

## On Shinran's Thought

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### 1. Buddhism and the Pure Land Sect

Shinran is a Japanese Buddhist in the twelfth century. He believed in the Pure Land sect and built original thought. Firstly I explain Buddhism and the Pure Land sect briefly. And then I want to explain the thought of Shinran.

The purpose of Buddhism is to realize the truth<sup>i</sup>. In Buddhism, people are the existences that continue suffering because they are ignorant of the truth. And they hold such opinion based on misunderstanding and act wrongly. As a result, they will repeat life and death eternally and continue taking many pains.

To escape from such pains, people must do religious practices and realize the truth. A man who realized this truth is Buddha. Buddhism is the teaching for people to become Buddha.

Ultimate happiness for people is to escape from pains by realizing the truth. Therefore they should make an effort and do religious practices by their own power. This is the basic idea in Buddhism.

The Pure Land sect is one sect of Buddhism but it is very unique as Buddhism. In the Pure Land sect, the final purpose is to realize the truth too. However, its method to accomplish that purpose is different from ordinary Buddhism greatly.

The Pure Land sect maintains we should aim at the rebirth in Pure Land to realize the truth. Pure Land is the words to express Buddha's country. But by the Pure Land sect, Pure Land means the country of Amida Buddha in particular. This Pure Land is supposed to be clean and comfortable, and people have no pain or obstruction there.

Such a Pure Land was built by Amida Buddha very long time ago. And by relying on the power of Amida Buddha, we can be born in this Pure Land after our death. And there we can realize the truth naturally and easily.

If we hope to realize the truth immediately, there is no easier method than being born in this Pure Land. Therefore, people should hope to be born in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha. This is the basic thinking of the Pure Land sect.

### 2. The Reason of Belief in the Pure Land Sect

Shinran was a Buddhist of the Pure Land sect. According to Shinran, if people do not choose the way of the Pure Land sect, they will never be able to realize the truth. The reason is that in his days Buddhism and people went wrong.

From the world view of Buddhism, Buddhism went on well after death of Syakamuni Buddha<sup>ii</sup> for 500 years. Buddhism was also in good in the following 1000 years. But for the next 10,000 years Buddhism shall decline and people shall become wicked and inferior. In the age of Shinran it has been already thought that it was in the last 10,000 years<sup>iii</sup>.

Such consciousness about his age was really deep-rooted in Shinran. However, Shinran arrived at this consciousness not by a simple calculation of the generation. Shinran observed many aspects of his time and he reflected on his own evil deeply again and again. In this way, he deepened his recognition that it was the age when Buddhism declined and that he himself was an inferior person in this dark age.

For people in this age, most practices in Buddhism were too difficult to perform. But only the way of the Pure land sect could be performed by such people, because Amida Buddha made this way in order to relieve even any stupid and wicked people. So people in this age must be leaded to the Pure Land sect and rely on the power of Amida Buddha.

### 3. Amida Buddha

For the Pure Land sect Amida Buddha is very important because it is the power of this Buddha that relieves people.

According to Sinran, in the past a bodhisattva<sup>iv</sup> named Houzou appeared from the truth so as to relieve people. The truth is the ultimate aim to be realized in Buddhism. The truth has neither figure nor color. And the truth cannot be expressed by words and cannot be thought by human mind. So the truth itself can not have an effect on people.

Therefore Houzou, with own figure and color, appeared from the truth and took 48 vows in order to relieve people. The main contents of these vows are to create the Pure Land where people can realize the truth very easily, and to make all people be born in this Pure Land.

Houzou declared that he would never become Buddha till he could accomplish these vows. After having done long religious practices, he accomplished all 48 vows. After that he became Buddha named Amida.

Among 48 vows there is "the vow of faith and Nenbutu". This vow was made in order to make people be born in the Pure Land.

"When I become Buddha, people shall get faith in me and do Nenbutu in order to be born in my country. If someone could not be born in my country, I would never become Buddha"<sup>v</sup>

Because this vow was realized, people who get faith in Amida Buddha and perform Nenbutu can be born in the Pure Land by the power of Amida Buddha. Therefore if people want to be born in the Pure Land they must get faith in Amida Buddha and perform Nenbutu. Next we elucidate this faith and Nenbutu.

#### 4. Faith

Firstly I want to explain the faith of this sect. This faith is to entrust all to Amida Buddha earnestly. For this faith there are two things necessary. One thing is to become aware of own evil, and another is to trust Amida Buddha deeply. At first I will explain the former. On this point Shinran said;

"People must not pretend to be a wise man or a good person. The reason is that they hold inward falsehood. Greed, anger, falsehood, and craftiness appear repeatedly. People can never get over their bad properties. This state is the same as a snake or a scorpion with poison.

Even if people train themselves by religious practices, it is poisonous good, and it is a false act. I cannot name this a genuine good act. Even if people decide to train themselves in such a state and make efforts all day, it is named entirely poisonous good"<sup>vi</sup>

According to this sentence, we are hopelessly evil. Even if people make many efforts and train themselves desperately, all of these are useless. Therefore within one's own power we cannot escape from a state of pains in which we repeat life and death forever.

Shinran said that people must realize this fact. By realizing this fact, people can stop relying on their own power. And by abandoning their own power, people can entrust all to the power of Amida Buddha in the purest way.

People must become aware of own evil in order to entrust all to Amida Buddha. At the same time they must trust Amida Buddha deeply.

The power of Amida Buddha makes people be born in the Pure Land. Shinran says that people must believe this power of Amida Buddha without doubt. By believing Amida Buddha so deeply, people can entrust all to the power of Amida Buddha.

