

# SHINRAN

*AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS THOUGHT*

With Selections from the  
Shin Buddhism Translation Series

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HONGWANJI INTERNATIONAL CENTER

Kyoto

1989

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## LETTERS AND COMMENTARIES

### 1 PRIMAL VOW

**THE Primal Vow** is the deep aspiration, arising from true wisdom or reality, to lead all beings to enlightenment. Thus it also refers to Amida Buddha's forty-eight Vows, in which this aspiration is manifested, and to the Eighteenth Vow in particular, which forms their core. The Eighteenth Vow is the foundation of the Pure Land path. The following passage is Shinran's only detailed commentary on it. Source: *Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls*, pp. 33-35.

#### **THE EIGHTEENTH VOW:**

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, with sincere mind entrusting themselves, aspiring to be born in my land, and saying my Name perhaps even ten times, should not to be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma.

#### **FROM SHINRAN'S COMMENTARY:**

##### **1 *With sincere mind entrusting themselves***

*Sincere* means true and real. "True and real" refers to Amida's Vow being true and real; this is the meaning of *sincere mind*.

- 2 From the very beginning sentient beings, who are filled with blind passions, lack a mind true and real, a heart of purity, for they are possessed of defilements, evil, and wrong views.
- 3 *Entrusting* is to be free of doubt, believing deeply and without any double-mindedness that Amida Buddha's Primal Vow is true and real.
- 4 This *entrusting with sincere mind*, then, is that arising from the Vow in which Amida urges every being throughout the ten quarters, "Entrust yourself to my Vow, which is true and real"; it does not arise from the hearts and minds of foolish beings of self-power.
- 5 *Aspiring to be born in my land*  
 "Out of the entrusting with sincere mind that is Other Power, aspire to be born in the Pure Land of happiness!"
- 6 *Saying my Name perhaps even ten times*  
 In encouraging us to say the Name that embodies the Vow, the Tathāgata added *perhaps even* to the words *ten times* to show that there is no set number of times the Name must be said and to teach sentient beings that there is no determined hour or occasion for saying it.
- 7 Since we have been given this Vow by Amida Tathāgata, we can take any occasion in daily life for saying the Name and need not wait to recite it at the very end of life; we should simply give ourselves up totally to the entrusting with sincere mind of
- 8 Amida. When we realize this true and real shinjin, we enter completely into the compassionate light that grasps, never to abandon, and hence become established in the stage of the truly settled. Thus it is written.
- 9 *[If such beings] should not be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment*  
 "If the person who has realized entrusting with sincere mind is not born in my Pure Land, may I not become a Buddha."

- 10 This, the essential purport of the Primal Vow, can be found  
 11 fully explained in *Essentials of Faith Alone*. "Faith alone" is the heart that aspires solely to this true and real entrusting.
- 12 *Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma*  
*Excluded* means that those who commit the five grave offenses are rejected and reveals how grave the evil of slandering  
 13 the dharma is. By showing the gravity of these two kinds of wrongdoing, these words make us realize that all the sentient beings throughout the ten quarters, without a single exception, will be born in the Pure Land.

## NOTES

## EIGHTEENTH VOW

The different versions of the *Larger Sutra* (Sanskrit, Tibetan, and five extant Chinese translations) give widely varying enumerations of Amida's Vows, ranging from twenty-four to forty-nine vows. The version of forty-eight in the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, the source for the Eighteenth Vow here, has been canonical for most of the Chinese and Japanese tradition.

*ten quarters*. The entire universe lying in the ten directions (eight points of the compass, zenith and nadir).

*with sincere mind entrusting themselves, aspiring to be born in my land*. This phrase was traditionally understood to indicate three attitudes or states of mind-sincerity, trust, and aspiration-required of beings. These were termed the "three minds" or "threefold mind."

*five grave offenses*. Acts that condemn one to the deepest hell. The Mahāyāna tradition records them as: 1) destroying temples; 2) reviling the teaching; 3) harassing monks and nuns; 4) intentionally killing one's father, mother, or an arhat, physically injuring a Buddha, or disrupting the sangha; 5) refusing to recognize the law of causation and constantly committing the ten transgressions: destruction of life; theft;

adultery; lying; harsh words; speech leading to enmity; idle talk; greed; anger; wrong views (Shinjin, 123). Shinran interprets these offenses broadly: "People who look down on teachers and who speak ill of the masters commit slander of the dharma. Those who speak ill of their parents are guilty of the five grave offenses" (*Letters of Shinran*, pp. 58-59).

1

*Sincere means true and real.* Shinran follows Shan-tao in interpreting "sincere mind" to mean "true and real"; however, he takes "true and real" not in their ordinary sense of complete sincerity, but in their Buddhist meaning, referring to truth or reality: "The true and real is Tathagata; Tathagata is the true and real. . . The true and real is Buddha-nature; Buddha-nature is the true and real" (*Nirvana Sutra*, in Shinjin, 26). Sincere mind, then, is the mind that is whole, pure, free of delusional thought and self-attachment-the enlightened mind of the Buddha.

*Amida.* As an expression of reverence, Shinran frequently uses one of the titles for a Buddha, "Tathagata" (J. *nyorai*) rather than "Amida." In the selections for this volume, we have often substituted "Amida" for clarity. It should be noted, however, that "Tathagata," meaning "come from thusness" or "gone to thusness," carries for Shinran the sense that "Amida Tathagata comes forth from suchness" (Realization, 1).

