Translation

The Chinese character *shin* contains layers of meaning. As I mentioned at the outset of this essay, it is usually translated as English terms like “trusting,” “entrusting,” “faith,” and “believing.” That is the way *shin* is commonly understood in non-Shinshu teachings. Although terms like “trusting” or “entrusting” convey an aspect of *shin*, they fail to express the “awakening” aspect of *shin* that Shin Buddhism talks about as its most important meaning.

Shinran sees the following five meanings in the character *shin*:

- a. Trusting (or entrusting, faith, or believing)
- b. Listening
- c. Thinking (or reflecting)
- d. Understanding
- e. Awakening

When Shinran uses the character, he indicates one or several of the meanings contained in the character. Or he often uses it to indicate all the meanings contained in it.

Among these five meanings Shinran sees in the character *shin*, we can find the three meanings, “trusting,” “understanding,” and “awakening” in Buddhist dictionaries. They are identified with Sanskrit terms as follows: trusting (*sraddha*); understanding (*adhimukti*); and awakening (*prasada*). But no Buddhist dictionary says that *shin* has the two meanings, “listening” and “thinking.” These are the two meanings that Shinran sees as integral parts of the *shin* experience.

Let me explain how Shinran saw in the character *shin* the entire process in which a person experienced spiritual awakening. As I discussed earlier, the *shin* experience takes place after a person has already engaged in various practices and become a failure at them, having recognized their futility. Let me explain the entire process of spiritual development that Shinran saw in the character *shin*.

First, a person meets a teacher and has “trust” in him and his teaching. Then he “listens” to the teacher’s teachings. “Listening” to his teacher’s teachings should be accompanied by “thinking” about their meaning. Then, “listening and thinking” should lead him to “understanding” of the meaning of the teachings—to understanding of both the self and the Dharma. When this understanding is deepened, he experiences a spiritual “awakening,” or a turning round of his life. Shinran believes that all these five things are integral parts of the *shin* experience.

Now let me talk about how the character *shin* should be translated into English. Since Shinran often sees multiple meanings in *shin*, consistently translating it with one word like “entrusting” or “faith” is not right because the word conveys only one aspect of *shin*. Constantly translating *shin* as “trusting” (or “entrusting”) is not right because the word expresses only the initial phase of the *shin* experience. The term “faith” in the sense of trusting (or entrusting) may be used in Shinshu because it is one aspect of *shin*. But I don’t think it proper to constantly use the word

“faith” because it confuses people with its mystic and dualistic (savior-saved) connotations that non-Buddhist religions have. There are no mystic elements in Shinshu.

The most important feature of Buddhism is that it is a teaching about the Buddha’s wisdom—insight into the Dharma. Buddhism teaches us to understand the Buddha’s wisdom and recognize the mistake of our reliance on human wisdom. Shinshu focuses on the most important feature of Buddhism. According to Shinran, the *shin* experience is the process by which we receive the Buddha’s wisdom and recognize the mistake of our reliance on human wisdom. Shinran’s *shin* refers to the process by which we come to deeply appreciate the Buddha’s wisdom. Terms such as “entrusting” and “faith” cannot show us that the *shin* experience is the process by which we receive the Buddha’s wisdom; they express only an initial phase of the *shin* experience.

Then how should we translate the character *shin* into English? I submit that we should use the words “trusting,” “understanding,” and “awakening, interchangeably depending on the contexts in which the character *shin* is used. I don’t think it advisable to use one consistent English word to translate it because Shinran often sees multiple meanings in it.

Shinran and other Pure Land masters often use the two terms *shin* and *shinjin* (literally, “*shin*-mind”) as synonyms. But strictly speaking, there is some difference between them. Although the term *shin* could refer to one or multiple phases of the five phases of the *shin* experience I discussed above, the term *shinjin* specifically means “understanding” or “awakening,” the advanced phase of the *shin* experience.

