

Medicinal Metaphors in a Soteriology of Transformation:

Shinran's View of the Power of the *Nenbutsu*

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Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1262) made a major shift in the understanding of the Pure Land teachings by situating human salvation in the moment of the attainment of faith, or *shinjin* 信心, rather than in birth in the Pure Land at the moment of death, as Genshin 源信 (943-1017) did. Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証 is a presentation of his reinterpretation of the basic texts of the Pure Land tradition, particularly the three Pure Land sutras, based on a passage at the beginning of the second fascicle of the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life*. This foundational passage describes the fulfillment of the original vow (*hongan* 本願) stating that faith is attained and birth in the Pure Land is settled through hearing the name of Amida Buddha. By focusing on this passage, Shinran removes the emphasis in Pure Land practice on the preparations for maintaining the proper state of mind at the moment of death, and places it on the act of hearing Amida's name, and thus, by extension, on the practice of listening to the teachings that explain the meaning of that name. In this way, he dissociates the moment of salvation from the moment of death, redefining it as the moment when Amida's name is heard and faith arises.

Shinran makes a further interpretive leap through his creative rereading of the Chinese text of the passage, appending an honorific verb ending to a central term, and thereby shifting the agency in the arising of both faith and practice from the human being who chants the *nenbutsu* to the working of Amida. That is, he argues that faith and practice arise due to other power

(*tariki* 他力), rather than the efforts of the person who is the subject of liberation, or self power (*jiriki* 自力). Through these two reinterpretations of the Pure Land scriptures, Shinran completely does away with the necessity for the “technology of the self” which is presented by Genshin and his associates. In its place, Shinran offers what might be termed an “alchemy of the spirit,” a soteriology in which there is no need for a volitional reconstruction of mind, but where one’s consciousness is utterly transformed through the incomprehensible working of Amida’s wisdom.

We ought to note, however, that this transformation—what Shinran calls “having evil transformed and made into good”—occurs on the plane of understanding and not within the physical realm. Although Shinran speaks of the vast benefits in this world endowed to one who has attained *shinjin*, he makes no promises about longevity, health, wealth or security that might be realized through chanting the *nenbutsu*. Instead, he sharply criticizes any attempts to employ the *nenbutsu* to attain worldly benefits as an expression of ingenuine faith and an attempt to drag the transcendental working of Amida down to serve base human ends. In one verse from his *Hymns on the Pure Land Masters* (*Kōsō wasan* 高僧和讃), Shinran states,

Although practicing with the name of the Buddha as most central /
 The practitioner who prays for this world /
 Is called one of miscellaneous cultivation /
 And despised [for] among a thousand such practitioners, not even one
 will be born.¹

Here, Shinran says that those who chant the *nenbutsu* in hopes of gaining benefits in this world, that is, using the *nenbutsu* as a tool to achieve specific ends in this world will never attain birth in the Pure Land.

The Pure Land tradition is not without a discourse regarding the benefits that accrue to the *nenbutsu* practitioner in this life. Daochuo 道綽 (562-645), one of the seven patriarchs of the Shin sect designated by

1 *Teihon Shinran shōnin zenshū* 定本親鸞聖人全集 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2008), vol. 2, “Wasan hen” 和讃篇, p. 110.

Shinran, states that chanting the *nenbutsu* leads to an extension of one's life, quoting two sutras that describe people who frightened off the demons who had come to take them to their next life by chanting the *nenbutsu*. Shinran wrote a hymn of fifteen verses about the benefits in the present world that are bestowed upon the *nenbutsu* practitioner, where he says that one who chants the *nenbutsu* will avoid "an untimely death." However, there is no reference among Shinran's works, nor among the works of the seven patriarchs, to the use of the *nenbutsu* to cure illness. Indeed, Shinran's references to the curing of illness in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* are all metaphorical expressions that are employed to describe the transformative power of the *nenbutsu* and the mind of entrusting that arises through hearing it. These medicinal metaphors, although appearing at critical junctures in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, are actually very few and far between. In all, there are six points at which Shinran employs medicinal metaphors to describe the way in which the ignorance, blind passions, and sins that Buddhism posits as the existential illness of human beings are cured through the encounter between the practitioner, the name, and the original vow. This encounter is presented as bringing about a transformation at the level of meaning—the way in which the practitioner views the world—not as the recovery of a state of physical health. In that sense, Shinran uses medicinal imagery to discuss spiritual, rather than corporeal, transformation.

