

# Shinran's Idea of Realization in Shinjin and Nembutsu<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Shinran's idea of realization in shinjin and nembutsu

In Pure Land Buddhist tradition, the *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* (the Larger Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life) which expounds the saving nature of Amida Buddha has been very influential in the theoretical development of Pure Land Buddhism. The idea of realization elucidated by Shinran also has its theoretical basis upon the content of this Mahayana sutra.

In his main work of *A Collection of Passages Revealing True Teaching, Shinjin and Realization* (abbreviated below as the *True Teaching, Shinjin and Realization*), Shinran states:

To reveal the true teaching: It is the Larger Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life. The central purport of this sutra is that Amida, by establishing the incomparable Vows, has opened wide the dharma-storehouse, and full of compassion for small, foolish beings, selects

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based upon author's two presentations at Munster University in 2017 and Georgetown University in 2018.

and bestows the treasure of virtues.

[CSW I: 7]

Shinran makes clear that his teaching has its foundation upon the teaching of the Larger Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life.

Furthermore, Shinran maintains the meaning of the true realization of shinjin and nembutsu which he is convinced as the manifestation of the working of Amida's Vow at the beginning of chapter on realization in the *True Teaching, Shinjin and Realization* as follows:

To reveal, with reverence, the true realization: It is the wondrous state attained through Amida's perfect benefiting of others; it is the ultimate fruition of supreme nirvana. It arises from the Vow of necessary attainment of nirvana, also known as the Vow of realization of great nirvana.

When foolish beings possessed of blind passions, the multitudes caught in birth-and-death and defiled by evil karma, realize the mind and practice that Amida directs to them for their going forth, they immediately join the truly settled of the Mahayana. Because they dwell among the truly settled, they necessarily attain nirvana.

[CSW I: 153]

We can find the distinctive understanding of salvific action revealed in attaining shinjin in these passages.<sup>2</sup> Shinran says that the true realiza-

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<sup>2</sup> We find some issues relating to the translation of Buddhist terms into English. For example, the term enlightenment is an English translation of Pali

tion in Shin Buddhism is the state attained through Amida's perfect benefiting of others and it is the consequence of supreme nirvana. When foolish beings possessed of blind passion and the multitudes caught in birth-and death or karmic sufferings realize the mind and practice, in other words, realize true and real shinjin (entrusting) and nembutsu that Amida directs to them, they are truly settled to be born in the Pure Land immediately. Because they dwell among the truly settled, they necessarily attain nirvana. In other words, salvific action of Amida is revealed in relation to the mind and practice, shinjin and nembutsu that Amida directs to foolish beings possessed of blind passions.

In this essay, I would like to discuss the theoretical structure and distinctive nature of Shinran's idea of realization in shinjin and nembutsu.

## 2. The characteristics of the idea of shinjin

Shinjin is the central concept in Shinran's thought as he insists that "true cause of attaining of nirvana is shinjin alone." [CWS I: 93-94]

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term bodhi which literally means "awakening", which was widely accepted in the Western world, as you may know well, through the 19th century translations of Max Müller. It has the western connotation of a sudden insight into a transcendental truth. The term is also being used to translate several other Buddhist terms and concepts used to denote insight (prajña and satori) ; "blowing out" of deluded mind and desires (Nirvana) and attaining of Buddhahood. In the western world the concept of spiritual enlightenment has taken on a romantic meaning. Since we see some possibilities that may distort the original meaning of Buddhist term in the context of Buddhist thought. Some Buddhist scholars are very careful about translating some Buddhist terms directly into English. We have similar discussions as to Shinran's term of shinjin and tariki.

## Shinran's Idea of Realization in Shinjin and Nembutsu

In Shinran, the term, *shinjin*, fundamentally refers to the cause of attaining the ultimate goal of Buddhist path.

Generally speaking, the words such as 'to believe' and 'faith' are used broadly in both a mundane and a religious sense. Especially, the term, 'faith,' is used to reveals the religious experience which refers to a devotional feeling or attitude of having belief in and obeisance to the divine(s).

We find that there are many Buddhist sutras, commentaries and expositions that use the term 'shin (to believe)' to express an attitude of having belief in and obeisance to the Buddha dharma (Buddha's teaching or truth). The two following passages are wellknown.