For Shinran, *shinjin* means “attaining the true beginning that assures the attainment of Buddhahood, the ultimate goal of Buddhism.” He says that *shinjin* is accompanied by the deep joy of entering the sphere of the Buddha’s wisdom. He identifies attainment of *shinjin* with “the stage of joy, the first of the ten bodhisattva stages” that Nagarjuna talks about. Shinran also identifies attainment of *shinjin* with “transcendence of samsara,” “gaining insight into the Dharma of ‘neither arising nor perishing,’” “birth in the Pure Land,” and “attainment of the stage of the truly settled (or of the stage of nonretrogression).”

III. *Shinjin* as Twofold Deep Understanding: Deep Understanding of the Self and Deep Understanding of the Dharma

A. Shan-tao’s Definition of *Shinjin* as Twofold Deep Understanding

The first person who defined the meaning of *shinjin* is Shan-tao (613-681, a Chinese Pure Land master whom Shinran revered as the fifth Shin patriarch). In discussing the deep mind (which is the second of the three minds—the sincere mind [*shijo-shin*], the deep mind [*jin-shin*], the mind of aspiration for birth and directing of virtues [*eko-hotsugan-shin*] that are found in the *Contemplation Sutra*) Shan-tao first identified the deep mind (*jin-shin*) as “the deeply understanding mind (*jin-shin-jin*)” that is synonymous with *shinjin*. Then, he identified “the deeply understanding mind” as twofold deep understanding—deep understanding of the self and deep understanding of the Dharma as follows:

We are foolish beings of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death, ever sinking and ever wandering in transmigration from innumerable kalpas in the past, possessing no condition whatsoever that would lead to emancipation.

Amida Buddha’s Forty-eight Vows grasp us sentient beings and, riding on the power of the Vow without any doubt or apprehension, we will attain birth.

(*CWS*, p. 85, with modification by N. Haneda)

The first paragraph is called deep understanding of the self and the second deep understanding of the Dharma. Here Shan-tao says that since human beings lack any good spiritual conditions (or resources), they are absolutely unsavable. In the second paragraph he says that since Amida Buddha (i.e., a symbol of all historical Buddhas) made Vows in which he swore to save all sentient beings with the power of the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion, they will be absolutely saved.

In Buddhism the most importance issue is what kind of wisdom we base our world view on. Shan-tao’s twofold understanding means this: as long as human beings base their world view on dualistic wisdom, they cannot find any good condition for liberation; but if they receive the power of the Buddha’s wisdom (that the word “Vow” symbolizes), they can be immediately liberated. It is when we recognize the limitations of dualistic human wisdom and the limitlessness of the Buddha’s wisdom that we are liberated. Until we encounter the Buddha’s wisdom, we never know the limitations of human wisdom. Thus deep understanding of the self and deep understanding of the Dharma take place simultaneously.

B. Shinran's View of the Twofold Deep Understanding as the Buddha's Twofold Deep Understanding

One important point that we must remember when we read Shinran's writings is this: Shinran claims that the ideas he expresses in his writings are not so much his own ideas as those that he hears from Amida Buddha, Shakyamuni, and his predecessors such as the seven Shin patriarchs. He declared that there was no teaching that should be considered his. He never identified himself as a teacher but called himself "an agent" who received teachings and transmitted them just as they are to other people. In writing his main work, the *Kyogyoshinsho*, he identified himself as a collector of passages that explain the Shinshu, his teacher Honen's Buddhism; he did not call himself the author of the work. Thus, he says in the preface of the *Kyogyoshinsho*: "I rejoice in what I have heard. I praise what I have received." (CWS, p. 4)

This humble attitude of Shinran is the basis of his view of twofold deep understanding. Shinran viewed Shan-tao's statement of the twofold deep understanding as the Buddha's words that Shinran had heard. Shinran did not think that deluded human beings could have the twofold deep understanding by themselves. He believed that deluded human beings could not deeply understand the nature of the self and the Dharma no matter how much effort they might make. Only the Buddha could understand deluded human beings as both absolutely unsavable and absolutely savable, and can tell them to understand themselves as such.