In the following article, Inoue Takami will be discussing the section in which Shinran expands on the image of the original vow being as the only medicine that can cure the "three illnesses difficult to cure" (those who slander the Mahayana, those who commit the five grave offences, and the *icchāntica* who has no karmic roots that will lead to liberation), so in this piece, I will introduce the other instances where Shinran uses the metaphor of a medicine to describe the working of Amida Buddha within the *nenbutsu* practitioner. In particular, I will look at how these metaphors are employed to describe the transformation brought about by hearing the name which is the centerpiece of the salvation put forth in Shinran's thought. Through

these considerations, I will explore the “alchemy of the spirit” that he presents wherein the significance of one’s karmic evil is transmuted into virtue through the insight brought about by the wisdom embodied in the name of Amida Buddha.

When considering the medicinal metaphors in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, it is important that we first clarify the nature of the illness that is said to be cured through the working of the various medicines that appear. Since the time of Śākyamuni, Buddhism has metaphorically defined the human condition as one of illness. As is well known, what is said to be Śākyamuni’s first sermon takes the form of a diagnosis and prescription for the human condition of suffering that he says is caused by craving, anger, and ignorance—the three most basic blind passions. The major Mahayana sutras follow in this tradition, using the metaphor of illness to describe the state of the human being, and particularly to discuss their blind passions and karmic evil. The *Nirvana Sutra* and the *Garland Sutra* (*Kegonkyō* 華嚴經) abound with metaphors of medicines that cure human beings’ blind passions and lead to a state of health, or liberation from the bonds of attachment and ignorance. As we will see, Shinran’s definition of the illness that is cured by the working of Amida Buddha is essentially in the same vein. However, it differs in that rather than positing the complete eradication of these blind passions and karmic evil, Shinran states that they are healed by being endowed with a new meaning as essential elements leading to the encounter with the name, and thus transformed into karmic good, or virtue.

This transformation is not a physical transformation in which a lump of evil karma is in some way miraculously transformed into good karma, but instead a transformation of the point of view of the practitioner—a shift from a reliance on one’s own value judgements to that which is apparent from the perspective of the Buddha’s wisdom. In that sense, Shinran’s use of these metaphors are very much in the vein in which they were presented in

the texts where they originally appear. That is to say, the Dharma as preached by the Buddha cures sentient beings' illness of ignorance by endowing them with wisdom. As we will see below, Shinran's originality lies in his contextualization of this basic schema of Buddhist salvation within Pure Land soteriology, in particular in his unique view of the transformative power of the wisdom expressed in the name.

The four medicinal metaphors that we will consider here are found in very different places in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, a work that is made up of six chapters, those on teaching, practice, faith, realization, true buddha bodies and lands (*shin butsudo* 真仏土), and transformed buddha bodies and lands (*keshindo* 化身土). The first metaphor appears in a list of twenty-eight metaphors praising the compassionate vow of Amida Buddha that appears toward the end of the chapter on practice. The second appears as part of one of Shinran's conclusions in the second section of the chapter on faith. The third, also in the chapter on faith, appears in a quotation of the *Anleji* 安樂集 in Shinran's comment on the nature and content of the life of the true disciple of the Buddha. The fourth appears in quotations of the *Nirvana Sutra* and *Garland Sutra* which Shinran includes to describe the nature of the "good teacher" (*zenchishiki* 善知識) in the chapter on transformed buddha bodies and lands. (There is a fifth reference to the way in which Śākyamuni's teaching in the "*Great Nirvana Sutra*" is similar to rarified ghee (*daigo* 醍醐) that appears in the chapter on true buddha bodies and lands, but since it does not directly relate to Amida's working in the practitioner, I will leave it out of the considerations in this paper.)

