

## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Essential Shinran: A Buddhist Path of True Entrusting.* Compiled and edited by Alfred Bloom. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006. xix + 252 pages. Paperback \$22.95.

WAYNE S. YOKOYAMA

We have to give Shin Buddhism credit for its heroic efforts to introduce Shinran's message to the Western world, a task it has taken upon itself for well over a hundred years. In an early phase the Buddhist Mission of San Francisco published *The Light of Dharma*, from 1901 to 1907, regarded by some as the first authentic Buddhist magazine in the West. At the other end of the same century, this trajectory reached its apex with the 1997 publication of the two-volume work, *The Collected Works of Shinran* (hereafter CWS).<sup>1</sup> CWS was a landmark publication that made available almost all of Shinran's writings in English translation. However, the book was not entirely successful. In Kona, Hawai'i, where I spent Christmas vacation one year, I saw a row of these nicely-boxed books lined up high atop a shelf in the temple library, looking forlornly out to sea like a row of Moai statues. The lady told me she gave them out to temple members, but they all came back, with the terse comment: "Too academic." Over the years I am sure other people must have voiced their similar frustration with the work.

Dr. Alfred Bloom, professor emeritus, University of Hawai'i, is an expert on Shin Buddhism. In his recent autobiography,<sup>2</sup> he demonstrates a strong will to find truth in a life that, despite its ups and downs, brought him to where he is now: still strongly motivated to find the answer, but more content with what he has found. Some of that knowledge he accrued has been compiled in this book, *The Essential Shinran*.

<sup>1</sup> *The Collected Works of Shinran*, ed. Gadjin M. Nagao, trans. Dennis Hirota, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga and Ryushin Uryuzu, 2 vols. Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997. The CWS is also available as a searchable database at the website of The Collected Works of Shinran (<http://www.shinranworks.com/>). Electronic versions of the original Japanese texts can be accessed at several sites, including the online database at the Kyōgaku Dendō Kenkyū Sentā 教学伝道研究センター (<http://www2.hongwanji.or.jp/kyogaku/gaiyo.htm>).

<sup>2</sup> *A Life of Serendipity: Blown by the Wind of Amida's Vow*, New York: American Buddhist Study Center, 2008.

I should first like to say that all of the conclusions presented in this book were arrived at by Dr. Bloom working on his own; no similar book exists in Japanese. It was he who had to climb the sheer cliff of Shinran's philosophical thought tooth and nail, a solitary seeker in search of truth. This is no mean feat. Shinran's writings comprise a complex literature, whose deep ecology is not easily understood. Today, with the publication of works like CWS, we find ourselves standing on the edge of a vast virgin forest, which beckons but to which we are unable to find a way to enter upon. This book thus serves as a torch as we peer into the darkness of this new frontier, promising a bright new continent of world culture to replace the one of fear, darkness, and despair in which we now live.

*The Essential Shinran* is a systematic presentation of the life and thought of Shinran, with prime statements carefully selected from traditional sources and thematically arranged to illustrate key points. Chapter 1 is an eight-page overview of Shinran's life and legacy. Chapter 2 presents over a dozen selections from the biographical literature, beginning with a loving letter from Shinran's wife, Eshinni, and ending with D. T. Suzuki's still useful translation of Kakunyo's *Godenshō (The Life of the Shōnin Shinran)*, Tokyo: The Buddhist Text Translation Society, 1911). Chapter 3, the main section, is a selection of well over three hundred statements selected from Shin and Pure Land Buddhist texts.

Dr. Bloom starts his presentation with examples of Shinran's confessions and closes the work with his statements on Nirvana, including many key doctrinal statements organized thematically in between. Over the course of over two hundred pages, during a vigorous trek through literary terrain made up of a wide range of texts, our vigorous guide pauses many times to comment on significant features of that landscape. Among the sections are: Shinran's self-understanding, experience of true entrusting, statements on the meaning of true entrusting, dimensions of the interpretation of true entrusting, the nenbutsu way of life, and views on life's fulfillment. Each item is consecutively numbered for ease of reference, with the original source text clearly indicated. At points our guide provides a brief note drawn from his deep appreciation of these texts that helps put us in the picture. The volume is appended with a glossary, bibliography, and index of selections, the latter listing item numbers and key words in relation to particular Shin works, which greatly enhance its overall usefulness.

