

SHINRAN, THE FOUNDER OF THE
SHIN-SHU *

IT is a singular fact that though many of the earlier Buddhist Scriptures have been translated by competent scholars, comparatively little attention has been paid to later Buddhist devotional writings, and this although the developments of Buddhism in China and Japan give them the deepest interest as reflecting the spiritual mind of those two great countries. They cannot however be understood without some knowledge of the faith which passed so entirely into their life that in its growth it lost some of its own infant traits and took on others rooted no doubt in the beginning in India but expanded and changed, as the features of the child may be forgotten in the face of the man and yet perpetuate the unbroken succession of heredity. It is especially true that Japan cannot be understood without some knowledge of the Buddhism of the Greater Vehicle (as the developed form is called); for it was the influence that moulded her youth as a nation, that shaped her aspirations, and was the inspiration of her art, not only in the written word but in every art and higher handicraftsmanship that makes her what she is. Whatever centuries may pass or the future hold in store for her, Japan can never lose the stamp of Buddhism in her outer or her spiritual life.

The world knows little as yet of the soul of Mahāyāna Buddhism, though much of its outer observance, and for this reason a crucial injustice has been done in regarding it merely as a degraded form of the earlier Buddhism, a rank off-shoot

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of the teachings of the Gautama Buddha, a system of idolatry and priestly power from which the austere purity of the earlier faith has passed away.

The truth is that Buddhism, like Christianity, in every country where it has sowed its seed and reaped its harvest, developed along the lines indicated by the mind of that people. The Buddhism of Japan differs from that of Tibet as profoundly as the Christianity of Abyssinia from that of Scotland, yet both have conserved the essential principle.

Buddhism was not a dead abstraction but a living faith, and it therefore grew and changed with the growth of the mind of man, enlarging its perception of truth. As in the other great faiths, the ascent of the Mount of Vision reveals worlds undreamed and proclaims what may seem to be new truths but are only new aspects of the Eternal. Japanese Buddhists still base their belief on the utterances of the Buddhas, but they have enlarged their conception of the truths so taught, and they hold that the new flower and fruit spring from the roots that were planted in dim ages before the Gautama Buddha taught in India and have since rushed hundred-armed to the sun. Such is the religious history of mankind and Buddhism obeys its sequence.

The development of Mahāyāna Buddhism has been often compared with that of the Christian faith from the Jewish, but it may be better compared with the growth of a sacerdotal system from the simplicities of the Gospel of St. Mark. That the development should have been on the same lines in all essential matters of symbol and (in the most important respects) of doctrine modified only by Eastern habits of thought and environment is a miracle of coincidence which cannot be paralleled in the world, unless it be granted that Christianity filtering along the great trade routes of an earlier world joined hands with Buddhism in many unsuspected ways and places. Evidence is accumulating that this is so, and in

a measure at present almost incredible. And if it be so, if it be true that in spite of racial distinctions, differences of thought and circumstance, the religious thought of East and West has so many and so great meeting points, the hope of the world in things spiritual may lie in the recognition of that fact and in a future union now shadowed forth only in symbol and in a great hope. This however is no essay on Buddhism, either earlier or later, and what I have said is necessary to the introduction of the *Jodo-Wasam*, or Psalms of the Pure Land which were composed by Shinran, the founder of the Shin Sect, and which are a part not only of the literature but also of the daily worship and spiritual life of Japan.

Buddhism passed into Japan from China and Korea about 1320 years ago, in or about the year 552 A.D. It adapted itself with perfect comprehension to the ideals of the Japanese people, inculcating among them the teachings of morality common to the great faiths with, in addition, the spiritual unction, the passion of love and sympathy, self-devotion and compassion in which Buddhism and Christianity are alike pre-eminent. The negative side of Buddhism, with its passionless calm and self-renunciation is the only one that has been realised in the West, and the teachings of Mahāyāna which have borne fruit and flower, visible to all the world, of happiness, courtesy, kindness in the spiritual attitude of a whole people, have never received the honour which was their due.

For with the Buddhist faith, there came the germ of the belief that the Gautama Buddha in his own grandeur bore witness to One Greater—the Amitābha or Amida Buddha,—that One who in boundless Light abideth, life of the Universe, without colour, without form, the Lover of man, his Protector and Refuge. He may, he must, be worshipped, for in Him are all the essential attributes of Deity, and He, the Saviour of mankind, has prepared a pure land of peace for his servants, beyond the storms of life and death. This belief

eventually crystallised and became a dogma in the faith of the Pure Land, known in Japan as Jōdo Shinshu, a faith held by the majority of the Japanese people. It is a belief which has spread also in Eastern Siberia, many parts of China, Hawaii, and in fact wherever the Japanese race has spread. And the man who stated this belief for all time was Shinran Shonin.