*Amida's Vow being true and real.* That Amida's Vow is "true and real" means that it arose from the mind of Tathagata or true reality and was fulfilled through Dharmakara's activity, carried on completely free of blind passions (Shinjin, 22).

2

Shinran draws a direct contrast between Buddha and sentient beings. It is often assumed that a relationship between Amida and beings stands upon some element or condition of commonality in beings, but in Shinran's thought, there is a fundamental and complete opposition. Beings seek to bring themselves toward Buddhahood, but through their efforts they can only become increasingly aware of failure. At the same time, it is precisely where Buddha and beings stand in opposition that Amida's directing of virtue, which grasps and takes into itself what is the opposite of itself, can be fulfilled.

*blind passions.* All the thoughts and feelings arising from attachment to self and binding us to samsaric existence. The original Sanskrit term *kleśa* means "defilements" of body and mind; the Chinese translation carries the meaning of pain or affliction (Passage 7, 1 I).

3

*free of doubt.* Not to cling to one's own calculation and designs; to be free of the fragmented thoughts and distractions of anxious self-concern.

*Primal Vow (hongan).* The term "primal vow" (sometimes rendered "original vow") refers to the vows that a Buddha made as a bodhisattva-vows which define the qualities that are manifested upon fulfillment of Buddhahood. The vows are "original"-causal and formative-in that they concretely delineate the goal of a bodhisattva's practice and the way the Buddha's enlightenment will function upon fulfillment. Thus, in the Pure Land tradition "Primal Vow" refers to the forty-eight Vows Amida made as Dharmakara Bodhisattva, and in particular to the central Eighteenth Vow.

*Primal Vow is true and real.* Here, sincere mind ("Vow being true and real") is the object of entrusting, not a characteristic of the practitioner's attitude.

4

In conclusion to his comments on "sincere mind" and "entrusting," Shinran points out that since "entrusting" means to be free of doubt, which is a form of blind self-attachment, it is the Buddha's mind embodied in the Vow and not the minds of beings. That is, it implies the turnabout in which a person becomes free of self-power, the mind of blind passions having been transformed into good (become one with the Buddha's mind).

*Entrusting with sincere mind (shishin shingyō).* In 3, Shinran gives a general definition of entrusting and identifies sincere mind as its object. In 4, he explains the special meaning of these terms in the context of the Vow. Here, entrusting is itself said to be the sincere mind. These two aspects of the mind of the Vow-entrusting to the sincere mind and entrusting that is the sincere mind-express the nature of shinjin, which is given to beings by the Buddha and realized or attained by beings as the awakening to the Vow. This "entrusting with sincere mind," then, is that to which people who enter the Pure Land path aspire (7 and 1 I).

*"Entrust yourself. . ."* To stress the centrality of the Buddha's activity, Shinran frequently interprets sutra phrases not as prescriptions for practice to be performed by beings, but as Amida's call or summoning of beings, awakening them to the Vow (that is, bringing them to realize shinjin). Amida's sincere mind in the Vow calls to beings to entrust themselves to it, and it is entrusted to by the sincere mind that Amida directs to beings (shinjin in which Amida's mind and the being's mind have become one).

6

*no set number.* Shinran's teacher Hōnen recited the nembutsu tens of thousands of times a day, as did Pure Land masters before him. Shinran stresses, however, that the number of times one says the nembutsu is not relevant to "being given the Vow" or realizing shinjin.

*no determined hour or occasion.* For example, at appointed hours of the day such as dawn or sunset, or at the time of death.

In this sentence, Shinran rejects two assumptions widely accepted in his day: that the more one said the nembutsu the better, and that the nembutsu uttered at the point of death held particular power in determining one's future as the final act of one's lifetime. It was thought that through the nembutsu uttered at the end of life, one could nullify all one's karmic evil and ensure Amida's aid in attaining birth. Shinran stresses that there is no need to await the moment of death for the settlement of birth, because one attains non-retrogression at the time one realizes shinjin; one should say the nembutsu and enter the ocean of the Vow in the present.

7

Shinran states that those who wish to enter the working of the Vow should "take any occasion" in daily life for saying the Name, and "give themselves up totally" (*fukaku tanomu*) to Amida's "entrusting with sincere mind" (the mind of the Vow). Two central points should be noted here.

First, in clarifying the passage of the Vow teaching the saying of the Name, Shinran moves easily from nembutsu to shinjin; to say the nembutsu, we should aspire to realize shinjin, and when we have realized shinjin, the saying of the Name (great practice) is also realized. This is because genuine nembutsu—the nembutsu set forth in the Vow—arises spontaneously when beings have realized the true and real mind of the Vow as shinjin or true entrusting. "True entrusting" means that one

has become free of all designs and all attachment to one's own will and actions; hence, the nembutsu is no longer an expression of one's own effort. It has the same fundamental nature as the mind of the Vow; hence, "It is the treasure ocean of virtues that is suchness or true reality" (Practice, I). Since it is the activity born from the mind in which the Buddha's mind and our own mind have become one, our usual measures of the quality of practice—length of performance, manner, or occasion—are irrelevant.