Entrusting (*shin*) is the basis of the Way. It is the mother of virtues. It increases all good dharmas and extinguishes all doubts. It manifests and opens up the unexcelled Path. [Taisho vol.9: 775-c]

With entrusting (*shin*) one is able to enter the great ocean of the Buddhadharma; with wisdom one is able to cross the ocean. [Taisho vol.25: 63-a]

However, in Shinran's teachings, *shinjin* or entrusting pertains the meaning of "true cause of attaining of nirvana." Why does Shinran insist so?

In this regard, Shinran states:

Great shinjin is the superlative means for attaining longevity and deathlessness. It is the wondrous way to awaken aspiration for the pure and rejection of the defiled. It is the straightforward mind directed to us through the selected Vow. It is shinjin that actualizes Amida's profound and vast benefiting of others. It is true mind that is diamondlike and indestructible. It is pure shinjin by which a person easily reaches the Pure Land where no one goes. It is the mind that is single, realized by the person who is grasped and protected by the compassionate light. It is great shinjin, rare and unsurpassed. It is the quick path difficult for people to accept. It is the true cause of attaining great nirvana. It is the white path by which all virtues are fulfilled instantly. It is the ocean of shinjin that is itself suchness or true reality. [CWS I: 79]

Shinran insists that shinjin is a wonderful way to aspire for the birth in the Pure Land which is directed to us through Amida's Vow. When we realize this mind of aspiration, we are grasped and protected by the compassionate light of Amida. Because it is Amida's true and real heart and mind directed to us through his Vows, this shinjin could be 'the true cause of attaining great nirvana.'

Shinran also explains the structure of arising of this true and real mind as follows:

As I reflect, I find that our attainment of shinjin arises from the heart and mind with which Amida Tathagata selected the Vow. [CWS I: 77]

Shinran's Idea of Realization in Shinjin and Nembutsu

Shinran elucidates shinjin arises from the heart and mind of Amida's Vow and is directed to us by Amida. In other words, because the essential nature of shinjin is rooted in the mind of purity of Amida's Vow, the person of shinjin realizes the arising of wisdom in oneself.

In this context, Shinran states:

Shinjin is wisdom. This wisdom is attained because we were grasped by the light of Other Power. [CWS I: 544]

To entrust oneself to the nembutsu is to already have become a person who realizes wisdom and will attain Buddhahood; know that this is to become free of foolishness. [CWS I: 656-657]

Shinran distinctively comprehends shinjin as wisdom. He expounds that when one attains shinjin one will be able to see and know what has been unseen and what has been unknown, and, at the same time, that is to see and know the true nature of all beings and the present self as they are. Shinran says:

All beings, an ocean of multitudes, have since the beginningless past down to this day this very moment been evil and defiled, completely lacking the mind of purity. [CWS I: 95]

In all small and foolish beings, thoughts of greed and desire incessantly defile any goodness of heart; thoughts of anger and hatred constant-

ly consume the dharmatreasure. Even if one urgently acts and urgently practices as though sweeping fire from one's head, all these acts must be called "poisoned and sundry good" and "false and deceitful practice." They cannot be called "true and real action." [CWS I: 98]

Furthermore, he laments:

Although I have taken refuge in the true teaching,  
The mind of truth hardly exists in me;  
Moreover, I am so false-hearted and untrue  
That there cannot be any mind of purity.

Each of us, in outward bearing,  
Makes a show of being wise, good, and dedicated;  
But so great are our greed, anger, perversity, and deceit,  
That we are filled with all forms of malice and cunning.

Extremely difficult is it to put an end to our evil nature;  
The mind is like a venomous snake or a scorpion.  
Our performance of good acts is also poisoned;  
Hence it is called false and empty practice. [CWS I: 421]

As far as one is possessed of ignorance and delusion, one cannot truly know it as ignorance and delusion. Only through wisdom is ignorance revealed as ignorance and only by encountering truth can delusion be

known as delusion. This knowing is a special implication of dynamics of Buddhist wisdom. As Shinran speaks of attaining of shinjin as awakening to working of wisdom or other power, the person of shinjin, although he is still a being creating karma that destines him for hell, has a true mind that results in his already living in the Pure Land. This Shinran's idea of shinjin contains the unfolding of this tension and dynamics which manifest the working of Amida's wisdom and compassion.

### 3. The nature of human existence unfolded in attaining of shinjin

We can also find the same logical structure in Shinran's perspective to the nature of human existence.

