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I. SHINRAN'S LIFE (1173-1262 C.E.) AND LEGACY

A. Shinran's Spiritual Journey

There is little biographical material concerning Shinran's early life beyond what is given in his wife Eshin-ni's Letters, some genealogical notations, and the *Godenshō*. Later biographies attempted to fill in the details, such as indicating that his mother was Kikko, the daughter of Minamoto Yoshichika. His father was Hino Arinori, belonging to a branch of the famous and powerful Fujiwara clan. According to the tradition, Shinran's parents are said to have died when he was about four years (father) and eight years of age (mother) respectively. Based on these traumatic experiences, Shinran reputedly entered the monastery at the age of nine. This has been a widely held view in the sect and reiterated over the centuries because of its stress on impermanence, which is a basic point of Buddhist teaching.

Nevertheless, we know that Shinran's father lived much longer. He had apparently become a lay-monk and is known as Arinori Nyūdō, a person who retired from the world. Evidence for this comes from the notation by Zonkaku (1289-1373 C.E.), the son of Kakunyo and an early scholar of Shin Buddhism, that Shinran and a brother Ken'u had dedicated a Sūtra as a memorial after the death of their father. Scholars have generally rejected the traditional accounts and hold that Arinori and four sons (Shinran, Jin'u, Ken'u and Yu-i) retired to the monastery possibly as a result of the upheavals and turmoil that attended the political change brought about by the overthrow of the Taira clan by the Minamoto in what are known as the Genpei wars (1181-1185 C.E.), culminating in the famous battle of Dan-no-Ura.

The earliest biography of Shinran written by Kakunyo (1270-1351 C.E.), the third Abbot, called *Godenshō*, does not provide any information on the early life of Shinran, other than his entry into the monastery at age nine. Radical scholars in the early part of the twentieth century questioned the biographical references of sectarian texts since many of them tended to exalt and divinize Shinran. The problem was that there was no information on him outside of his writings and the sect biographies and legends that had grown up. There were no objective sources.

However, this situation was resolved with the discovery of 10 letters of Eshin-ni, Shinran's wife, in the Hongwanji storehouse in 1921. From that time on greater authority was given to Shinran's autobiographical references in his writings and the information they yield. Essentially, the letters,

together with the *Godenshō*, permit us to outline Shinran's life, though details may be lacking.

There are generally four stages in his life progress. The first stage is his life on Mount Hiei. His presence there had been questioned until Eshin-ni indicated that he was a *dōsō*, a type of minor priest in the monastery, functioning in services of continuous *nembutsu*. These services were sponsored anywhere from a week to 90 days for the benefit of nobles who were ill or had died. The merit of the recitations were transferred to the client. Here Shinran must have contacted Pure Land thought, and he is said to have studied in Mount Hiei at the Ryōgon Hall in Yokawa where Genshin (942-1017 C.E.), one of the great teachers in Japanese Pure Land teaching and Shinran's lineage, taught. While in the monastery, Shinran studied the Tendai teaching, while practicing the meditations and disciplines which originated in Zen, Pure Land, Shingon, and Tendai traditions. Mount Hiei was the Harvard University of the time. It brought together many facets of Buddhist practice and teaching in which Shinran is said to have excelled. His thought was greatly influenced by Tendai teaching.

According to Eshin-ni serious questions arose for Shinran concerning his future destiny. He somehow felt inadequate and despite the learning he had achieved, he was unsure that he would ever attain enlightenment. In order to resolve his doubts and anxieties, he undertook a practice of meditating at the Rokkakudō in Kyoto. This temple is alleged to have been founded by Prince Shōtoku and enshrined a figure of Kannon Bodhisattva (the Bodhisattva of Compassion). He meditated there for 100 days and on the 95th day he received a message from Shōtoku that led him to Hōnen (Eshin-ni, Letter 3) whereupon he became his disciple. This event, whatever it involved, was a great turning point for Shinran and for Buddhism.

The *Godenshō* records a dream of Shinran that forecasts his marriage. In the dream Kannon vows to take the form of a woman and together they will spread the *nembutsu* teaching. The text of this dream also appears in Shinran's handwriting but is undated. Kakunyo, the author of the *Godenshō*, placed it in connection with the Rokakkudō experience, though it is not clear that that is its proper place.