Second, we are urged to "give ourselves up totally" to "entrusting with sincere mind." Since such entrusting is free of doubt and double-mindedness (blind passions), it can arise only as the true and real mind of Amida given to beings and not from sentient beings themselves. Hence, beings must aspire for its realization; they cannot entrust themselves to the Vow through their own will or intellectual assent. By listening to the teaching and perhaps saying the nembutsu, and by seeking to live in accord with what is true and real in their daily lives, beings become increasingly aware of their own actual powerlessness to achieve enlightenment. In this way, they may reach a point at which the power of the Vow grasps them, so that their minds and Amida's mind become one. This is the point of the realization of "entrusting with sincere mind," or shinjin.

8

*grasps, never to abandon (sesshu fusha).* Phrase derived from the *Contemplation Sutra*, which states that "each ray of Amida's light shines everywhere on the worlds of the ten quarters, grasping and never abandoning sentient beings of the nembutsu." Shinran frequently adopts this phrase to express the Vow's activity, for it connotes the complex relationship of simultaneous mutual opposition and identity between Amida Buddha and the person of evil who has realized shinjin. It also expresses the significance of realizing shinjin as attainment of non-retrogression.

*truly settled (shōjōju).* Those whose attainment of enlightenment is completely settled. In general Mahāyāna writings, this term refers to bodhisattvas who have attained the stage of non-retrogression. The Eleventh Vow states that beings in the Pure Land will "dwell among the settled and necessarily attain nirvana." Prior to Shinran, this was interpreted to mean that they will reach the stage of the truly settled in the Pure Land after death, but Shinran states that this stage is attained at the point of realizing shinjin.

9

Although the Vows take the form "If, when I attain Buddhahood. . .," for Shinran they express not tentativeness, but rather the intricate and necessary bond between the Buddha's enlightenment and the liberation of beings.

10

*Essentials of Faith Alone (Yuishinshō)*. Tract by Seikaku (1167-1235), Shinran's contemporary and fellow disciple of Hōnen. Translated in *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone,'* pp. 55-76.

11

Shinran explains the central term in Seikaku's title. Although we have employed the translation "faith" to distinguish Seikaku's usage from Shinran's concept of shinjin, the original term (*shin*) is the same, and Shinran interprets it as "true and real entrusting," the mind that is true and real. "Alone" implies "aspiring solely" to this entrusting; thus, as in 7, the true mind of shinjin is the object of aspiration. Elsewhere, Shinran gives a similar explanation of Seikaku's term: "*Faith alone* means that nothing is placed equal with this shinjin of Other Power" (*Notes on 'Essentials Of Faith Alone,'* p. 29).

12

Among the forty-eight Vows, only the Eighteenth includes a clause excluding certain beings from its working-in this case, those who commit the five grave offenses or who slander the dharma. That the Vow that provides a way for "the sentient beings of the ten quarters" to attain Buddhahood should have such a clause has seemed self-contradictory to some Pure Land masters, but the fact that the exclusion is reiterated in the passage on the fulfillment of the Vow indicates its importance. Concerning Shinran's understanding, see Comment.

## COMMENT

Shinran's interpretation of the Eighteenth Vow differs from that of the preceding tradition. This may be seen by comparing it with a paraphrase by Shan-tao:

Bhikṣu Dharmākara, before Lokeśvararāja Buddha, established forty-eight vows, stating in each one: If, when I attain Bud-

dhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters say my Name aspiring to be born in my land, even but ten times, and do not attain birth, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. (from *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, quoted in True Buddha and Land, 30).

Two crucial points of similarity may be seen here. First, the Eighteenth Vow is recognized as the core of the entire set of forty-eight vows. Second, the term *nen*—which may be interpreted to mean "mindfulness" or "thinking on" the Buddha—is interpreted to mean utterance.

Shan-tao's interpretation, however—while focusing on saying the nembutsu—differs in omitting two phrases, "with sincere mind entrusting themselves" and the final sentence on the exclusion of people who commit the grave offenses and slander the dharma. For Shan-tao, the crucial center of Amida's Vow is his promise to save those who say his Name. Faith in the Vow is of course necessary, but awakening sincere belief and avoiding the grave offenses are the practitioner's problems; they do not involve the Buddha's activity.

For Shinran, however, these two phrases are the defining passages of the Vow.

Concerning the first: Shinran takes up the "three minds" presented in the Vow in order; they are not treated simply as a list, however. Sincere mind forms their essence, with entrusting arising from it (4), and aspiration arises from "entrusting with sincere mind" (5). By unfolding the three minds in this way, and by defining sincere mind as the Buddha's mind, Shinran indicates that they are not generated from the ignorant minds of beings.

At the same time, if shinjin (the threefold mind) is not an attitude that beings assume, neither is it a vague sense that we are already saved as we are. We must aspire to realize shinjin—"aspire solely to this true and real entrusting" (11)—and when we entrust ourselves to the Vow that is true and real (Amida's sincere mind), that trust is further "entrusting with sincere mind." As the mind of beings that has become one with the mind of the Buddha, it has the subjective content of entrusting to the Vow and realizing one's own nature as blind passions.

In the same way that Shinran divests the threefold mind of attitudes assumed by the practitioner and shows it to be the activity of the Buddha's mind, he also strips the saying of the Name of all sense of practice performed in order to attain birth through the Vow. He takes note of the expression "perhaps even" ten times, which he explains as meaning that there is no set number of times the Name must be said and no

special or particularly appropriate time for saying it. For Shinran, since the nembutsu is great practice directed to beings by Amida through Other Power, whether one says it many times or only a few, its essential nature remains unchanged. However much merit a person may seek to accumulate, such effort is all empty and temporary, and cannot function as a cause of birth.