According to Shinran, human beings are submerged in the depths of blind passions and live as foolish beings with the mind of "greed-love." In his *Notes on Once-Calling and Many Calling*, he states:

Foolish beings: as expressed in the parable of the two rivers of water and fire, we are full of ignorance and blind passion. Our desires are countless, and anger, wrath, jealousy, and envy are overwhelming, arising without pause; to the very last moment of life they do not cease, or disappear, or exhaust themselves. [CWS I: 488]

The parable of two rivers of water and fire is a story found in Chinese Pure Land master Shantao's writing that illustrates a life of a human existence as filled with relentless desires and anger. Shinran says that human beings are filled with blind passions until the very last moment of

life.

In *a Record in Lament Divergence* which imparts Shinran's words we read his words as following:

If I could attain Buddhahood by endeavoring in other practices, but said the nembutsu and so fell into hell, then I would feel regret at having been deceived. But I am incapable of any other practice, so hell is decidedly my abode whatever I do. [CWS I: 662]

Here Shinran says, "Hell is decidedly my abode whatever I do." He denies his capacity to attain enlightenment on his own. For he sees himself as an existence with the mind of greed-love" and lacks of true wisdom. However, he talks of the salvation of such an existence.

For example, *A Record in Lament Divergence* chapter 3 records Shiran's paradoxical words as to this:

*Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will.*

Though it is so, people commonly say, "Even an evil person attains birth, so it goes without saying that a good person will." This statement may seem well founded at first, but it runs counter to the intent of the Primal Vow, which is Other Power. This is because people who rely on doing good through their self-power fail to entrust themselves wholeheartedly to Other Power and therefore not in accord with Amida's Primal Vow. [CWS I: 663]

## Shinran's Idea of Realization in Shinjin and Nembutsu

It seems contradictory to insist that rather a good person an evil person attains birth in the Pure Land. However, Shinran says that since a good person of self-power fails to entrust oneself wholeheartedly to other power “Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will.” Shinran also calls such person as “evil persons who entrust themselves to other power.” Needless to say, Shinran does not talk of good and evil in mere moral sense but from fundamental or ontological perspective of the nature of human existence. There is no capacity to attain enlightenment on human part. One can be born in the Pure Land only through entrusting oneself to Amida Buddha's Primal Vow or other power because it is in accord with the intent of the Vow.

Shinran's innovation on the complete reversal of the transferring agents i.e. Buddha rather than humans is none other than his realization of deep reflection on the wicked and perfidious nature of human beings. As a practitioner of the Buddhist path, he experienced difficulty in achieving his goal through his own efforts, and realized it was not possible without Amida Buddha's Primal Vow.

Relating this, Shinran writes in his *Notes on 'Essential Faith Alone'*:

This means that, since there is no one – whether among the wise of the Mahayana or the Hinayana, or the ignorant, good or evil – who can attain supreme nirvana through his or her own self-cultivated wisdom, we are encouraged to enter the ocean of the wisdom-Vow of the Buddha of unhindered light, for the Buddha's form is the light of

wisdom. This form comprehends the wisdom of all the Buddhas. It should be understood that light is none other than wisdom.

[CWS I: 452]

Shinran states that by entering the ocean of the wisdom, Vow of the Buddha of unhindered light, whether the wise or the ignorant, good or evil can attain supreme nirvana.

In this regard, Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota pointed out the two elements of shinjin as follows:

At the foundation of the realization of shinjin lies two inter-related elements: the dissolution of self-power, which is attachment to one's own will and capacity to determine and to determine and do what is good, or what accords with truth and reality; and the emergence of Other Power in one's existence, which is expressed as entrance into the ocean of Amida's Vow or being grasped by Amida. These two elements are in fact two faces of a single religious awakening. Thus, becoming free of attachment to one's own designs has two phases. First, one awakens to failure of one's own intellectual and volitional powers to know and perform good, and to the failure of one's own efforts to achieve emancipation. Here, if there occurs a transformation in which one cannot but abandon the powers of one's own wisdom, love, and goodness and give oneself over to the power of the Vow, then shinjin becomes settled, and one becomes completely free of self-power. One becomes aware that one already is, and always has

been, within the working of great compassion, just as one is.

[Ueda & Hirota: 158]

Shinjin is the true cause of attaining of nirvana because it is directed to us through Amida's Vow. Since this shinjin of other power arises from the heart and mind with which Amida Buddha selected the Vow, we are grasped by Amida's light of wisdom and become a person who realizes wisdom and will attain Buddhahood or supreme nirvana. And two inter-related elements of shinjin which are discovered in the dissolution of self-power and the emergence of other power in one's existence constitute the theoretical framework of Shinran's idea of shinjin.

