

# THE SONGS OF SHINRAN SHŌNIN

## I

### SONGS IN PRAISE OF AMITABHA

1. Since the attainment of Buddhahood by Amitabha,  
Ten kalpas<sup>1</sup> have now passed away;  
The Light radiating from the Dharmakaya<sup>2</sup> has no  
limits:  
It illuminates the world's blindness and darkness.
2. The Light of His wisdom is measureless,  
All conditional forms without exception  
Are enveloped in the dawning Light;  
Therefore take refuge in the True Light.
3. Amida's Light is like a wheel radiating without bounds.  
Buddha<sup>3</sup> declared that all things illumined by His<sup>4</sup>  
Light  
Are freed from all forms of being and not-being.  
Take refuge in the One who is universally enlightened.
4. The clouds of Light have, like space, no hindrances;  
All that have obstructions are not impeded by them;  
There is no one who is not embraced in His Soft Light:  
Take refuge in Him who is beyond thought.
5. Nothing can be compared to His Pure Light;  
The result of encountering this Light  
Destroys all karma bondage:  
So take refuge in Him who is the Ultimate Haven.
6. Amida Buddha's illuminating Light is above all,  
So he is called the Sovereign Buddha of Flaming Light,  
The darkness of the three evil paths<sup>5</sup> is opened:  
Take refuge in the Great Arhat.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kalpa: a long period of time.

<sup>2</sup> Dharmakaya: generally translated "Law-Body". The highest reality or personality.

<sup>3</sup> Buddha, i.e., Shakamuni.

<sup>4</sup> His, i.e., Amida's.

<sup>5</sup> Three evil paths: the hungry ghosts, the animal world, and hell.

<sup>6</sup> Arhat: one of the ten titles of the Buddha, he who is worthy of respect.

7. The radiance of His Light of Truth surpasses all,  
So He is called the Buddha of Pure Light:  
Those who are embraced in the Light  
Are cleansed from the dirt of karma and attain en-  
lightenment.
8. However far His Light illumines, love penetrates,  
The joy of faith is attained,  
So we are told.  
Take refuge in the Great One who gives comfort.
9. He is known as the Buddha of the Light of Prajna<sup>7</sup>  
Because He dispels the darkness of ignorance;  
The Buddhas and the beings of the Three Vehicles<sup>8</sup>  
All join in praising Him.
10. As there is a constant flow of Light,  
He is known as the Buddha of Increase;  
Because of perceiving the power of light with uninter-  
rupted faith,  
We are born into the Pure Land.
11. As the Buddha of Light knows naught of measurement,  
He is known as the Buddha of Miraculous Light:  
All other Buddhas praise the Ōjō<sup>9</sup>  
And the virtues of Buddha Amida are extolled.
12. As His Wondrous Light transcends form and descrip-  
tion,  
He is known as the Buddha of Inexpressible Light;  
His Light has the power to enlighten all beings:  
So he is praised by all the Buddhas.
13. As His Light surpasses that of the Sun and the Moon,  
He is known as the Sun-and-Moon-Surpassing Light;  
Shakamuni could not praise Him enough:  
Take refuge in the One who is peerless.
14. At the first discourse given by Amida  
The holy multitudes were beyond calculation;  
Those who wish to go to the Pure Land

<sup>7</sup> Prajna: transcendental knowledge or source of all knowledge.

<sup>8</sup> Three Vehicles: 1. The Bodhisattva, being of enlightenment,  
2. Pratyekabuddha, solitary Buddha, and 3. Śrāvaka, hearer.

<sup>9</sup> Ōjō: literally "to go and be born," i.e., assurance of rebirth in  
the Pure Land.