Thus, instead of seeking to say the Name as a means of gaining merit, "we should simply give ourselves up totally to the entrusting with sincere mind of Amida" (11). for it is shinjin-the mind of the Buddha realized in beings-that is the source of genuine utterance. Thus, nembutsu and shinjin are not conditions to be fulfilled, but natural manifestations of having realized the Buddha's mind, or of having been given the Vow.

#### *Exclusion clause*

Both T'an-luan and Shan-tao discuss the clause, partly to resolve inconsistencies with a similar provision stated in the *Contemplation Sutra* (Shinjin, 120, 121). Shan-tao also states, however, that its purpose is not to exclude certain beings. Rather:

The Tathāgata, fearing that we would commit these two kinds of faults, seeks to stop us through compassionate means by declaring that we will then not be able to attain birth. This does not mean that we will not be grasped. (Shinjin, 121)

Shinran follows Shan-tao in finding that the clause is intended to make us realize the gravity of the offenses. He goes further, however, in stating that it is through this clause that we realize that no beings are excluded. This is because, for Shinran, it is precisely the person who commits grave offenses and slanders the dharma-who lacks any capacity for good-who is the object of the Vow. Precisely through becoming aware of the nature of one's own existence as characterized by the grave offenses and releasing one's attachments to one's own powers to do good, one comes to be grasped by the Vow. Thus, the Buddha, out of compassion, seeks to awaken beings to their own existence with the exclusion clause. This does not mean, of course, that beings are encouraged to continue in their evil acts; to the contrary, their self-reflection naturally leads to an abhorrence of their own misdeeds (see Passage 14). But with this interpretation of the exclusion clause as in fact all-embracing, Shinran presents a consistent understanding of the entire Vow as the Buddha's call to beings.

## 2 REALIZATION OF SHINJIN

THE *Larger Sutra* relates how the bodhisattva Dharmākara made his Vows and ultimately fulfilled them to become Amida Buddha. Then, in passages that correspond closely in content to some of the major Vows, the *sutra* describes the conditions resulting from their fulfillment. Shinran bases his understanding of the Eighteenth Vow on the passage teaching its fulfillment, discovering in it such crucial concepts as Amida's directing of virtue (*ekō*) and the "immediate attainment of birth." Source: *Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling*, pp. 32-33.

#### THE FULFILLMENT OF THE VOW:

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.

#### SHINRAN'S COMMENTARY:

##### 1 *All sentient beings*

All the sentient beings throughout the ten quarters.

##### 2 *As they hear the Name*

- 3 To hear the Name that embodies the Primal Vow. *Hear*
- 4 means to hear the Primal Vow and be free of doubt. Further, it indicates shinjin.

##### 5 *Realize even one thought-moment of shinjin and joy*

*Shinjin* is hearing Amida's Vow and being free of doubt.

## COMMENT

The importance of the Name for Shinran may be grasped from his practice late in life of placing scrolls inscribed with it, in one of its different versions, in the altar, in place of statues or painted depictions of Amida. The Name, *Namu-amida-butsu*, is itself the Buddha (wisdom, suchness), the form that the Buddha takes in the activity of awakening beings.

One of the fundamental analyses of the Name in the Pure Land tradition is that of Shan-tao, who divides it into *Namu* and *Amida-butsu*. He states that *Namu* ("I take refuge") expresses aspiration and *Amida-butsu* holds the significance of practice; thus, in saying the Name, the practitioner fulfills the two requirements for birth (Practice, 30).

Shinran develops Shan-tao's interpretation, shifting the perspective from the practitioner's activity to the power of the Vow. He states that *Numu* is "the command of the Primal Vow calling to and summoning us" (Practice, 34); further, it is "to respond to the command and follow the call" of Śākyamuni and Amida (*Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls*, p. 51). Thus, the Name is Amida's activity calling to us, and further, it is our response to that call, our utterance arising from *shinjin*. *Amida-butsu*, then, is not recitation as a form of religious endeavor; it is "none other than the Primal Vow," arising from the working of Amida.

## 5 SELF-POWER, OTHER POWER

IN answer to questions sent by people in the distant Kantō region, Shinran provides clear explanations of what is meant by self-power and Other Power, and of the relevance of this distinction for people who seek to enter the Pure Land path. Source: *Letters of Shinran*, pp. 22-23.

- 1 ACCORDING to the true essence of the Pure Land way, there are two kinds of people who seek birth: those of Other Power and
- 2 those of self-power. This has been taught by the Indian masters and Pure Land teachers.
- 3 Self-power is the effort to attain birth, whether by invoking the names of Buddhas other than Amida and practicing good acts other than the nembutsu, in accordance with your particular circumstances and opportunities; or by endeavoring to make yourself worthy through amending the confusion in your acts, words, and thoughts, confident of your own powers and guided by your own calculation.
- 4 Other Power is the entrusting of yourself to the Eighteenth among Amida's Vows, the Primal Vow of birth through the nembutsu, which was selected from among all other practices.
- 5 Since this is Amida's Vow, Hōnen said: "In Other Power, no
- 6 selfworking is true working." "Selfworking" means calcula-
- 7 tion. Since a practitioner's calculation is self-power, it is selfwork-
- 8 ing. Other Power is the entrusting of ourselves to the Primal Vow and our birth becoming firmly settled; hence it is altogether free of selfworking.
- 9 Thus, on the one hand, you should not be anxious that
- 10 Amida will not receive you because you do wrong. A foolish being is by nature possessed of blind passions, so you must



- II recognize yourself to be a being of karmic evil. On the other hand, you should not think that you deserve to attain birth because you are good. You cannot be born into the true and real fulfilled land through such self-power calculation. I have been taught that with a shinjin of self-power a person can attain birth only in the land of indolence, the borderland, the womb of the Pure Land, or the city of doubt.