Let us start by looking at the first one, from the chapter on practice, because it is perhaps the simplest and most straightforward of the four. This example will give us a clear idea of what Shinran saw as illness, and how that illness might be alleviated. The metaphor appears in a list of

2 We should note that this traditional imagery does not posit a state of health prior to an encounter with the Dharma. Human beings are born with the sickness of ignorance which can only be cured through the Buddha's teachings.

metaphors all borrowed from the *Garland Sutra* that Shinran uses to describe the working of the original vow. It reads:

[The compassionate vow] is like the clear-sight tree, the king of medicines, for it destroys all the diseases of blind passions.³

The illness here is very clearly defined as the blind passions. The medicine that represents the original vow is called the “clear-sight tree” (*zenkenju* 善見樹), which is a mythical medicinal plant that appears in a few sutras and other works in the Buddhist canon. References to it can be found several times in the *Garland Sutra*, particularly in the list of almost two hundred different metaphors regarding the benefits that are received in the mind that aspires for enlightenment (*bodaiśhin* 菩提心), many of which were appropriated by Pure Land thinkers such as Daochuo, Genshin and Shinran to describe the benefits of the *nenbutsu*. The twenty-eight metaphors that Shinran lists in this portion of the chapter on practice are all taken directly from that list in the *Garland Sutra*, which covers the better part of six pages in the Taishō canon.⁴ Shinran’s description of the working of the clear-sight tree is based entirely on the wording in the *Garland Sutra*, which also says that the medicinal tree cures the illness of the blind passions.

In a different portion of the *Garland Sutra*, the way that the clear-sight tree functions to cure illness is described in the following way.

There is a tree in the snowy mountains that is a king of medicine called clear-sight. If someone sees it, their eyes become perfectly pure. If someone hears it, their ears become perfectly pure. If someone smells it, their nose becomes perfectly pure. If someone licks it, their tongue becomes perfectly pure. If someone touches it, their body becomes perfectly pure. If there are sentient beings who collect that earth

3 *Teihon kyōgyōshinshō* 定本教行信証 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1989), p. 82. See *Collected Works of Shinran*, trans. Dennis Hirota, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga, and Ryushin Uryuzu (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997), vol. 1, p. 66.

4 *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經, ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭 (Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–34; hereafter T), no. 279, 10: 429a–434c.

[where the tree grows], it will also bring them the benefit of having illnesses removed.⁵

The clearsight tree is said to have the power to purify those things that come in contact with it and is therefore used as a metaphor for the purification of the blind passions of human beings. There is another story that appears in a more obscure sutra, the *Na'nyo giiki innen kyō* 棕女祇域因縁経 (T no. 553), which perhaps explains the name, “clearsight,” and the reason that Shinran chose to include it in his list. In the story, the great doctor Jivaka (Jpn. Giba 耆婆) comes upon a boy, carrying a load of firewood, whose internal organs are all perfectly visible through his skin. Jivaka is said to have immediately bought all the firewood from the boy and ferreted out the branch of the clearsight tree which enabled him to see directly into the organs of anyone whom he touched with it. Although it is unclear whether Shinran has this story in mind, the possibility exists that he chose to include the metaphor of the clearsight tree in this list because it cures by making the inner workings of the illness apparent, which resonates with his use of the imagery of light clearing up the darkness of ignorance. He may have wished to employ the image of the clearsight tree to describe the way in which the teachings expressed in the name alleviate the suffering caused by the blind passions by providing clear insight into them. Considered in this way, the clearsight tree might be seen as a representation of Amida's wisdom.

Shinran holds that this healing wisdom is imparted to the practitioner in hearing the name and the teachings that explain it, as can be seen by the next set of medicinal metaphors that we will look at. In the chapter on faith, Shinran describes in detail the changes that occur in—the benefits that are endowed to—the person who has attained faith through hearing the name. He lays out a set of ten benefits and goes on to show the scriptural basis for those benefits in his comment on the true disciple of the Buddha, whom he defines as the person who hears the name and practices the mind of true

⁵ T no. 279, 10: 277b3-7.

entrusting. In that comment, Shinran quotes from the *Anleji* in order to provide instructions regarding how to preach and listen to the Dharma. In this quotation, he says that the act of listening to and preaching the Dharma should be considered one of healing. The passage reads:

To clarify the proper track for listening to and preaching the Dharma: One should think of the person who preaches the Dharma as a king among physicians and as one who eliminates suffering. One should think of the Dharma that is preached as the sweet nectar of the gods (*kanro* 甘露) or rarified ghee (*daigo*). One should think of the person who listens to the Dharma as having excellent understanding that is increasing and growing and that his illness is being cured. When preachers and listeners are able to do this, the Buddha-Dharma flourishes and they are all constantly born before Buddhas.⁶