- Should take refuge in the Buddha who commands great numbers.
15. The numberless great Bodhisattvas in the Land of Bliss  
After one birth more will become Buddhas;  
When they have taken refuge in the virtues of Fugen<sup>10</sup>  
They will come back to this world in order to teach beings.
  16. For the sake of all beings in the ten quarters<sup>11</sup>  
They gather up all the Dharma<sup>12</sup>-treasures of Tathagatahood,<sup>13</sup>  
And to save them lead them to the Original Vow.<sup>14</sup>  
Take refuge in the Ocean of the Great Heart.
  17. Together with Kwannon<sup>15</sup> and Seishi,<sup>16</sup>  
He illumines the world with the Light of Mercy;  
Leading all those in ripe condition for the Dharma.  
He knows no time for rest.
  18. Those who reach the Land of Purity and Happiness,  
When they return to this world of five defilements,<sup>17</sup>  
Like Buddha Shakamuni work without cessation  
For the welfare of all beings.
  19. The miraculous power and self-mastery  
Enjoyed by them is beyond calculation;  
They have accumulated virtues beyond thought:  
Take refuge in the Honoured One who is peerless.
  20. Śrāvakas<sup>18</sup> and Bodhisattvas in the Land of Happiness,  
Men and gods all radiant in Prajna,

<sup>10</sup> Fugen: the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, one of the most important figures of Mahayana, engaged in the work of salvation.

<sup>11</sup> Ten quarters: the eight points of the compass *plus* the nadir and the zenith.

<sup>12</sup> Dharma: in this case, virtues or values.

<sup>13</sup> Tathagatahood: "One who thus comes," a title of Buddha.

<sup>14</sup> Original Vow: *pūrvapranidhāna* in Sanskrit is the expression of the will or love Amida cherishes for all beings.

<sup>15</sup> Kwannon: Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva standing to the left of Amida represents Mercy.

<sup>16</sup> Seishi: Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva standing to the right of Amida represents Wisdom.

<sup>17</sup> Five Defilements: *Pañca-kashāya* in Sanskrit. Defilement relating to age, philosophical insight, morality, physical existence, and life-length.

- In form and appearance are equally majestic;  
But different names are given according to this world.
21. They are incomparably perfect in features,  
Exquisite in bodily form, their equals cannot be found;  
Appearing from the Void,<sup>19</sup> yet they have infinite form:  
Take refuge in the Power to whom all beings are equal.
  22. Those who aspire to the land of Happiness  
Must abide "in the group of perfect faith"<sup>20</sup>  
None are to be found there who long for wrong or un-  
settled faith,  
And they are praised by all the Buddhas.
  23. When all beings in every condition within the ten  
quarters,  
Endowed with all excellent virtues,  
Hearing the name of Amida with sincerity of heart,  
Attain faith; how they will rejoice at what they hear!
  24. "Because of my Vow if they should not be born [in the  
Pure Land]  
I will not attain enlightenment."  
When the right moment for faith arises, joy is instantly  
felt,  
And rebirth is definitely confirmed, once for all.
  25. The Buddha Land of Happiness with everything be-  
longing to it  
Is the product of the power of Dharmakara.<sup>21</sup>  
There is nothing compared to it above or below the  
heavens:  
Take refuge in the Great Mind-Power.
  26. The splendid views of the Land of Happiness  
Shakamuni with all his unobstructed wisdom declared  
To be really beyond all expression:

<sup>18</sup> Śrāvakas: Literally "hearers," contrasted to Bodhisattva, roughly the hearers are followers of Hinayana and Bodhisattvas belong to Mahayana.

<sup>19</sup> Void: *śūnyatā* in Sanskrit. The Mahayana system is based on this idea. The term is quite frequently misunderstood.

<sup>20</sup> Group of perfect faith: group of Buddhists who are definitely assured of their attainment of Buddhahood.

<sup>21</sup> Dharmakara: The name assumed by Amida while still in the stage of Bodhisattvahood.