## NOTES

1

true essence of the Pure Land way (*Jōdo shinshū*). Shinran uses this term for the path revealed in the *Larger Sutra*, of which he states, "to teach the Tathāgata's Primal Vow is the true intent of the sutra; the Name of the Buddha is its essence" (Teaching, 2). It indicates the teaching he received from Hōnen, in contrast to other interpretations of the Pure Land teaching. It was later adopted as the name for the movement which Shinran founded, and became the designation of the Shin Buddhist schools.

two kinds of people who seek birth. The terms self-power and Other Power were first used by T'an-luan to distinguish the Pure Land path of easy practice (in which one has the support of the Buddha's power) from other forms of Buddhist practice (which are based solely on self-power) (Practice, 18). Shinran, however, brought about a major change in the tradition by pressing this distinction within the Pure Land way. Even among nembutsu practitioners, there are those who cling to self-power. By refining and deepening the insight into the nature of self-power, Shinran was able to develop the path of Other Power in which nembutsu and shinjin are manifestations of the Vow (Passage 6). Thus he cautions, "You must understand fully the working of self-power" (Passage 3).

3

good acts other than the nembutsu. Shan-tao, for example, teaches such auxiliary acts as sutra recitation, worship, and contemplation of

Amida as supportive of endeavor in nembutsu recitation. The central issue concerns attitude, however:

Those who take up auxiliary good acts are people endeavoring in self-power. "Self-power" characterizes those who have full confidence in themselves, trusting in their own hearts and minds, striving with their own powers, and relying on their own various roots of good. (Notes on *Once-calling and Many-calling*, pp. 43-44)

Thus, saying the nembutsu as one's own act of good is also an expression of self-power.

5

no selfworking is true working (literally, "No working is Other Power's working" *tariki ni wa ji nuki o ji to su*). Shinran adopts this phrase from Hōnen, but imparts his own interpretation. In form it is flatly self-contradictory ("Not-A is A"). Shinran explains that "A" here is the practitioner's calculation or self-power, but this clearly refers only its first appearance, where it is negated. The second "A" has been interpreted as the "meaning" of the teaching or the "doctrinal principle" behind the nembutsu, but this robs the phrase of its rhetorical force. We have taken it to mean the Buddha's working, synonymous with Other Power. The general meaning of the entire phrase is clear from other statements, for example: "Other Power means above all that there must not be the slightest calculating on our part" (*Letters of Shinran*, p. 42). That is, self-power and Other Power stand in opposition, and for the mind of self-power to fall away is for one to be grasped by Other Power (see comment).

Shinran's frequent use of this paradoxical phrase points to the final discontinuity that lies between our efforts in self-power reaching an impasse and falling away and our being grasped by Other Power. It cannot be said that one is the cause and the other is the result. For human beings, there is no method of action or rational understanding that can lead directly to realizing shinjin or receiving the Buddha's mind. We cannot know why becoming free of self-power is to be grasped by Other Power. As stated here, Other Power is simply "altogether free of selfworking" (8).

But beyond this, it further points to the unity in Other Power of Amida and the being who has realized shinjin, which has come about through the complete negation of the being's calculation. One remains possessed of blind passions, but through the elimination the attachment in self-power, one's life and the world itself have become Other

Power. To express this structure of both negation and affirmation in the existence of the practitioner of shinjin, Shinran employs this phrase, which is reminiscent of the *prajñāpāramitā* formulation, “A is not-A, therefore it is A.” While the latter expresses wisdom or emptiness pervading the world of existence, “In Other Power, no selfworking is true working” expresses being grasped by compassion, so that the Buddha’s mind and the being’s mind have become one.

9-11

Self-power as “calculation” (*hakarai*) includes the belief that we cannot be saved if we do evil (we must do good in order to accord with the Vow) or that it is because we possess some aspect of good (have faith, say the nembutsu) that we are grasped by the Vow. Such assumptions arise from a failure to recognize the self-attachment harbored in our perceptions and judgments, and from the imposition of those judgments on Amida’s working. It is when we become aware of ourselves as beings of karmic evil that reliance on our own judgments drops away, and being grasped by the Vow becomes possible.

13

the land of indolence, the borderland, the womb of the Pure Land, or the city of doubt. Names for “transformed lands”—modes of attainment-established by Amida for beings who aspire for birth in the Pure Land, yet fail to entrust themselves to the Vow and cling instead to their own wisdom and goodness. Such people cannot attain birth into the “true fulfilled land,” which unfolds naturally from realization of shinjin, but neither do they remain caught in samsaric existence. Their limited attainment is taught in the *Larger Sutra*:

The Buddha said to Maitreya: Suppose there are sentient beings who, with minds filled with doubts, aspire to be born in the Pure Land through the practice of various meritorious acts; unable to realize the Buddha-wisdom, the inconceivable wisdom, the ineffable wisdom, the all-encompassing wisdom of the Mahāyāna, the unequaled, peerless, and supremely excellent wisdom, they doubt these wisdoms and do not entrust themselves. And yet, believing in [the recompense of] evil and good, they aspire to be born in that land through cultivating the root of good [that is, reciting the nembutsu]. Such sentient beings will be born within the palace of that land, where for five hundred years they will never see the Buddha, hear the dharma of the sutras, or see the sacred host of bodhisatt-

vas and śrāvakas. Hence, in that land this is known as womb-like birth. (Transformed Buddha-Bodies and Lands, 7)

Only after a long period during which the karmic evil of the self-attachment of doubt is overcome can they realize enlightenment in the true fulfilled land (*Tannishō*, 17). By delineating this distinction in attainment, Shinran develops his analysis of the nature and significance of self-power thinking within the Pure Land path, and interprets certain Pure Land teachings as intended precisely to lead us from such attitudes.

## COMMENT

The central concern of the practitioner is the relationship with Amida Buddha. Shinran probes the nature of this relationship through his use of the concepts of self-power and Other Power. While prior to Shinran this distinction was most widely understood to correspond to that between other forms of Buddhism, which could be accomplished only by sages, and the Pure Land path, Shinran brought it to bear on attitudes of practitioners within the Pure Land tradition itself, and his plumbing of self-power is a major feature of his development of the Pure Land teaching.

Moreover, he asserts that forms of self-power practice-of reliance on one’s own capacities for religious fulfillment and refusal to entrust oneself to the Vow—are also expressed in the Pure Land sutras. Such “provisional” teachings, he states, have been provided precisely to awaken us to the tenacity of self-power attitudes and to guide us to genuine realization of shinjin, or true entrusting.

Shinran distinguishes two major forms of self-power practice found among the Pure Land practitioners: performance of various religious and moral activities, and performance of nembutsu recitation. The first form he finds expressed as a provisional teaching in the *Contemplation Sutra*, which sets forth thirteen contemplative exercises focusing on the Pure Land, Amida, and his attendant bodhisattvas (meditative practice) and further describes three levels in the observance of precepts and performance of moral good acts (non-meditative practice). Shinran identifies this teaching with the Nineteenth Vow. The second form of self-power practice is found in the *Smaller Sutra*, which teaches the merit in saying the Name and encourages reciting it for one to seven days. Shinran identifies the teaching of nembutsu utterance as one’s

own practice-to accumulate merit or attain a state of concentration and tranquility-with the Twentieth Vow. Those who follow these two forms of self-power practice within the Pure Land path are born in transformed lands, not the true Pure Land.

In *Teaching, Practice and Realization*, Shinran describes his process of religious awakening as a movement of three phases, being guided from the first form of self-power (various practices and good acts) to the second (endeavor in nembutsu recitation), and then to genuine entrusting or shinjin (Eighteenth Vow) (Transformed Buddha-Bodies and Lands, 68). Shin commentators are quick to point out that this is not a prescription that every practitioner is necessarily to follow. Nevertheless, Shinran's sense of process and his concept of provisional teachings as a means are consonant with his assertion that realizing shinjin is "the most difficult of all difficulties." Thus he also quotes Genshin to the effect that few are born in the true Pure Land, while many are born in the transformed lands (Passage 11,15).

On the one hand, we must make a conscious effort to free ourselves from all the attachments and desires that bind us to egocentric, samsaric existence. Shinran often uses the verb particle *nu*, indicating a perfect tense, in speaking of entrance into the ocean of the Vow. This particle connotes completion of an action-"having come to enter"-implying a process of realization over a period of time. The biographies of exemplary people of shinjin typically show long years of engagement with the teaching before entrance into the world of shinjin. Even though one seeks to follow the Pure Land path intellectually, the impulses first to make oneself good, and then to appropriate the saying of the nembutsu as a sign or activity of one's own merit, are difficult to overcome.

On the other hand, *nu* also implies that this process takes place naturally and is not accomplished through human intentions. With the concept of provisional teachings, Shinran delineates a process to the complete dissolution of self-power; thus, it is seen, finally, to have been indicated by the Buddha beforehand and brought about through the guidance of the Vow.

#### *Other Power*

What, then, is the Other Power that lies at the core of Shinran's realization? Fundamentally, it is the power or activity of Amida's Primal Vow that becomes present in our daily lives. Amida is the Other, standing beyond the blind passions and samsaric existence of human beings, and he directs the virtues or the power of his enlighten-

ment to us. In Shinran's writings, however, the term "Other Power" expresses much more than the absolute standing apart from beings. There are two general meanings:

1. "Other Power is none other than the power of Amida Tathāgata's Primal Vow" (Practice, 81).
2. "Other Power is the entrusting of yourself to the Eighteenth [Vow]" (4).

In the first usage, Other Power indicates the activity of Amida's Vow, and in the second, it refers to the mind of beings who entrust themselves to it. Although these meanings differ, they are both aspects of Other Power, which expresses not simply the Buddha but the relationship between Amida and human beings that Shinran realized.

The unity of these two meaning is expressed:

The ocean of beings of the ten quarters [will] be grasped and never abandoned when they have taken refuge in this practice (nembutsu) and shinjin. Therefore he is called "Amida Buddha." This is Other Power. (Practice, 71)

On the one hand, "Amida" signifies "grasping, never to abandon," and it is this that is Other Power.