Shinran's study (1201-1207 C.E.) under Hōnen constitutes the second phase of his life. He was 29 years of age when he entered the hermitage at Yoshimizu, and, as far as we know, never returned to Mount Hiei. By his own confession in the *Tannishō*, he stated that he would not feel regret if he were deceived by Hōnen, as many people at the time were saying, because he was not capable of any other practice and hell is his determined residence (*A Record in Lament of Divergences* [*Tannishō*] 2). In the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, Shinran exclaimed his joy as he recollected his meeting with Hōnen, his being able

to copy Hōnen's major work, the *Senchakushū*, and draw a portrait. On one occasion, as the result of criticism of Hōnen's disciples because of laxity in maintaining precepts, Shinran signed a pledge, using the name Shakkū which had been given by Hōnen. Later, according to Shinran, Hōnen changed his name from Shakkū to Zenshin through a dream.

These events constitute Shinran's claim to be an authentic disciple of Hōnen, though he was excluded from the acknowledged successors by the later Pure Land (Jōdo-shū) sects which claimed Hōnen as their heritage.

The earliest writings of Shinran are notes that he made to the *Sūtra of Contemplation* and the *Smaller Pure Land Sūtra*, possibly before 1217 C.E. They reflect the strong influence of Hōnen.

Hōnen's group did not escape criticism and opposition as his teaching became better known. Essentially Hōnen proposed that the *nembutsu* recitation was fully capable of bringing the highest enlightenment to all people, saint and sinner alike. It undercut the traditional Buddhist establishment. In addition, it undermined the folk religious tradition, since Amida was the sole spiritual power in the universe. As a result of some indiscretions and the insensitivity of a few of his followers, complaints arose from other Buddhist temples. Eventually, the conversion of two women in the court to his teaching, through their relation with some of his disciples, led to their execution and the prohibition and abolition of the movement by exiling leading members, including Shinran. Shinran criticized this event in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* because of its injustice and lack of real investigation. However, Hōnen and Shinran parted, never to meet again. This took place in 1207. Shinran went to Echigo in northern Japan and Hōnen went to Tosa in Shikoku.

The period of exile (1207-1212 C.E.) and his later activities in propagation in the Eastern provinces (1211-1235 C.E.) mark the third phase of Shinran's life. These aspects of his life comprise his time away from Kyoto. Little is known of the period of exile except that he married Eshin-ni and began to raise a family. He had six children with her, though traditional biographies list a child by Tamahi, the reputed daughter of Fujiwara Kanezane.

There is a legend that Kujō Kanezane, a supporter of Hōnen, requested him to designate a disciple to marry his daughter Tamahi in order to demonstrate his teaching that Amida's salvation does not require keeping precepts. Hōnen chose Shinran to fulfill this request, who thereupon obediently married Tamahi.

This story emerges in Shin Buddhism, illustrating its view of total reliance on Amida's Vows. Beyond the fact that Kanezane did not have a daughter by that name, it also contrasts with what we know of Hōnen, who maintained monastic discipline and generally called on his disciples to follow the precepts. While it is clear that Shinran married Eshin-ni, there are

suggestions of the existence of another mysterious woman and her son, on whose behalf Shinran later in his life requested assistance from his disciples. Whatever the truth may be in these traditions, we can be clear that Eshin-ni was a central person in the life of Shinran and her letters are an important contribution to assessing his life.

There does not seem to be much evidence of Shinran's evangelistic activity in Echigo since only one disciple is known from that area. We may consider that Shinran lived for a period of some five years in exile, contemplating his life and the teaching he received, as well as his future work.

When he was finally pardoned, he remained in Echigo for a few years because of the birth of a child. Finally, he set out for the Kanto region, though it is not clear why he chose that area. However, his dream vision tells of the masses yearning to hear the teaching and perhaps he believed he could propagate the *nembutsu* without great interference in the Eastern provinces.

A significant event took place in 1213 C.E. as Shinran traveled from Echigo to the Eastern provinces of Kanto. It signals a transformation in Shinran's understanding of religious faith. On that occasion he made a vow to recite the three thousand sections of the Pure Land Sūtras for the sake of all beings to bring them to enlightenment. He began the process but suddenly stopped, realizing this was not the true way to bring about their salvation. Rather it was *jishin kyōninshin*, which means that the true way to repay the Buddha's compassion was to share the faith one received with others. This statement comes originally from the Chinese Pure Land teacher Shan-tao (613-681 C.E.), but it gave Shinran a clue to his ministry, which was to approach people directly and share the teachings with them. The original method was indirect and magical without requiring any contact with people. It also reflects his mission, which he received in the vision in the Rokakkudō.