People are able to entrust all to Amida Buddha as a result of these two manners. If people rely on their own power even slightly, it cannot be said that they entrust all to Amida Buddha purely. And if people do not trust Amida Buddha so deeply, they cannot entrust all to Amida Buddha.

#### 5. Nenbutu

I explained faith. Next I will explain Nenbutu. Nenbutu is to recite a name of Amida Buddha. Nenbutu is to pronounce "Namu Amidabutu". This Nenbutu has connection with faith very closely. Faith and Nenbutu should not be thought separately. Shinran said;

"True faith is accompanied with Nenbutu. However, Nenbutu is not always accompanied with faith"<sup>vii</sup>

According to this sentence, faith is always accompanied with Nenbutu. People who get faith in Amida Buddha perform Nenbutu certainly. The reason is that there is "the vow of faith and Nenbutu" in 48 vows of Amida Buddha.

In this vow Amida Buddha declares people must perform Nenbutu if they want to be born in the Pure Land. Faith is to entrust all of self to Amida Buddha. People who got faith in Amida Buddha make themselves empty and obey Amida Buddha earnestly. So it is inevitable for such people to perform Nenbutu which Amida Buddha tells them to perform. Therefore, people who get faith in Amida Buddha will perform Nenbutu certainly.

In this way true faith is always accompanied with Nenbutu. However, Nenbutu is not always accompanied with faith. Because Nenbutu is a very simple act, any people can perform it anywhere and anytime. Even a person who does not get faith in Amida Buddha can perform Nenbutu. However such Nenbutu does not have any meaning to be born in the Pure Land.

Nenbutu without faith is the act that people perform intentionally and by their own power. Because people are evil and inferior they can achieve nothing by their own power. Therefore people cannot get any result if they perform Nenbutu by their own power.

In contrast, Nenbutu caused by own faith is not the act which people perform intentionally and by their own power. People throw their own power away completely and entrust all to Amida Buddha. As a result Nenbutu happens naturally. So to speak, people are made to perform such Nenbutu by Amida Buddha. And by such Nenbutu, people accept the power of Amida Buddha.

It is said that at the moment such people come to have the conviction of being relieved by Amida Buddha. By that, no pains can hurt them any more and they shall find great pleasure.

#### 6. The Difficulty to get Faith in Amida Buddha

Faith and Nenbutu are a series of things which are hard to be separated. But it may be said that the first condition to be born in the Pure Land is to get faith in Amida Buddha. The reason is that Nenbutu is necessarily performed if

people get faith in Amida Buddha, and it does not have any effect if Nenbutu is not caused by faith.

Faith is very important in order to be relieved by Amida Buddha. However, it is very difficult for people to get faith in Amida Buddha. As Shinran said, it is impossible that people get faith in Amida Buddha by their own power because they are inferior and wicked.

Faith is to entrust all of self to Amida Buddha. In order to entrust all to Amida Buddha, people should trust Amida Buddha without doubt. And people should throw their own power away by becoming aware of their own evil.

But these are very difficult things. For example, to become aware of one's evil is to despair oneself. People can hate and abandon their own power only if trust in oneself is broken entirely.

However, trust in human self is not the thing which is so easily shaken. Rather it is extremely natural for people to accomplish things by relying on their own power. Such a natural tendency cannot be thrown away easily. So even if people reflect on their own evil very sincerely, in the depths of the mind they still try to think themselves to be good.

Therefore faith in Amida Buddha is not the thing which people get by their own power. Shinran said that faith is given by Amida Buddha. Because people are evil they must throw their own power away and rely on the power of Amida Buddha. And such inferior people can do so not by their own power but by the power of Amida Buddha.

About getting faith in Amida Buddha, Shinran did not tell many things. Perhaps in his sincere religious life, Shinran experienced a moment that he realized Amida Buddha clearly by mysterious intuition. When he faced Amida Buddha that is absolute, both any kind of limited human effort and any kind of limited human good became

equal to nothing. As a result of this, he could merely entrust himself to Amida Buddha. It can be thought that there was such a mysterious moment in Shinran's life.

#### Notes

1. The truth in Buddhism means the truth of the world and self. Everything in the world is related mutually. One thing makes other everything exist and other everything makes one thing exist. In this way, everything depends on one another. They are formed because of the relation. Nothing can stand alone and can exist without changing. This whole world formed by relation is the truth. A man realizes this truth by mysterious intuition. At that time he knows that he himself is the world itself and the truth itself and that there is no distinction between self and others. This man is Buddha. Buddha has ultimate wisdom based on realizing the truth and limitless compassion on others. Buddha is a living person who realized the truth. But often, the truth itself is thought to be metaphysical Buddha too. This Buddha doesn't have figure and exists eternally. And it cannot be expressed by words and cannot be thought by human mind.
2. Syakamuni Buddha is the founder of Buddhism.
3. This period is called the last Dharma.
4. Bodhisattva means a man who is doing religious practices in order to become Buddha. But Houzou is not an ordinary man. He is the incarnation of Buddha which is the truth itself. This Buddha made Houzou appear by limitless compassion and at last Houzou became Amida Buddha. Amida Buddha is the power to relieve everything and is often expressed as eternal light which spreads out all over the world.
5. "Jyoudosanbukyou Muryoujyukyou" Iwanamibunko 1963.12.16 p157
6. "Kyougyoushinsyou" Shinran Iwanamibunko 1957.10.7 p135
7. "Kyougyoushinsyou" Shinran Iwanamibunko 1957.10.7 p169