We can find the characteristic structure of Shinra's idea of shinjin in these points.

#### 4. The idea of nembutsu of other power

The practice of nembutsu in Shinran is to say the Name of Amida Buddha.

In Pure Land tradition, the term 'nembutsu' refers to several practices oriented toward Amida Buddha. The first of the two Chinese characters, nem (念), has two-fold meaning. One is 'to think of,' and the other is 'to recite.' Shinran follows his teacher Honen and Honen's interpretation of Shantao and understands it as to recite the Name, saying '*Namu-Amidabutsu*.'

Shinran elucidates the true practice of the Pure Land Way at the beginning of the chapter on practice in the *True Teaching, Shinjin and*

*Realization* as follows:

The great practice is to say the Name of the Tathagata of unhindered light. This practice, embodying all good acts and possessing all roots of virtue, is perfect and most rapid in bringing them to fullness. It is the treasure ocean of virtues that is suchness or true reality. For this reason, it is called great practice. [CWS I: 13]

The word 'practice' generally refers to our own actions on the path to the attainment of Buddhahood. 'Great practice' indicates an inquiry into the very foundations of our practice, which leads to a realization of its continuity with truth and an awareness of the working of Amida's Vow, which is directed to us. In other words, Shinran reveals, 'great practice' is none other than Amida's practice.

Therefore, the meaning of this passage is that our everyday practice of the nembutsu — our voicing of the Name of Amida Buddha (the Tathagata) — is our practice, and yet it is also true practice of Amida, which embodies all good acts and virtues, and brings to perfect fulfillment all that is valuable for our attainment of birth and enlightenment.

For that reason, this practice of saying the Name is called as great practice. Even if it remains our practice, it is called great practice as well — the true and real practice that is bestowed by Amida's Vow.

Moreover, Shinran explicates the implicit implication of nembutsu by interpreting the phrase '*Namu Amidabutsu*', word by word, as followings:

From these passages we see that the word *Namu* means to take refuge. In the term to take refuge (*kimyo*), *ki* means to arrive at. Further, it is used in compounds to mean to yield joyfully to (*kietsu*) and to take shelter in (*kisai*). *Myo* means to act, to invite, to command, to teach, path, message, to devise, to summon. Thus, *kimyo* is the command of the Primal Vow calling to and summoning us.

[CWS I: 38]

Here, Shinran interprets the implication of the selected Vow of Amida more radically. Nembutsu is the practitioner's saying of the Name of Amida but in its essence it is the command of Amida's Primal Vow "calling to and summoning us" to awaken to. Nembutsu itself is other power. This is Shinran's unique understanding of nembutsu of other power.

In understanding of the practice of the Pure Land way to be utterance of the nembutsu, Shinran follows his teacher Honen and Honen's interpretation of Chinese Pure Land master, Shantao. Honen understands nembutsu as the practice of selected Vow of Amida and, at the same time, as the practice that sentient beings undertake to accord with the Vow. However, Shinran understands the implication of nembutsu from different perspective. He stresses that nembutsu is not the calling or invoking to Amida Buddha by a practitioner but activity arising from Amida's Vow. Shinran says that "it is the command of the Primal Vow calling to and summoning us." This nature of other power nembutsu is clearly spelled out by Shinran in the opening passages to the chapter on practice.

Shinran's Idea of Realization in Shinjin and Nembutsu

Shinran also reveals the workings of this Amida's Vow through nembutsu in various contexts. He expresses:

It is the power of Dharmakara's Vow  
That we realize the nembutsu that is wisdom;  
Were it not for the wisdom of shinjin,  
How could we attain nirvana? [CWS I: 407]

Namu-amida-butsu is the Name embodying wisdom.  
[CWS I: 453]

Shinran also understands nembutsu as wisdom, which indicates that nembutsu has the same working as above mentioned 'the wisdom of shinjin.' That is why, Shinran also insists that nembutsu is unhindered by any deluded heart and mind. In this, Shinran points out:

Saying the Name breaks through all the ignorance of sentient beings and fulfills all their aspirations. Saying the Name is the right act, supreme, true, and excellent. [CWS I: 17]

In *A Record in Lament of Divergences* also records following Shinran's words,

The nembutsu, for its practicers, is not a practice nor a good act. Since it is not performed out of one's designs, it is not a practice.