Shinran remained in the Kanto area for about twenty years, and we can see the results from the major disciples with whom he communicated and in various lists of disciples from that period. The Shin Buddhist movement began from this time and Shinran nurtured several leaders who were outstanding in their commitment and devotion to him and his mission. From the various sources 74 disciples are known, of which three were women and the remainder men. The full number of disciples is not entirely clear but by some estimates may range in the hundreds and thousands. It is assumed that the persons mentioned in the listings were leaders of larger bands of followers. The example for this is Chū Tarō of Ōbu who was the leader of 90 people. Scholars have also discussed the social class of Shinran's disciples. They range from farmers and peasants to townspeople, merchants, and lower

level samurai. The teaching itself, reflecting a universal character, does not indicate a particular class connection.

During the period of evangelization, Shinran probably began the composition of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, which is his major text and resource for knowing his teaching in detail. Essentially it is an anthology of Sūtra and commentary passages selected from a variety of primarily Pure Land teachers as well as other Buddhist texts. Interspersed with the quotations, Shinran made his own observations and interpretations, which provide an understanding of his thought. He gave an overall structure to the work by dividing it into six sections, focusing on a range of themes of Pure Land teaching. His motives for writing are not entirely clear, nor is the date. However, it seems to have been a work in progress and was revised at various times.

We know little of Shinran's activities beyond the fact that he managed in the course of the years to develop a community of faith. We know nothing of his methods of propagation or the response to it by other groups. Perhaps the story of the conversion of Myōhōbō in the *Godenshō* gives a suggestion of Shinran's approach. According to this story, a Shingon priest, a mountain ascetic (*yamabushi*), despised Shinran and threatened to kill him. However, once he met Shinran his life transformed.

For some unknown reason Shinran decided to return to Kyoto around 1235. Once in Kyoto he never left again. However, in this final period of his life, Shinran engaged in writing, exchanging letters, and visits with disciples. A major incident in his life was the disowning of his eldest son Zenran in the later period of his life.

Because of misinterpretations of the teaching there was conflict among the disciples in the Eastern provinces. Shinran received disturbing messages involving licensed evil and sent his son Zenran to investigate. While there, Zenran himself became the source of misunderstanding, apparently claiming he had received special teaching from his father. The issue even reached the point where a court trial took place in Kamakura and threatened to bring persecution on the nascent community. Shinran's leading disciples questioned him concerning the position of Zenran, necessitating drastic action to demonstrate his sincerity. Evaluating the various charges and rumors he received, Shinran decided to disown Zenran. Several letters reflect that decision (see entry 9. Disowning) and the acrimony that went with it. Once the issue was settled, Shinran lived quietly until the ripe age of 90 years, passing away in 1262 attended by his daughter and some disciples.

In Eshin-ni's letters, she responds to Kakushin-ni's question about the certainty of Shinran's salvation. Eshin-ni replied that no matter how he died, he certainly went to the Pure Land. It is suggested that Shinran died an ordinary death with no special supernatural signs, befitting the way he lived. In

Buddhist tradition a great man's death is often accompanied by auspicious signs such as the smell of incense and purple clouds that envelop the individual. Hōnen's death is described in this manner. No signs appeared with Shinran. This is in accord with a famous saying of Shinran that even though people may accuse his followers of being cattle thieves, they should not put on the appearance of seekers of the afterlife. Naturalness or ordinariness is the mark of Shinran's way, and he died in that fashion.

Shinran's life, in its outward or observable features, does not exhibit the dramatic events and supernormal experiences that mark the lives of the other great teachers in the history of religion as means to highlight their greatness. Shinran does not prove his teaching with demonstrations of supernatural power nor does he give magical means to his followers to ease their path. Rather, he gave spiritual insight into human nature and a vision of ultimate reality that transformed the inner life of people and enabled them to endure the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." This is the source of his appeal even today among religious thinkers and seekers.

B. Shinran's Legacy: The Shin Path to Enlightenment

Almost 2000 years after Gautama Buddha, in Japan, on the background of the many developments of Buddhist tradition in Asia, Shinran, an exponent of the Pure Land teaching, significantly reinterpreted the nature of Buddhism. He opened wide the door of universal salvation for even the most evil person. He was spurred to alter the assumption of self-perfectibility through discipline and practice that underlay the traditions of India, including Buddhism, as a result of his own experience of failure and despair during twenty years of intense practice in the Tendai monastery on Mount Hiei, a major center of Buddhism in medieval Japan.

Shinran lived during the Kamakura period in Japanese history (1185-1332 C.E.), an age of upheaval and turbulence which rendered the traditional forms of Buddhism in Japan ineffectual in bringing spiritual consolation to ordinary people. In the midst of this turmoil, several creative individuals appeared, such as Hōnen (1133-1212 C.E.) in the Pure Land tradition, Dōgen (1200-1253 C.E.) in the Zen, and Nichiren (1222-1289 C.E.) who focused on the *Lotus Sūtra*. They left Mount Hiei largely because it did not measure up to their spiritual ideals and expectations. However, Shinran differed from his contemporaries because he could not fulfill the high spiritual ideals and disciplines of monastic life.