Deluded human beings have only dualistic wisdom. As long as they rely on it, they can see only the good and evil that are conceived in dualistic or ethical thinking; they cannot see both bottomless karmic evil and the good potential, Buddha-nature, that the Buddha sees in human beings. Because the Buddha views bottomless karmic evil in human beings, he says that humans are absolutely unsavable—that they don't have any condition for salvation. This view of the Buddha is the basis of deep understanding of the self. But because the Buddha views the good potential, Buddha-nature, in human beings, he says that they are absolutely savable. This view of the Buddha is the basis of deep understanding of the Dharma. Thus only the Buddha can have the twofold deep understanding and tell human beings that they are both absolutely unsavable and absolutely savable. The Buddha tells human beings that although they may think that they have some good potential for salvation, they do not have it, and that they can be saved only by the power of the Buddha that can awaken and nurture Buddha-nature (or *shinjin*) in them. It is only when the Buddha tells deluded human beings how they should understand the self that they can start to understand themselves in the way the Buddha does. Shinran reads Shan-tao's twofold understanding in the following way and adds his comments to it.

The second is deep mind. Deep mind is the deeply understanding mind. There are two aspects. The first is "*Understand* deeply and decidedly that you are in actuality a foolish being of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death, ever sinking and ever wandering in transmigration from innumerable kalpas in the past, with never a condition that would lead to emancipation!" The second is "*Understand* deeply and decidedly that Amida Buddha's Forty-eight Vows grasp sentient beings, and riding on the power of the Vow without any doubt or apprehension, you will attain birth!"

The deep understanding (*jinshin*) expounded above is the diamondlike mind that is the consummation of Other Power, the ocean of true and real *shinjin* that is the supreme One Vehicle.

(CWS, p. 604 with modification by N.H. The Italics are by N. H.)

Shinran reads Shan-tao's twofold deep understanding in a unique way—as two imperative sentences coming from the Buddha, as the Buddha's command telling deluded human beings how they should understand themselves.

After citing Shan-tao's words, Shinran says that "the deep understanding (*jinshin*)" in Shan-tao's statement, which is synonymous with *shinjin*, is actually "the diamondlike mind," the mind of the Buddha, not a mind that deluded human beings can generate. Shinran indicates here that only the Buddha can generate the mind of deep understanding and give it to human beings.

In the Postscript of the *Tannisho*, Yuien also cites Shan-to's words concerning deep understanding of the self as an imperative sentence just like Shinran:

Know yourself to be a foolish being of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death, ever sinking and ever wandering in transmigration from innumerable kalpas in the past, with never a condition that would lead to emancipation.

(CWS, p. 679. The Italics are by N.H.)

These words of Yuien may indicate that Shinran often talked about Shan-tao's twofold deep understanding statement as an imperative one.

IV. Shinran's *Shinjin* as a Paradoxical Experience

Having discussed Shinran's view of *shinjin* as the twofold deep understanding, I want to further explain it. *Shinjin*, in which one simultaneously experiences both the unsavability and the savability of the self, is a paradox. I want to cite the expressions of Shinran and three modern Shin teachers which show us the paradoxical aspect of the *shinjin* experience.

A. The Words of Rev. Ryojin Soga (1875-1971, a Japanese Shin teacher): "Being Inside Is Being Outside. Being Outside Is Being Inside."

In explaining the paradoxical nature of *shinjin* Rev. Ryojin Soga said, "One who thinks that he is inside [the world of *shinjin*] is actually outside [it]. One who thinks that he is outside [it] is actually inside [it]."

Let me explain this expression of Soga's with a Japanese proverb, "The frog in a tiny well does not know the huge ocean." This proverb makes fun of a person who secludes himself in a small cocoon, remaining ignorant of the things that are happening outside the cocoon. Although the proverb says that the frog is ignorant of the huge ocean, he is actually ignorant of two things, the tininess of the well and the hugeness of the ocean. This twofold ignorance turns into twofold awakening when the frog sees the ocean for the first time; he recognizes both the tininess of the well and the hugeness of the ocean. While he is in the well, being ignorant of the hugeness of the ocean, he thinks that his well is a huge one. But when he sees the ocean for the first time, his idea that the well is a huge world gets shattered. He learns that he is in a tiny world and outside a huge world.