Here, Shinran admonishes the person who listens to the Dharma to think of the person who preaches the Dharma as a king among physicians, one who is able to cure any disease. The Dharma itself is referred to as the medicine that cures the listeners' ills. "Sweet nectar of the gods" (Jpn. *kanro*, Skt. *amṛta*) is known as a medicine that endows immortality to those who drink it. "Rarified ghee" (*daigo*) is also a medicine that appears often in the Buddhist cannon and is said to cure all illnesses. The passage further states that the person who listens to the Dharma should be thought of as being healed through that action. Daochuo and Shinran, in this passage, very clearly state that the cure to human beings' most fundamental illness is to be found in the Dharma, the truth that the Buddha and his followers preach. In this way, Shinran situates the resolution of the ills of sentient beings in the act of listening to the Dharma, hearing the meaning of the name—hearing, as he says it, "the whole of the arising of the vow from beginning to end"⁷—expressed and explained. As such, the image of healing that Shinran presents in this passage can be said to be healing affected through

6 *Teihon kyōgyōshinshō*, p. 145.

7 *Teihon kyōgyōshinshō*, p. 138.

coming into contact with the Buddhist teachings and the truth that they express. The imagery of healing employed here suggests that listening to the Dharma, the core of praxis in Shin Buddhism, is meant to be a transformative experience, in which one is definitively changed by the Dharma that is preached.

The nature of that change will be made more apparent in the fourth metaphor that we will consider, but first let us turn our attention to the quotations that Shinran uses to describe the *zenchishiki*, or “good teacher,” who serves in an indispensable role in Shinran’s soteriology, in that he preaches the Dharma that transforms the practitioner. In the chapter on transformed buddha bodies and lands, Shinran quotes a passage from the *Nirvana Sutra* and one from the *Garland Sutra* that both describe the *zenchishiki* using medicinal metaphors. The *Garland Sutra* states that one should think of the *zenchishiki* “as one who cures all the various ailments, and as the heavens that rain down sweet nectar of the gods (*kanro*).”⁸ The passage from the *Nirvana Sutra*, which is too long to quote in its entirety, describes the one who preaches the Dharma as “a king among physicians” and states that this *zenchishiki* employs various medicines in accord with the nature of the illness (*ōbyō tōyaku* 応病投薬). In this passage, the human illness is again described in terms of the blind passions. The passage states that: “Considering the various illnesses of [foolish] ordinary beings, there are three types. The first is greed. The second is anger. The third is ignorance.” According to the passage, the good teacher prescribes a different teaching for each of these illnesses, curing with teachings that directly speak to the problem of the specific practitioner. Here again, the illness is presented as blind passion, its cure is presented as the Buddhist teachings, and the doctor is shown to be the one who relays those teaching to the practitioner. In these two instances, hearing the teachings, and coming into contact with the wisdom expressed therein, is described using the metaphor of healing, but in order to understand the content of the healing that Shinran

⁸ *Teihon kyōgyōshinshō*, p. 306.

envisioned, we will need to consider two more metaphors that appear in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*.

The first is the last of the medicinal metaphors that we will look at in this paper. It appears in the chapter on faith as the closing statement to Shinran's exposition on the nature and content of the mind of true entrusting. In this exposition, Shinran lays out the doctrinal foundation for his assertion that the mind of true entrusting arises entirely based on the working of the Tathāgata and not on the efforts of the practitioner. In doing so, he repeatedly describes the absolute gap between the immense karmic burden of sentient beings and the karmic purity and perfection of Amida Buddha, a gap that he shows is only bridgeable through the working of the Tathāgata, and not through the machinations of human beings. Shinran employs the metaphor of the *akadayaku* 阿伽陀藥 (Skt. *agada*) as a part of the conclusion to this argument. Shinran states that, "The ocean of the great faith does not choose between wealthy or poor, religious or lay. It says nothing of male or female, young or old, makes no question of the amount of sins committed, does not discuss the length of religious practice."⁹ Here, Shinran states that none of the categories that human beings might imagine to be agents of salvation—social status, age, gender, moral behavior, or religious cultivation—actually serve to bring about liberation. He goes on to say that it is not possible to categorize this faith based on human thought in any way, concluding that "it is just this: the inconceivable, indescribable, inexpressible mind of true entrusting." Shinran uses the following medicinal metaphor to drive home this point that this mind of true entrusting, a product of the perfected wisdom of Amida, completely transcends any human intelligence that might try to classify it. He states,

For example, it is similar to the *akadayaku* which is capable of eradicating all poisons. The medicine of the vow of the Tathāgata eradicates the poison of wisdom and foolishness.¹⁰

⁹ *Teihon kyōgyōshinshō*, p. 132.