As a compendium of Shinran's teaching, *The Essential Shinran* obtains many of its quotations from the aforementioned CWS. The CWS was a

magnificent project, but not without its faults, not the least of which was the daunting prospect of having to read one thousand pages of translation. It was a stroke of genius, then, that Dr. Bloom decided to rearrange excerpts from the CWS thematically and present them in logical categories, letting the texts speak for themselves, with helpful commentary supplied sparingly by the editor. This new work thus is what the well-oiled hinge is to the sticky door, and will surely give even the average reader a firm grip on Shinran's teaching.

Ultimately, *The Essential Shinran* is not limited to the CWS but aims to go beyond it. To open up the field of Shinran studies in the West, the CWS alone is not sufficient; a firm grasp of works such as the *Tannishō* and *The Larger Sutra of Infinite Life*, both of which are axial to understanding Shinran's thought, are also necessary. *The Essential Shinran* is thus more than a learned guide to the CWS. It intends for us to go beyond it to explore the broader field of Shinran studies inclusive of other works. To describe that field, the author uses the pages of the book as a huge mural on which to paint his intellectual portrait of Shinran using the tints and tones of the principles he has eluted from his writings.

In a note Dr. Bloom writes, "Contemplation of the *nembutsu* opens our spiritual eyes to all-embracing reality which surrounds, permeates, and is one with our limited fragment of passionate life. While we ourselves as foolish beings cannot say that we have the qualities of a Buddha, true entrusting awakens us to our true self and our potentiality to contribute positively to the world and society as bearers of compassion and wisdom, which are the essence of Buddhahood" (p. 183). The fact that religious truth is given social expression in the communities they form is a theme reiterated in the excellent foreword, "Shinran's Message for Our Time," contributed by Dr. Ruben L. F. Habito, professor of theology and spiritual director of the Maria Kannon Zen Center, Dallas. It was in part from a prophetic dream that Shinran had, that he found the courage and vision to marry and start an open, family-oriented community based on the Pure Land Buddhist teaching. Dr. Bloom's book tells us more about that vision informing his dream: in effect, that Shinran has a message for us today living in a world of darkness and strife, a vision of an open community that contributes positively to a new world society and whose members truly live full lives by helping others to do so. This sort of community grows out of the spiritual understanding of our true bearing in life: that we only seek to become Buddhas in order to become bodhisattvas who return to this world,

which Other Power reveals to us over the course of a lifetime in that one moment of awakening. Somehow we sense in Dr. Bloom's lifework that he is also such a bodhisattva on a return course to this world.

It is hoped that this book will have the power to move Shinran's message beyond the immediate Buddhist community into the broad-based world community no longer defined primarily by ethnic ties or national and cultural boundaries. As it flowers in that borderless land, it will have the potential to attract new students into the field who will no doubt find *The Essential Shinran* a welcome addition to their reading list. College students tend to have a natural interest in religion, but in the absence of any Buddhist prompts, they may well turn to other religions or turn away from religion altogether. This book has the power to change all that. It can breathe new life into Shinran's writings, reconnecting students to the Buddhist roots they never knew they had, bringing in a new generation of people into the field of Shinran studies. *The Essential Shinran* thus stands to make a lasting contribution to the future of Shinran's message in the West.

*Sacred Kōyasan: A Pilgrimage to the Mountain Temple of Saint Kōbō Daishi and the Great Sun Buddha.* By Philip L. Nicoloff. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. xvii + 392 pages. Hardcover \$ 89.50; Paperback \$ 29.50.

ELIZABETH TINSLEY

Even though Kōyasan, or Mt. Kōya, was designated a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 2004 and today it is the destination for over a million pilgrims and visitors from all over the world each year, literature on the subject available in English barely compares with the colossal amount, scholarly and otherwise, published in Japanese. The mountain has a long and fascinating history, where it played a vital role in the development of religion in Japan, and continues to occupy an integral position in the East Asian tradition of esoteric Buddhism. Philip L. Nicoloff's *Sacred Kōyasan: A Pilgrimage to the Mountain Temple of Saint Kōbō Daishi and the Great Sun Buddha* makes a valuable contribution to the English-speaking audience towards knowledge and understanding of the site and its significance.