Shinran's sense of personal failure may, in part, be explained by the fact that he entered the monastery at a young age. Concerned for his future des-

tiny, he became a disciple of Hōnen, then a leading teacher of the Pure Land faith. Encouraged by his teacher, Shinran gained release from his fears and anxieties and received the assurance that Amida Buddha had embraced him unconditionally in his compassion and would bring him to final enlightenment.

When separated from Hōnen by exile Shinran became a more independent thinker, developing an interpretation of Pure Land teaching with more philosophical and psychological depth. He also redefined the nature of religion and the meaning of salvation. His thought was also inspired by his life among the peasants, farmers, and townspeople in the distant provinces of Eastern Japan. He acquired a wife and raised a family of six children. After many years he retired to Kyoto where, through various writings, he left his teachings for future generations.

The hallmark of Shinran's teaching is essentially "salvation by faith alone." This teaching has attracted Western scholars because of its similarity to the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther's understanding of religious faith. Taking seriously his inability to gain enlightenment on his own, Shinran interpreted faith as a gift of Amida Buddha's compassion that secures salvation and spiritual liberation for even the most evil person.

Though this teaching may appear similar to ideas in Western religion, there is a world of difference resulting from its root in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. Mahāyāna teaching distinguishes between conventional thought and belief and the truth of the absolute realm. The level of conventional thought denotes thinking based on naïve realism and objectivity. Such knowledge informs our egocentrism and perpetuates our ignorance of our true nature and of the world. The absolute truth, while inconceivable and inexpressible, exposes the unreality and distortions created by our delusory, self-centered knowledge and interests. The Mahāyāna perspective on religion rejects the literalism, dogmatism, objectivism, and moralism found in many religious traditions. Mahāyāna Buddhism recognizes that all people are at differing stages of spiritual development and affirms people as they are. It is a more accepting, compassionate teaching.

Shinran imbibed the spirit of Mahāyāna Buddhism. His Pure Land teaching is an inclusive, humane faith. It is non-authoritarian, non-dogmatic, egalitarian, non-superstitious religious faith. Through deepening religious understanding it liberates people from religious intimidation and oppression, which trade on the ignorance of people and their desire for security. Shinran's teaching does not encourage blind faith at the expense of one's reason and understanding.

Gratitude for the Buddha's compassion is the basis for life and human relations. It expresses deep gratitude to all those who support our lives

whether ancestors, family, community, or Nature. Though seemingly otherworldly, it is really a faith for living with resolution and commitment in this life.

Shin Buddhism focuses on the central problem of the ego as the source of our many problems, personal and social, even as we engage in religious practices. The practice of "deep hearing" and self-reflection increase spiritual sensitivity in our day-to-day affairs. It affirms ordinary everyday life, enabling the individual to discover meaning and depth in all aspects of experience. It sanctifies ordinary life as the sphere of personal fulfillment. Rather than material benefits from faith, Shinran's teaching offers us realistic self-understanding which is the greatest benefit of all.

Religious devotion and commitment are expressed in the recitation of Amida Buddha's Name, *Namu-amida-butsu*, understood as an act of gratitude and spiritually as the call of Amida to our hearts. Amida calls us to reflect on the nature of our lives and our entanglements in blind passion and ignorance. As a bright light sharpens the shadows, Amida's compassion and wisdom illuminate the inner recesses of our consciousness and empower and transform us within the process of our daily living. Shinran indicates that in trusting faith the true mind of Amida works within our lives to bring the Buddha's wisdom and compassion to bear on our daily activities and our relations to others.

Shinran's understanding of Buddhism is all-embracing and comprehensive, offering a way of life that can be realized in the workaday world, as well as the religious experience that we are accepted and destined for enlightenment, despite the limitations we encounter constantly in our struggle for existence.

In its historical development in Japanese tradition, Shin Buddhism became a powerful religious and social institution energized by the strong commitment and devotion of its followers to the present day. Nevertheless, it now faces an uncertain future. Rapidly changing societies throughout the world, higher levels of education, the rise of technocracy and the information age, a highly competitive religious environment, advancing threats to the environment, and widespread poverty and violence in the modern world present a challenge, as well as opportunity, for the spiritual legacy of Shinran to illuminate the travail of the human spirit and offer a path of liberation from egoistic bondage.

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