He was born in the year 1175 A. D. near City-Royal Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan. He was a son of one of the noblest families, in close connection with the Imperial House, and had it not been for the passion for truth and the life of the spirit which consumed him, his history would have been that of the many other brilliant young men who sank into mere courtiers—"Dwellers above the Clouds," as the royalties and courtiers of the day were called among the people. But the clear air above the clouds in which his spirit spread its wings was not that of City-Royal, and the way opened before him as it has opened before many a saint of the Christian Church, for while still a child he lost both his parents, and so, meditating on the impermanence of mortal life and seeing how the fashion of this world passes away, he abandoned his title and became a monk in one of the noble monasteries, whose successors still stand glorious among the pine woods above Lake Biwa.

These were not only monasteries but seats of learning as in Europe in the Middle Ages, and here the Doctrines were subjected to brilliant analysis and logical subtleties which had almost superseded the living faith. In that cold atmosphere the spirit of Shinran Shonin could not spread its wings though for twenty years he gave his thoughts to its empty glitter. Therefore, at the age of twenty-nine he cast it all behind him and in deep humility cast himself at the feet of the great teacher Honen, who in the shades of Higashiyama was setting forth the saving power of the Eternal One who abideth in the

Light and in whom is no darkness, the Buddha of Boundless Light. And in this place and from this man Shinran received enlightenment.

Life now lay before him as a problem. Unlike as the two men are in character and methods, his position resembled that of Martin Luther on quitting the Church of Rome. For the Buddhist monastic rule requires its members to be homeless, celibate, vegetarian, and here, like Luther, Shinran joined issue with them. To his mind the attainment of man lay in the harmonious development of body and spirit, and in the fulfilment, not the negation of the ordinary human duties. Accordingly, in his thirty-first year, after deep consideration he married the daughter of prince Kujo Kanezane, Chief Minister of the Emperor and head of one of the greatest houses in Japan, and in that happy union he tasted four years of simple domestic joy during which a son was born to him. Then the storm broke.

Trouble was stirred up by the orthodox Buddhist Church with evil reports which reached the ears of the Emperor and Shinran was sent into banishment in the lonely and primitive province of Echigo, a terrible alternative for a man of noble birth, and refined culture. He took it however with perfect serenity as a mission to those untaught and neglected people and into their darkness he brought the light of the Father of Light, and the people flocked to the warmth and wonder of the new hope, and heard him gladly. The story is told by a contemporary whom I have thus rendered; "In the spring of the third year of the era of Kennin, the age of Shinran Shonin was twenty-nine. Driven by the desire for seclusion he departed to the monastery of Yoshimizu. For as his day was so remote from the era of the Lord Buddha and the endurance of man in the practice of religious austerity was now weakened, he would fain seek the one broad, straight way that is now made plain before us, leaving behind him the more devious

and difficult roads in which he had a long time wandered. For so it was that Honen Shonin, the great teacher of the Doctrine of the Land of Pure Light, had taught him plainly of the inmost heart of the Faith raising up in him the firm foundation of that teaching. Therefore he certainly received at that time the true meaning of the Divine Promise of universal salvation and attained unto the imperishable faith by which alone the ignorant can enter into Nirvana without condition or price.

“From the province of Echigo Shinran passed onward to that of Hitachi, and entered into seclusion at Inada, that little village of the region of Kasama. Very lonely was his dwelling, yet many disciples sought after him, and though the humble door of the monastery was closed against them many nobles and lesser persons thronged into the village. So his hope of spreading abroad the Holy Teaching was fulfilled, and his desire to bring joy to the people was satisfied. Thus he declared that the revelation vouchsafed to him in the Temple of Rokkaku by the Bodhisattva of Pity was indeed made manifest.”

It is that revelation which speaks in the Psalms (*Wasan*)—the love, aspiration, passion for righteousness and humility, which are the heart of all the great religious utterances of the world.

“Alas for me, Shinran, the ignorant exile, who sinks into the deeps of the great ocean of human affections, who toils to climb the high mountains of worldly prosperity, and is neither glad to be with them who return no more to illusion, not takes delight in approaching more nearly to true enlightenment. O the pity of it. O the shame of it!”

This cry alternates with the joy of perfect aspiration, and it is that which keeps those Psalms in warm human touch with the spirituality that is neither of race or time, but for eternity.

He was sixty-two years of age when he returned from exile to City-Royal and though he made it his centre it was his home no more. He wandered from place to place, teaching as he went, after the manner of the Buddhas. At the age of ninety his strength suddenly failed, and the next day he passed away in perfect peace.

Such were the outward events of his life; his own writings must give the history of his soul. His teachings today are spread far and wide in the land of his birth, and are an inspiration to millions within and without its shores. In him was the harmonised spirit of Buddhism at its highest, woven warp and weft with the Bushido; that was the spirit of Japan. Those who can enter into the heart of Shinran Shonin will have gained understanding of the heart of a mighty people which is said to be impossible of Western reading, and yet in its essentials is simple as the heart of a child.

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