Initially when the frog was in a tiny well, he thought that *he was inside* a huge world. But *he was actually outside* one. When the frog becomes awakened to the existence of the huge world, he learns that *he is outside* it. But the huge world can tell the frog that *he is now actually inside* it because the huge world is making him recognize the tininess of the well; the frog and the well are being encompassed by the huge world.

There is a tremendous difference between the frog that is not awakened to the huge world and the frog that is awakened to it. Although they live in the same well, the former has an infatuated view of the well because he overestimates it; but the latter has the right view of the well because he is humbled by the huge world.

Likewise, when a person knows only provisional Buddhism, he thinks that *he is inside* true Buddhism. But *he is actually outside* it. When a person encounters true Buddhism for the first time, he learns that *he is outside* it. But *he is actually inside* it because his view that *he is outside* it is a confession or clear understanding of the self, an important matter that belongs to true Buddhism.

If a person thinks that he is a good and wise person who deserves salvation, he is actually an evil and foolish person who is far away from salvation. But if he thinks that he is an evil and foolish person who does not deserve salvation, he is actually a good and wise person who deserves salvation. That is why Shinran said in the *Tannisho*, "Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will." (CWS, p. 663)

B. Shinran's Words, "I Do Not Have *Shinjin* at All," Express His *Shinjin*

Here let me first cite Shinran's verse from his *Gutoku's Verses of Lament and Confession* and then Shuichi Maida's (1906-1967, a Japanese Shin teacher) comments on it.

Although I have taken refuge in Jodo Shinshu (i.e., True Buddhism),
I do not have the true mind (i.e., *shinjin*) at all.
This body is full of falsehood and insincerity;
I completely lack the pure mind (i.e., *shinjin*).
(CWS, p. 421, with modification by N.H.)

Shuichi Maida's comments:

Shinran's confession that he does not have sincerity is the only sincerity that a human being can have. Genuine sincerity is something that does not claim to be sincerity—this is a paradox. Only a paradoxical expression can reveal human sincerity.
(*Complete Works of Shuichi Maida*, vol. vi, p. 542. Trans. by N.H.)

C. Words of Rev. Haya Akegarasu (1877-1954, a Japanese Shin Teacher): “Becoming Totally Unsavable Is Salvation.”

It is not by becoming savable that we are saved. It is by becoming totally unsavable that we are saved.” (Dharma Breeze newsletter, V-2)

Let me explain these words of Akegarasu’s by talking about how Shinran viewed himself. Shinran identified himself with “those who commit the five atrocities and those who slander the right Dharma”—those whom Amida Buddha excluded from salvation in the Eighteenth Vow. Shinran considered those people the specific examples of “people who do not possess any condition whatsoever that would lead to emancipation,” an expression found in Shan-tao’s passage about deep understanding of the self. By identifying himself with those who are excluded from Amida’s salvation, Shinran tells us that it is in the recognition of the unsavability of the self that one simultaneously experiences salvation, i.e., deep understanding of the Dharma. (Cf. *The Evil Person*, pp. 77-83) Thus, for Shinran the Eighteenth Vow contains a paradox—that those who found themselves unsavable are actually being saved by the Buddha.

I have cited the words of three modern teachers. All of them emphasize the importance of deep understanding of the self, the first part of the twofold deep understanding. They tell us that we do not have to be so much concerned with deep understanding of the Dharma, the second part of the twofold deep understanding, because if we truly experience the first deep understanding alone, the second deep understanding is definitely there in the background of the first. If the second deep understanding were not there, the first deep understanding could never take place. Just as the insight into the smallness of the well presupposes insight into the hugeness of the ocean, and just as the recognition of the myriads of particles of dust presupposes illumination by a strong light that shows the existence of particles, we cannot recognize the futility of human wisdom unless we encounter the great power of the Buddha’s wisdom that challenges our attachment to human wisdom.

Deep understanding of the self is the core of the *shinjin* experience because it is in deep understanding of the self that we are totally liberated from the self. After all, Buddhism teaches us that the basic cause of suffering is self-love or self-attachment. When the Buddha’s light (or wisdom) makes us recognize the myriads of particles of dust (or ignorance) within us, we can no longer have any optimistic or infatuated view of the self; we clearly see it as a clump of self-love—as nothing worth cherishing. Deep understanding of the self alone can liberate us from the self.