¹⁰ *Teihon kyōgyōshinshō*, p. 132.

Shinran's source for the image of this medicine as the antidote to all poisons is again the *Garland Sutra*, which states, "In the same way that the *akada-yaku* eradicates all poisons, this wisdom will eradicate all ignorance."¹¹ However, Shinran's choice to extrapolate this metaphor to include both wisdom and foolishness as the object of eradication stems from his understanding of Amida's wisdom as something utterly transcendent of human intellectual capacity. Because the insight that arises in hearing the teachings is a product of that transcendental wisdom, any attempts to attain that insight through human intellect serve as an obstruction to that wisdom, and therefore Shinran describes this human wisdom as a "poison" that is cured through the working of "the wisdom of faith."

Shinran's denial of the efficacy of human wisdom—human intelligence—in the attainment of the true insight that he holds is a product of the mind of faith plays a central role in his soteriology. This stance forms the backdrop of his understanding of human salvation as occurring in a transformative awakening brought about by hearing the name and coming into contact with the wisdom expressed therein. He describes this transformative wisdom saying, "The auspicious name, endowed with perfect, unsurpassed virtues, is the correct wisdom which transforms evil and turns it into virtue."¹² From Shinran's perspective, the moral categories of good and evil that are delineated based on human intellect are, when seen in the light of Amida's wisdom, obliterated, and new categories of meaning are established based on that transcendental wisdom which is epitomized in the name. In this way, Shinran holds that the transformative wisdom of *shinjin* effects a change in the faithfuls' understanding of their karmic circumstances.

Shinran uses another metaphor, that of an alchemist's potion, to describe the transformative power of the act of hearing the name and the teachings about it. In the chapter on practice, where he discusses this transformative power of the name using a variety of metaphors, he quotes

11 T no. 279, 10: 101a26–27.

12 *Teihon kyōgyōshinshō*, p. 5.

from the *Rakuhō bunrui* 楽邦文類, saying,

As one grain of *kantan* 曇丹 will change iron and make it gold, the single word of truth will transform evil karma and turn it into good karma.¹³

In this passage, the working of the name, or “single word of truth,” is described with the metaphor of alchemy. For Shinran, in the healing experience of hearing the name, the very thing that had been understood as evil karma is transformed into good karma, because the act of listening to the name and the teachings about it brings about a reassignment of meaning based on the transcendental wisdom of Amida. In this “alchemy of the spirit” that is the core of Shinran’s soteriology, experience (karma) that when evaluated with human wisdom can only be said to be evil, an acting out of blind passion at the expense of others, takes on a new significance as a good, or virtue. However, because the exact way in which the meaning of that experience is transformed is the product of Amida’s wisdom, which according to Shinran is “inconceivable, indescribable, and inexpressible” from the human standpoint, only the person who has encountered that wisdom through listening to the Dharma would be able to describe the content of that insight.

In this way, Shinran employs metaphors of medicines in order to describe the working of Amida’s wisdom within human beings. For Shinran, Amida’s wisdom serves to heal the basic human illness of ignorance—ignorance of what is truly good and what is truly evil. He likens hearing the teachings, and the name which represents them, to the experience of healing in that it effects a change within the listener.¹⁴ The content of the transforma-

¹³ *Teihon kyōgyōshinshō*, p. 80.

¹⁴ The Buddhist tradition has long held that metaphors are only effective to a point in elucidating a given situation, arguing that any attempt to extrapolate the metaphor beyond those bounds leads to a reduction to absurdity. In the Buddhist tradition and in Shinran’s works, “healing” serves as a metaphor for awakening in that it describes the transformative nature of that experience, but attempts to push the implications of that metaphor beyond that simple correlation are unproductive.

tion that he presents is one on the level of meaning—a transformation of consciousness or spirit—rather than on the physical level. In that sense, Shinran’s soteriology can be characterized as an “alchemy of the spirit” wherein assignment of value based on human intellect—the labeling of good and evil—is denied and a new understanding of moral categories opens up based on the transcendental wisdom endowed within the Buddhist teachings.