- Take refuge in the Buddha whose glory is beyond description.
27. Rebirth [in the Pure Land] for all the periods of time<sup>22</sup>  
Not only is assured for beings of this world  
But for all in the Buddha-lands of the ten quarters:  
Their number is indeed measureless, numberless, and  
incalculable.
  28. Those beings who hearing the Holy Name of Amitabha  
Buddha  
Feel joyous and adore him,  
Will be given treasures of merit  
And benefits great and incomparable.
  29. Although the great chiliocosm may be filled with flames.  
Yet he who hears the Holy Name of the Buddha,  
Always in accord with steadfastness,  
Will freely pass [to the Pure Land].
  30. Amida's mysterious limitless Power  
Is praised by innumerable Buddhas;  
From the Buddha-lands in the East  
As many as the sands of the Ganges, numberless Bud-  
dhas come.
  31. From the Buddha-lands in the remaining nine quarters.  
Come the Bodhisattvas to see him;  
Shakamuni the Tathagata composing songs  
Praises his virtues infinite.
  32. All the countless Bodhisattvas of the ten quarters  
In order to plant the root of merit  
Pay homage to the Bhagavat and praise him in song:  
Let all beings take refuge in Him.

## II

The Songs of Shinran Shōnin were written by him in praise of the Buddha Amitabha and also of certain sutras and of the patriarchs of the Shin sect, Nāgārjuna.<sup>23</sup> Vasu-

<sup>22</sup> Periods of time: Past, present, and future.

<sup>23</sup> Nāgārjuna (Ryūju) lived during the second or third centuries A.D. He was a great Buddhist scholar and several sects claim him as their founder.

bandhu,<sup>24</sup> Doran,<sup>25</sup> Dōshaku,<sup>26</sup> Zendō,<sup>27</sup> Genshin,<sup>28</sup> and Genkū.<sup>29</sup> In the Japanese language they are called *Wasan*, and this word is generally translated as "hymn" or "psalm," but as these terms have too Christian a flavour, I have preferred the simple word "song" which indeed they are.<sup>30</sup>

Shōnin means "sage" or "holy man," sometimes translated as "Saint." Most students of Japanese Buddhism are familiar with the life of Shinran Shōnin. But for those who are not, I shall relate it most briefly.

He was born near Kyoto in 1173 A.D., and although there is some historical doubt as to his parentage and early life, he is said to have been the son of Lord Hino Arinori. He lost his parents while very young and was brought up by his uncle. When he was only nine years old he became a priest of the Tendai school, given the name Hannen and thereafter spent twenty years in the life of a Buddhist priest at the temple of Enryakuji on Mt. Hiei near Kyoto, where

<sup>24</sup> Vasubandhu (Seshin), A.D. 450. With his brother Asanga he founded the Yogācāra school of Buddhist philosophy.

<sup>25</sup> Doran, (T'an-luan), 476-542 A.D. His chief work is "Commentary on Vasubandhu's *Discourse on the Pure Land*."

<sup>26</sup> Dōshaku (Tao-cho), 562-645 A.D. The author of *Treatise on Peace and Joy*.

<sup>27</sup> Zendō (Shan-tao) died 681 A.D. He left several important works on the Pure Land teaching, the chief of which is a commentary on the *Meditation Sutra (Kwangyō)*.

<sup>28</sup> Genshin, 942-1017 A.D. First Japanese patriarch of the Pure Land school.

<sup>29</sup> Genkū (Hōnen Shōnin), 1133-1212 A.D. Japanese founder of the Pure Land (Jōdo) sect.

<sup>30</sup> The *Wasan* have been translated twice into English; in 1922 by Mr. Oshima of Ryūkyoku College, published by the West Hongwanji, and in 1921 by S. Yamabe and L. Adams Beck in "The Wisdom of the East" series. The former is very literal but sometimes not quite accurate and the latter, although beautiful in literary style, also contains inaccuracies. Herewith a new translation is made of the first thirty-two stanzas composing the first set of songs in praise of Amitabha. There are several sets of *Wasan*, but this set which may be called *The Praises of Amida* puts forth succinctly Shinran's doctrine in its first thirty-two stanzas, the remaining sixteen stanzas being devoted to a description of the Pure Land.

he assiduously devoted himself to the study of Buddhist philosophy. But owing to spiritual dissatisfaction he joined Hōnen Shōnin's circle and learned his doctrine of salvation through faith in Amida.