On the other hand, to have been grasped, never to be abandoned, means that one has realized shinjin; hence, Shinran also states, "It is when one is grasped that the settling of shinjin occurs" (*Letters of Shinran*, p. 42). Thus the settlement of shinjin-the entrusting of oneself to the Vow-is also Other Power. Since to realize shinjin is for the attitude of self-power to fall away, it may further be said that "Other Power means to be free of any form of calculation" (*Letters of Shinran*, p. 39). It is also termed *jinen*: "Jinen is none other than being free of all calculation. It is itself Other Power" (*Tannishō*, 16).

With regard to Amida, Other Power is the grasping of beings, never to abandon them: with regard to beings, it is the realization of shinjin. Amida Buddha and sentient beings stand in the opposition of wisdom (reality) and delusion, or enlightenment and blind passions; beings are people of karmic evil who have been grasped by the Buddha, and the relationship is one of dualism. At the same time, Other Power expresses an interaction and a point of unity. The Buddha's mind and the mind of beings have become one, so that beings have become the equal of the Buddhas. Wisdom-compassion has grasped, never to abandon, the mind of blind passions, and that mind of passions has become free of the calculation and attachments of self-power and entrusted itself to

Other Power. In this latter aspect, Other Power has become the beings'; their lives manifest the power of the Vow.

Thus, in Other Power, the relationship between Amida and beings is dualistic, and at the same time that dualism is transcended, so that Other Power expresses the fundamental nature of the existence of people who have realized shinjin. *Tannishō*, 13, states:

It is when a person leaves both good and evil to karmic recompense and entrusts wholly to the Primal Vow that he is one with Other Power.

When the small, limited self, together with the restricted sphere in which it has struggled to exert its will and impose its judgments, has been abandoned, and one entrusts oneself to the wisdom-compassion of the Vow, then life opens forth with the freedom and strength of Other Power, which manifests itself in all things. The *myōkōnin* Saichi (1850-1932) states:

In Other Power, there's no self-power and no other-power. Other Power's everywhere. *Namu-amida-butsu.* (*Tariki ni wa jiriki mo tariki mo ariwasen. Ichimen tariki. Namu-amida-butsu.*)

## 6 SHINJIN AND NEMBUTSU

MANY who entered the Pure Land path encountered difficulty because they understood saying the nembutsu with trust to be a condition one had to fulfill to be saved. In their efforts, they tended to emphasize either practice, diligently saying the nembutsu as often as possible, or trust, which they understood to mean giving up special efforts to say the nembutsu or lead a religious life. In answer to questions, Shinran states that entrusting oneself to the Vow and saying the Name, properly understood, are inseparable, for both arise as Amida's activity in beings. Source: *Letters of Shinran*, pp. 39-40 and 37.

### ONSHINJIN AND PRACTICE:

- 1 Although the one moment of shinjin and the one moment of nembutsu are two, there is no nembutsu separate from shinjin, nor is the one moment of shinjin separate from the one moment
- 2 of nembutsu. The reason is that the practice of nembutsu is to say it perhaps once, perhaps ten times, on hearing and realizing that birth into the Pure Land is attained by saying the Name
- 3 fulfilled in the Primal Vow. To hear this Vow and be completely without doubt is the one moment of shinjin. Thus, although shinjin and nembutsu are two, since shinjin is to hear and not doubt that you are saved by only a single pronouncing, which is the fulfillment of practice, there is no shinjin separate from nembutsu; this is the teaching I have received. You should know further that there can be no nembutsu separate from shinjin. Both
- 4 should be understood to be Amida's Vow. Nembutsu and shinjin on our part are themselves the manifestations of the Vow.

Whatever may occur, as far as birth is concerned, one should just recall constantly and unselfconsciously the depths of Amida's benevolence and one's gratitude for it, without any contriving. Then the nembutsu will emerge. This is the meaning of *jinen*. (*Tannishō*, 16)

Thus, Shinran sets no limit on utterance of the nembutsu, for it is not performed as a good act, but arises as the Buddha's activity. Moreover, Shinran sets forth two kinds of significance of saying the nembutsu:

People who feel that their birth in the Pure Land is not yet settled should say the nembutsu aspiring for birth. Those who feel that their birth in the Pure Land is settled should, responding in gratitude to the Buddha's kindness, say the nembutsu and hold it firmly in their hearts, with the wish, "May there be peace in the world and may the Buddha-dharma spread." (*Goshōsokushū*, SSZ, II, 697).

## 7 TURNABOUT

IN his tract *Essentials of Faith Alone*, Seikaku quotes the following verse to explain the Eighteenth Vow, emphasizing its universality. Shinran, in notes to this verse, focuses on the conversion that lies at the heart of the Pure Land path. This conversion is an overturning of reliance on one's own capacities. At the same time, it is the transmutation through Amida's activity of something base—our own existence—into something precious. Source: Notes on '*Essentials of Faith Alone*,' pp. 39-41.

### FROM A HYMN BY THE CHINESE MASTER TZ'U-MIN:

Amida Buddha, in his causal stage, made the universal Vow:  
When beings hear my Name and think on me, I will come to  
welcome each of them,

Not discriminating at all between the poor and the rich and  
wellborn,

Not discriminating between the inferior and the highly gifted;

Not choosing the learned and those upholding pure precepts,  
Nor rejecting those who break precepts and whose evil karma is  
profound.

When beings just turn about at heart and abundantly say the  
nembutsu,  
it is as if bits of rubble were changed into gold.