Shinran's Idea of Realization in Shinjin and Nembutsu

Since it is not good done through one's own calculation, it is not a good act. Because it arises wholly from Other Power and is free of self-power, for the practitioner, it is not a practice or a good act.

[CWS I: 665]

Here, Shinran further indicates that the nembutsu is not a practice nor a good act. Relating this understanding, Shinran writes in his letter:

The *Sutra of the Treasure Name* states: "The nembutsu of Amida's Primal Vow is not our practice, it is not our good; it is simply keeping the Name of the Buddha." It is the Name that is good, the Name that is the practice. When we speak of practice, we mean doing good. The Primal Vow is clearly the Buddha's promise. When we have understood this, we see that the Vow is not our good, nor is it our practice. Hence we speak of Other Power.

[CWS I: 555]

The last passages from Shinran's letter completely clarify the context in which the second passages from *A Record in Lament of Divergences*, which reveals the notion that saying the Name is 'neither a practitioner nor a good act', should be understood. For Shinran, saying nembutsu itself is nothing other than working of other power itself, salvific action of Amida. In the act of saying the Name, we hear the calling of Amida and accept them.

In other words, our saying of the Name toward the direction of the Buddha becomes, just as it is, the Buddha's saying of the Name to us.

Thus, even though it is our act of saying the Name, at the same time, it cannot be said that saying the Name is really our practice or our act of good. That is why Shinran calls it as nembutsu of other power.

## 5. Conclusion

Asahara Saichi (1850–1932), a devoted lay follower of Shin Buddhism, who was also called Myokonin, a wonderful person of faith in nembutsu by D. T. Suzuki, expresses his understand in this way:

When I say the nembutsu, which I recite, the nembutsu has no taste to it. But when I say the nembutsu, which is recited to me, then the nembutsu has a rich flavor. [Suzuki:1967 144]

The true practice of the nembutsu — saying the Name of the Buddha — arises in a direction from us to the Buddha. Shinran expresses the dynamics as tariki or other power. At the same time, together with our own practice of saying the Name, saying of the Name arises in the direction from the Buddha to us, as our fundamental self-abandonment that results from our being illuminated from the supra-mundane world. Our exclusive practice of saying the Name is identical with our hearing of the Name. Our whole-hearted calling out to the Buddha constitutes, just as it is, our response to the calling voice of the Buddha.

In this context, Shinran claims that this practice of saying the Name is the locus for the fulfillment of shinjin.

## Shinran's Idea of Realization in Shinjin and Nembutsu

[A] though 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 of nembutsu. ...Thus, although shinjin and nembutsu are two, since shinjin is to heart and not doubt that you are saved only by 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.

[CWS I: 538]

Shinran states that, apart from the true practice of the nembutsu, there is no shinjin. If separated from shinjin, the nembutsu of the Primal Vow will not arise. Thus, in Shinran's thought, the true practice of the nembutsu—saying the Name—does not apart from arising of shinjin. Shinjin of the Primal Vow can never be apart from the practice of saying the Name either.

Shinran says in this regard:

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. [CWS I: 80]

Hearing is to entrust oneself to the Name that embodies the Tathagata's Vow. [CWS I: 495]

For Shinran, nembutsu and shinjin have inseparable relationship. The arising of shinjin comes about in the completeness of the practice of saying the Name and shinjin comes about within the deepening of hearing the Name. The true act of saying the Name is the true hearing of the Name, which in turn is none other than true shinjin. Shinran understands shinjin and nembutsu, faith and practice, in such dynamics of working of Amida's working of Vow.

To be concluded, Shinran calls nembutsu practice as great practice since it is directed to us from Amida's Vow as the same as shinjin of other power. He metaphorically interprets the implication of nembutsu as "the command of the Primal Vow calling to and summoning us." He understands that "saying the Name breaks through all the ignorance of sentient beings and fulfills all their aspirations."

On the other hands, he elucidates that the nembutsu, for its practitioner, is not a practice nor a good act since it is a practice of other power. Furthermore, Shinran claims that this practice of saying the Name is the locus for the fulfillment of shinjin. For Shinran, nembutsu and shinjin are not generated out of human's will, but it emerges together as manifestation of Amida's Vow. This leads his understanding of inseparability of shinjin and nembutsu of other power as salvific action. Here we can see the theoretical structure and distinctive nature of Shinran's idea of realization in shinjin and nembutsu.

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