V. The Sadness in Confession and the Joy-Gratitude in Liberation

Preface: The Uniqueness of Shinran’s Teaching

Here I want to discuss one of the unique features of Shinran’s teaching. Shinran never says that he can eliminate things such as dualistic human wisdom (that “a tiny well” symbolizes), deluded ideas, and blind passions. This teaching of Shinran is in direct contrast to the teachings of non-Shinshu teachers that teach people to eliminate such things.

Buddhism is about the two ways of transcending things such as dualistic human wisdom, deluded ideas, and blind passions: (1) transcending them by *eliminating* them and (2) transcending them by *seeing* them. Non-Shinshu teachers teach us the first way of transcending. Shinran teaches us the second way. Shinran tells us that when we receive the Buddha’s wisdom-perspective and are able to clearly *see* the self (i.e., human wisdom, deluded ideas, and blind passions) through that perspective, we are transcending it, although we have not eliminated it.

Here an example that shows the Shinshu way of transcending is in order. I can talk about the smallness of my house and the hugeness of the world outside it. If I only stay in my house, I cannot see its smallness; I think that my house is a huge world and all the things I do in it have great significance. For example, my occasional argument with my wife is a matter of great significance, and which one of us is right is a matter of great importance. But if I happen to see my house from an airplane in the sky, I can see the smallness of the house and all the things that take place there. Then I can simultaneously transcend my misguided view that my house is a huge world and all the things that take place in it have great significance. This transcendence, however, does not mean that I stop arguing with my wife. I still do, but there is a difference between before and after seeing the house from the sky. Before I thought everything about the house had great significance, but now I don’t think so. Although I still have my karma of arguing with my wife, I can now see it as a matter that does not have absolute importance. I can now

laugh at myself—at all the things that I consider significant. This is the Shinshu way of transcending.

Shinjin awakening means the same thing. “Seeing it is transcending it.” It does not mean that we can eliminate things such as dualistic human wisdom; it means that we clearly see their pettiness and smallness and become liberated from *attachment* to them.

Shinjin awakening is accompanied by a sense of both sadness and joy: the sadness of seeing the self that lives in the small world of human wisdom and the joy of seeing the self transcending the small world. This is the unique aspect of Shinran’s *shinjin* awakening.

Non-Shinshu teachers say that their liberation experience is accompanied by a sense of great joy at having eliminated dualistic human wisdom and becoming one with the Buddha’s wisdom or at having eliminated their blind passions. They seldom talk about the sadness of seeing the self that still lives in a small world of human wisdom or the self that still has deluded views and blind passions. But Shinran is different. He tells us that a *shinjin* person experiences both deep sadness at having dualistic human wisdom, deluded ideas, and blind passions and deep joy at receiving the Buddha’s wisdom that enables us to transcend them.

Shinran never places himself on the side of the Buddha’s wisdom or the Dharma. He never claims that he has become one with the Buddha’s wisdom. He always sees himself as a recipient of light; he keeps on recognizing the depth of his darkness, being illumined by the light. The more light he receives from the Buddha, the more particles of dust he discovers in the self. He experiences both the sadness of discovering the miserable reality of the self and the joy of being embraced by the Buddha’s light.

A. The Sadness in Confession

1. Two types of confession

I want to discuss the sadness that a *shinjin* person experiences in deep understanding of the self. When he recognizes the unsavability of the self, he experiences deep sadness. We can say that deep understanding of the self is what we mean by the word “confession.” Now in order to explain deep understanding of the self that is accompanied by a sense of sadness, let me talk about the difference between the two types of confession, i.e., (1) non-Shinshu confession—the type of confession that people make on the basis of dualistic (or ethical) human thinking and (2) Shinshu confession—deep understanding of the self that people experience on the basis of the Buddha’s wisdom.