## SHINRAN'S COMMENTARY ON THE FINAL THREE LINES:

*Nor rejecting those who break precepts and whose evil karma is profound*

*Break precepts* applies to people who, having received the precepts for monks or laity mentioned earlier, break and abandon them; such people are not rejected.

*Evil karma is profound:* evil people who have committed the ten transgressions or the five grave offenses, people of evil karma who have reviled the teaching or who lack seeds for Buddhahood, those of scant roots of good, those of massive karmic evil, those of shallow inclination to good, those of profound attachment to evil—such wretched people as these, profound in various kinds of evil karma, are described by the word *profound*. *Profound* means bottomless.

Good people, bad people, noble and low, are not differentiated in the Vow of the Buddha of unhindered light, in which the guiding of each person is primary and fundamental. Know that the true essence of the Pure Land way is that when we realize true and real shinjin, we are born into the true fulfilled land. . . .

*When beings just turn about at heart and abundantly say the nembutsu*

*When beings just turn about at heart* instructs us. “Singleheartedly make your heart turn about!”

*Turn about* means to overturn and discard the mind of self-power.

Since those people who are to be born in the true fulfilled land are without fail taken into the heart of the Buddha of unhindered light, they realize diamond-like shinjin. Thus, they “abundantly say the nembutsu.”

*Abundantly* means “often” in the sense of great in number, “exceeding” and “supreme” in the sense of excelling and sur-

9 passing all good acts. This is because nothing excels the Primal Vow embodying Other Power.

10 “To abandon the mind of self-power” admonishes the various and diverse kinds of people—masters of Hīnayāna or Mahāyāna, ignorant beings good or evil—to abandon the conviction that one is good, to cease relying on the self, to stop reflecting knowingly on one’s evil heart, and further to abandon the judging of people as good and bad. When such shackled foolish beings—the lowly who are hunters and peddlers—thus wholly entrust themselves to the Name embodying great wisdom, the inconceivable Vow of the Buddha of unhindered light, then while burdened as they are with blind passions, they attain the supreme nirvana.

11 “Shackled” describes us, who are bound by all our various blind passions. Blind passions are the pains that torment the  
12 body and the afflictions that distress the heart and mind. The hunter is he who kills the many kinds of living things; this is one  
13 who slaughters. The peddler is he who buys and sells things; this  
14, 15 is the trader. They are called “low.” Such peddlers, hunters, and others are none other than we, who are like stones and tiles and pebbles.

16 *It is as if bits of rubble were changed into gold*

This is a metaphor. When we entrust ourselves to Amida’s Primal Vow, we, who are like bits of tile and pebbles, are turned  
17 into gold. Peddlers and hunters, who are like stones and tiles and pebbles, are grasped and never abandoned by Amida’s light.\* Know that this comes about solely through true shinjin.  
18 We speak of the light that grasps because we are taken into the heart of the Buddha of unhindered light; thus shinjin is said to be diamond-like.

19 \*In a variant text, this sentence reads: (This line] states that it is like tile and pebbles being turned into gold. Hunters, peddlers, and others are we, who are like stones and tile and pebbles. When we entrust

ourselves without any doubt to Amida's Vow, we are taken into the light that grasps, and without fail the enlightenment of great nirvana is made to unfold in us; that is, for hunters and peddlers, it is like stones and tiles and pebbles being turned into gold.

## NOTES

## HYMN

*Tz'u-min* (J. Jimin, 680-748). Chinese Pure Land master renowned for his long practice in India; founder of his own branch of Pure Land teachings. This hymn, based on the *Sutra of the Samādhi of AN Buddhas' Presence* (J. *Hanju zammaikyō*), appears in Practice, 35.

## line 1

*causal stage*. The period of vows and practice as Bodhisattva Dharmakara.

*precepts*. Precepts for laity include, for example, the "five precepts" against destruction of life, theft, adultery, false speech, and taking intoxicants.

7

*diamond-like shinjin*. See Passage 16, IO- I I.

12-13

*hunter*. . . *peddler*. Considered to belong to the lowest level of society because their livelihoods involved the chronic breach of Buddhist precepts against destruction of life and against flattery and false speech.

## 8 EVIL INTO GOOD

THE verse taken up in Passage 4 states that the bodhisattvas who attend Amida come to guide people of the nembutsu to the Pure Land when they die. Shinran rejects the moment of death as crucial to religious attainment, and in his commentary emphasizes instead the activity of Amida's wisdom and compassion in the immediate present, functioning free of human intentions and designs. He focuses on the word "themselves" (*ji*, 自), which may mean a person or thing "itself," and also "of itself," that is, naturally and spontaneously. Source: *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone,'* pp. 32-33.

## LINE FROM A HYMN BY FA-CHAO:

Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta come themselves to welcome [people who say the Name]

## FROM SHINRAN'S COMMENTARY:

1 Come themselves to welcome

*Themselves (ji)* means "in person." Amida and a vast and numberless saintly host, consisting of innumerable manifestation-bodies of Buddhas, of Avalokiteśvara, and of Mahāsthāmaprāpta, appear in person to be alongside and always protect those who have realized true and real shinjin, at all times and in all places; hence the word "themselves."

- 2 *Ji* also means "of itself." "Of itself" is a synonym for *jinen*, which means "to be made to become so." "To be made to become so" means that without the practitioner's calculating in any way whatsoever, all his past, present, and future evil karma
- 3 is transformed into good. To be transformed means that evil kar-