This doctrine Shinran developed still further, for while Hōnen believed in the merit of good works and the recital of the Nembutsu, Shinran believed in faith alone and established his doctrine entirely upon it. He devoted his life to preaching and teaching his doctrine. He died quietly in Kyoto in 1262.

In the *Wasan* we can find the essential points of his doctrine.

The name Amida, Amitabha in Sanskrit, signifies Infinite Light, and it is the first axiom of Shin that Amida sends out his light to illuminate this world. So wherever we see beauty, holiness, compassion or love manifested in this world of ignorance and illusion, we can know that it is because Amida's light is shining through the darkness.

Amitabha is Light in space while Amitayus, another name for Amida, is Life in time, so Amida is the Master of Space and Time and through him we transcend both.

An important point not only in Shin but in all Mahayana Buddhism is that salvation is universal; there are no beings on whom the light does not shine; all may awake to enlightenment. This being the fact, Shinran appeals to us to take refuge in the True Light which is Amitabha.

But how are we to take refuge through faith in Amida's power to save? To get this faith is not so easy as one might think and as is claimed by teachers of Shin. There has to be a strong effort to obtain it. So in the end it may be as difficult as the efforts of Self-Power sect believers.

To obtain this faith corresponds to conversion among the Christians. According to Shinran's own explanation, the experience should be sudden, *ōchō* as he called it. *Ōchō* means "to leap crosswise" and may be contrasted to Zen's "straightforward leap." Both Zen and Shin belong to what

is known as the "abrupt school." The progress made in the understanding of the truth is not gradual, not going from step to step as is done in logic but it is a leap over the gap. You come to the end of your journey, you halt and are at a loss how to make a further advance as there is before you a gaping abyss. Zen jumps straight forward while Shin jumps crosswise. The line of Zen suggests continuous extension and according to Shin is not quite a leap in its proper sense. What Shin accomplishes is really discontinuous, proving that the deed springs from the "other power"<sup>31</sup> which is Amida.

This is similar to what the Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard<sup>32</sup> calls the Leap and the Instant. In his *Philosophical Fragments* he says, "And now the Instant! Such an instant has a peculiar character. It is short indeed and temporal, as every instant is fleeting, as every instant is, gone like all instants, the following instant, and yet it is decisive, and yet it is full of eternity. Such an instant must have a special name, let us call it *the fullness of time*." (Walter Lowrie—*Kierkegaard*, p. 312.) Shin would call it the fullness of faith.

And again Kierkegaard says, "Religious faith is not to be reached by any approximations of proof and probability but only by a leap."

The *Wasan* also tell us that the Light can dissolve the bondage of karma, and that not only is the darkness of ignorance broken but that joy is given to all beings through Amida's compassion.

Another important point of Shin doctrine to be met

<sup>31</sup> "Other power": Shin makes the distinction between *tariki* and *jiriki*. *Jiriki* means "self-power or depending on one's own virtues for rebirth in the Pure Land while *tariki*, literally "other power," is to put oneself in a state of complete passivity and losing self altogether in the other, i.e., Amida. Zen according to Shin is *jiriki* and Shin is pure *tariki*.

<sup>32</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, religious philosopher of Denmark, born 1813, died 1855. He had through his writings a great influence on many modern philosophers and religionists.



with is that those who see the Light and trust to it are, by means of their firm faith, bound for the Pure Land, there to be enlightened and attain Buddhahood.

What is the Pure Land? It is made by the will of Dharmakara who vowed not to attain to enlightenment unless through him all the worlds became enlightened.<sup>33</sup>

The mysterious Pure Land is built and adorned by his Original Vow, and to be born there, self-will must be renounced, and those who enter must have faith spring up in their hearts.