Non-Shinshu confession that people make on the basis of dualistic (or ethical) thinking is what people usually call confession. The basic features of this type of confession are as follows:

A person has faith in his dualistic (or ethical) values, such as good and evil, pure and impure. When he commits a transgression, he describes himself as “an evil person.” This confession of being “an evil person” is based on dualistic (ethical) criteria. Although this humble view of the self as “an evil person” appears similar to the deep understanding of the self that Shinran talks about, it is not. It is an expression of the inferiority complex of a person who cannot live up to the required ethical standards. When a person views himself as “an evil person” on the basis of dualistic human wisdom, he feels only sadness.

Next, let me discuss Shinshu confession that a person makes on the basis of the Buddha’s wisdom. When the person encounters the nondualistic wisdom of the Buddha, his attachment to dualistic human wisdom is challenged and negated by it. He becomes ashamed of his attachment to ethical (or dualistic) thinking itself. Here he is not ashamed of “ethical evil.” Being ashamed of one’s attachment to ethical (or dualistic) thinking means that he is ashamed of both good and evil that are based on dualistic thinking. For Shinran “evil” means being attached to dualistic thinking and “good” means being liberated from dualistic thinking.

2. Shinran’s Words of Confession

I want to cite Shinran’s words that express his confession, his deep understanding of the self.

a. Shinran’s confession of the futility of humanly conceived good and evil

I know nothing at all of good or evil. For if I could know good thoroughly, as Amida Tathagata knows it, then I would know good. If I could know evil thoroughly, as the Tathagata knows, then I would know it. But with a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are empty and false, totally without truth and sincerity. The nembutsu alone is true and real.

(*CWS*, p. 679)

b. His identification of himself as a non-Buddhist

As I discussed earlier, Shinran identified himself with “those who commit the five atrocities and slander the right dharma” that are mentioned in the Eighteenth Vow. He also identified himself as an *icchantika*—one who is totally devoid of good spiritual potential, “a foolish ordinary person who is fully possessed of blind passions” (*CWS*, p. 679), and “a monk in name only without precepts.” (*CWS*, pp. 249, 423)

Although we call Shinran a great Buddhist, he did not view himself as a Buddhist. He would say that he could not find anything in himself that deserved the title of “Buddhist.” We can see Shinran’s view that he is not a Buddhist in his following words:

I know truly how grievous it is that I, Gutoku Shinran, am sinking in an immense ocean of desires and attachments and am lost in vast mountains of fame and advantage, so that I rejoice not at all at entering the stage of the truly settled, and feel no happiness at coming nearer the realization of true enlightenment. How ugly it is! How wretched!
(*CWS*, p. 125)

I may think that these times belong to the right dharma-age,
But in me—the lowest of foolish beings—
There is no mind that is pure, true, or real;
How could I awaken the aspiration for enlightenment?
(*CWS*, p. 402)

B. Joy-Gratitude in Liberation

Shinran says that *shinjin* is accompanied by joy and gratitude. I want to first talk about the joy that a *shinjin* person experiences. This joy arises because the *shinjin* person is liberated from a small and isolated religious cocoon. First, let me discuss Shinran’s view of the two types of joy that the *shinjin* person experiences.

1. Two Types of Joy

a. Joy at having met wonderful teachers and receiving wonderful teachings—the joy that is directed toward the past

Shinran says that when a person experiences *shinjin*, he experiences great joy (that is synonymous with gratitude) toward the teachers and their teachings—toward the good karmic conditions that made it possible. Shinran defines this joy as “rejoicing upon attaining what one is supposed to attain.” (Cf. *CWS*, pp. 480-481) This is like the joy a student feels when he has just entered a college—the joy that he feels toward those who helped him to enter the college. Shinran talks about the joy of having met with wonderful teachers such as Shakyamuni and the seven patriarchs.

If you should come to realize this practice and *shinjin*, rejoice at the conditions from the distant past that have brought it about. (*CWS*, p. 4)

I sincerely revere the benevolent care behind the masters’ teaching activity. My joy grows ever fuller, my gratitude and indebtedness ever more compelling.
(*CWS*, p. 291. See also *CWS* p. 4)

b. Joy at attaining the true beginning that necessarily leads one to the attainment of Buddhahood—joy directed toward the future

Shinran says that when a person experiences *shinjin*, he experiences another type of joy—the joy of attaining the true beginning in which one is absolutely assured of attaining Buddhahood. This is joy directed toward the future. Shinran defines this joy as “rejoicing beforehand at being assured of attaining what one shall attain.” (Cf. *CWS*, p. 480) This is like the joy a student has when he enters a college and thinks about his future academic achievement.

