

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

LETTERS OF SHINRAN: A Translation of Mattōshō. Edited by Yoshifumi Ueda. Volume I, Shin Buddhism Translation Series I. Published by Hongwanji International Center, Kyoto, 1978. 102 pp.

Of the extant letters of Shinran Shōnin (1173-1262), approximately half belong to the collection entitled *Mattōshō* ("Lamp for the Latter Ages") which was compiled in 1333 by Jūkaku, one of Shinran's descendents. These twenty-two letters, many of significant content, were written during the latter period of his life, from age seventy-nine until his death at ninety. An invaluable source of information regarding Shinran in his advanced years, these letters afford us a glimpse of the outcome of a lifelong deliberation on major Pure Land themes.

The English translation of the *Mattōshō* recently released by the Hongwanji International Center, Kyoto, under the title *Letters of Shinran*, is the first in the Shin Buddhism Translation Series headed by Dr. Ueda Yoshifumi, editor, and staffed by a committee of scholars. It will no doubt provide a good foundation for the subsequent works in the planned series, and also serve to further the understanding of Shin Buddhism abroad.

The Introduction contains a discussion of various Shin concepts encountered in the text, followed by a short note regarding the text of the *Mattōshō*. The translation itself is on the whole lucid and highly readable. Care has been taken to open each letter with a word of explanation to the reader with regard to its content. The Glossary of Shin Buddhist terms is a further indication of the pains taken by the committee in the course of preparing the work for publication.

I cannot help viewing with reservations, however, certain of the solutions decided upon by the translators in their renderings of technical terms. Ordinary translations that have gained a certain degree of currency in the West have sometimes been abandoned for new ones. While this is not to be altogether discouraged, I wonder at this stage of presenting Shin Buddhism to a Western audience if it is indeed the best method. Let me take up a few of these points in the following paragraphs.

One can for example, share the translators' concern that the meaning of the key Shin term "faith" (*shinjin*; literally, "faith-mind") might be misconstrued, as has often been the case in the past. It is indeed a most difficult concept to grasp, and yet to leave it untranslated, *shinjin*, as they have done seems, at least to this reviewer, an inadequate solution to the problem. The tract *Yuishinshō* ("On Faith Alone") is thus given as "Shinjin Alone." This may well lead the first-time reader of Shin literature to assume that Shin is something not universal but peculiar to Japanese Pure Land Buddhists. It is of course essential to keep the implications of such a key term from being lost, but at the same time, can we really expect that the Japanese term will convey the right implications, or any implications at all for that matter, to the Western reader.

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Pure Land is rendered as Buddha Land. But Pure Land (*Jōdo*) and Buddha Land (*Butsudo*) are two distinct terms, each with nuances of its own. Surely it is important that these two terms be clearly distinguished.

I would also like to point out the usage of the word "negate," which seems to be used in more than one sense. We find, for instance, "Jinen [naturalness] . . . means the negation of all calculation" (p. 75), and "Shinjin [faith] is the complete negation of self-willed calculation" (p. 68). In context, the former seems to be referring to renunciation or cessation, and the latter to an absence of calculation, rather than the negation of it.

Finally, there is a statement in the Glossary section deserving of mention: "Jōdo, or Pure Land, Buddhism has its beginning in three Mahayana sutras" (p. 75). While not inaccurate, it may also be said that Pure Land Buddhism has its beginnings in man's experience of the infinite enlightening power, and that it is this which came to be expressed in concrete terms in the Pure Land sutras. May we not say that this original religious experience of man's encounter with the infinite is being concretely expressed at the beginning of the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* as Ānanda's encounter with Śākyamuni Buddha as Amida?

These reservations aside, it is gratifying to see the *Mattōshō* in English translation. For the Western reader it should open a new vista into the life and teachings of Shinran Shōnin.

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