We have just seen that beings will be enlightened and attain Buddhahood in the Pure Land. To attain Buddhahood is a characteristic of Mahayana Buddhism. According to Mahayana, all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature and therefore must manifest a progressive development toward Buddhahood. In the so-called *jiriki* or "self-power" school of Buddhism such as Shingon or Zen, enlightenment or realisation of Buddhahood can take place generally only after long preparation in this life, but in Shin it can be consummated only in the Pure Land after death in this world, and unlike Zen, true enlightenment can never take place in this world. Beings can enter the Pure Land on the ground that they are Buddha's sons. The Pure Land is not to be regarded as a material paradise but as a positive Nirvana. Shinran calls the Pure Land Nirvana past all understanding where we labour for the salvation of all sentient beings.

The Pure Land is conceived of not only as a land of happiness and peace but as a field of enlightenment for the practice of *gensō ekō* ("returning to this world") in order to help sentient beings.

In one of the *Wasan* we read that after the Bodhisattvas in the Pure Land have learned how to teach all beings, they will come again to this world to enlighten them. From this we see that Paradise or the Pure Land is a place or condi-

<sup>33</sup> This is called "The Original Vow."

tion or consciousness of activity, and not of negative rest.

Trust and faith in Amida is all important in Shin Buddhism. In the doctrine of the Southern School, merit is stressed, but in Shin, merit is entirely cast aside. Good works are not necessary for salvation, instead we must throw ourselves upon the mercy of the compassionate Buddha, and by means of our faith in him, we have his assurance of salvation, for in the eighteenth of his forty-eight vows, he declared that if sentient beings have faith and, wishing to be reborn in his land, repeat his name and yet should not be reborn, then he would forfeit his own great enlightenment.

Shinran laid the greatest stress upon faith rather than like Hōnen on the repetition of the Name (Nembutsu). In fact Shinran's Buddhism was a last break with ritualism, for him, it is not necessary to take time and energy for the practice of the Nembutsu, simply turning in faith to Amida is quite enough.

Among the twenty-two stanzas of the "Songs of the Pure Land" based upon the *Larger Sukhāvati-vyūha Sūtra*,<sup>34</sup> the fourth stanza reads thus:

"The idea of the Tathagata's appearance in this world  
Was to disclose the truth of Amida's Original Vow  
Which is however both as difficult to encounter and  
understand  
As the appearance of the *udumbara* flower."<sup>35</sup>

This is another leading tenet of the Shin school of Buddhism. In the *Shōshinge*<sup>36</sup> Shinran states that the reason Shakamuni

<sup>34</sup> *Sukhāvati-vyūha Sūtra*: translated into Chinese by Saṅghavarman (Kōsōgai in Japanese) in 252 A.D.

<sup>35</sup> Udumbara flower: the *ficus glomerata*, a fig tree supposed to bloom once in three thousand years.

<sup>36</sup> "Shōshinge" is a poem written by Shinran which summarises the Shin faith. In this poem we find what is missing from the *Wasan*, —the teaching that laymen and priests and saints are alike before Amida, and that even the wicked if they turn to Amida in faith can be saved and all their sins forgiven.

was revealed to this world was solely in order to proclaim the Vow of Amitabha.

In the *Amitāyur Dhyāna Sūtra*<sup>37</sup> it is Shakamuni who explains to the Queen Vaidehi the teaching of Amida and the Pure Land, as Song No. 8 expresses it, "men were ripe for hearing the Pure Land doctrine which advises them to give up self-reliance and dependence upon merit and instead to desire to be established in the faith and power of the compassionate Amitabha.

Besides faith in Amida men must express gratitude and in Shin the Nembutsu is used only as an expression of gratitude or of praise. A number of Shinran's songs extol the virtue of praising the Name of Amida and give assurance that the Name will guard all who use it with a heart of faith and that if they remember Amida they are sure to see him and be saved.

So we see that the Songs of Shinran express poetically and emotionally most of his religious views and we can understand that they are greatly prized by the followers of the Shin sect.

BEATRICE LANE SUZUKI

<sup>37</sup> *Amitāyur Dhyāna Sūtra*: translated into Chinese by Kālayasha (Kyōryōyasha in Japanese) in the first half of the fourth century.