2. The Joy of Being Called “a True Disciple of the Buddha” by the Buddha in Spite of the Fact That Shinran Sees Himself as a Non-Buddhist

Shinran created the Buddhist name for himself, “Foolish stubble-haired Shinran, a disciple of Shakyamuni (*gutoku-shaku-shinran*).” (*CWS*, p. 4, p. 289) This name implies two things: first, “foolish stubble-haired” means that Shinran is a person who does not deserve to be called a Buddhist—that he is an unsavable person; second, “a disciple of Shakyamuni” means that the

Buddha calls Shinran “a disciple of Shakyamuni,” considering him deserving to be called so because Shinran has understood the unsavability of the self.

In many places in his writings Shinran says that the Buddha admires a person who attains *shinjin*, or deep understanding of the self, and calls such a person “a disciple of Shakyamuni,” “a wonderful person (*myokonin*), “a pure white lotus,” a person equal to Maitreya,” and “a person equal to a Tathagata.” Shinran says that although *shinjin* persons do not see any good spiritual qualities in themselves, the Buddha calls them “excellent people.” Shinran says,

All foolish beings, whether good or evil,
When they hear and entrust to Amida’s universal Vow,
Are praised by the Buddha as people of vast and excellent understanding;
Such a person *is called* a pure white lotus. (CWS, p. 70)

Since those counted among the truly settled [i.e., *shinjin* persons] are of the same stage as Maitreya, they *are also said to be* equal to the Tathagatas. Know that persons of true *shinjin* can *be called* equal of Tathagatas because, even though they themselves are always impure and creating karmic evil in their bodies, their minds are always equal to Tathagatas.

(CWS, p. 528 with modification by N.H. The Italics are by N.H.)

C. Gratitude

All religious people emphasize the importance of gratitude. Shinran often talks about his gratitude or his indebtedness to his teachers. For Shinran, joy and gratitude are almost synonyms. Here I want to say that Shinran’s expressions of gratitude are unique in that he expresses his gratitude exclusively to those, such as Amida Buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha, and the seven patriarchs, who guided him and enabled him to attain the Buddha’s wisdom. We are surprised by the fact that Shinran does not express his gratitude to other things, such as his country, the ruler of the country, his parents, people in general, and nature—things to which we usually express our gratitude. Many Buddhist teachers of the past and present have talked about the importance of expressing our gratitude to those things.

The reason Shinran expresses his gratitude exclusively to those who led him to the Buddha’s wisdom is this: for Shinran, receiving the Buddha’s wisdom—the wisdom that transforms the negative into the positive—is everything in Buddhism. If a person receives the Buddha’s wisdom, all the negative things, such as sickness, poverty, an accident, and a disaster, start to have positive meanings—they turn into “our teachers.” If all those negative things turn into something meaningful, they become the objects of our gratitude. Then our regular gratitude that is directed only toward positive things, such as health, wealth, and happiness, start to appear shallow. When we say, “I am so grateful,” we are usually talking about positive things, such as wonderful health, a nice family, and a nice job. We seldom feel grateful for the negative things we have in our lives.

Shinran knew that if we receive the Buddha’s wisdom alone, all things in our lives, not only the positive things but also the negative things, would become indispensable conditions for the fulfillment of our lives. That’s why he expressed his gratitude exclusively to those who guided him to the Buddha’s wisdom, and did not talk about his gratitude for other things.

One of Shinran’s expressions of gratitude is as follows:

Such is the benevolence of Amida’s great compassion,
That we cannot help returning it, even to the breaking of our bodies;
Such is the benevolence of the master [i.e., Shakyamuni] and true teachers,
That we cannot help repaying it, even to our bones becoming dust.
(CWS, p. 412, with modification by N.H.)

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