

On Recent Readings of Shinran

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1. Common Readings of Shinran: A Paradigm of Bifurcation

Shinran's thought has received a sparseness of attention in the West quite out of proportion to the originality of his achievement and the place of his Shin movement in Japanese society and in the history of Buddhist tradition as a whole.¹ There is widespread agreement among most commentators that the chief reason for this imbalance in modern Western Buddhist studies, even given the early marginalization of Japanese Buddhist traditions as being far removed from the doctrines and practices of 'original' Buddhism, lies in the close resemblance of fundamental Shin symbols and concepts to those of Protestant Christianity. Jan van Bragt, a Catholic priest with long experience in Japan, characterizes the common attitude:

[T]he West is mainly interested in Buddhism as its antipode, partly in distrust of its own religious tradition. It is therefore most attracted to these forms of Buddhism wherein that antipodal character appears most clearly—Theravada, Zen, Tibetan Buddhism. The Pure Land school, on the other hand, is perceived as very close to Christianity and far removed from the mainstream of Buddhism.²

While this general account of the interests of many Western Buddhist scholars may be accurate, I believe that further analysis of the dominant views of Shin may be useful, for even in a case like van Bragt's, awareness of the fundamental predisposition that has colored Western attitudes toward Japanese

¹ Regarding Western interpretations of Shin tradition, see Amstutz 1997.

² Bragt 1993, p. 47.

Pure Land traditions does not necessarily keep him from adopting the same basic assumptions in his own discussion.

In brief, Shin Buddhism has been understood in the West in terms of resemblance with Protestant Christianity, where its essential significance has been located. Further, this resemblance has in itself been taken to indicate removal from Mahāyāna tradition. Treatment of Shin has therefore been cast in an analytic mode of discussion framed by its similarity or contrast with Western and Mahāyāna traditions. Moreover, such analysis has not been simply comparative, but has imposed from the outset an understanding of Shin as internally divided, as though religious features wholly familiar to the West have been incongruously grafted onto alien roots. Situated thus as a kind of hybrid or amalgam between the distinctive poles of Mahāyāna Buddhism and Protestant Christianity, Shin has tended to be judged inherently deficient or underdeveloped with regard to both poles.

In other words, in the standard discussions of Shin Buddhism, including that of van Bragt, the elements of Shin have been divided in two, or separated out into two conceptual bins. On the one hand, there are the religious attitudes and social manifestations that have close correspondences within Christian tradition (Karl Barth, in his pioneering discussion of Shin in *Church Dogmatics*, lists: “religion of grace,” “Reformation doctrines of original sin, representative satisfaction, justification by faith alone, the gift of the Holy Ghost and thankfulness”).³ On the other, there are elements that are absent, and teachings or symbols that appear distinct from any Christian counterpart (Barth states, “we miss any doctrine of the law and also of the holiness, or wrath of Amida. . . . In the Jodo religion it is not Amida or faith in him, but this human goal of desire [for nirvana] which is the really controlling and determinative power”). The latter characteristic of aspiration for enlightenment is generally understood to represent the attitude of “mainstream Buddhism” or “general Mahāyāna.” In short, Shin is grasped as a tradition whose evolution has dislodged it somehow from general Buddhist soil, making it comprehensible only by situating it somewhere between Christianity and more “mainstream” Buddhism.

As I have discussed elsewhere, I find Barth’s lists both of similarities and differences insightful.⁴ Nevertheless, his apologetic use of Shin Buddhism

³ Barth 1961, vol. 1, 2: p. 342.

⁴ I have discussed Barth’s exposition in Hirota 2000, pp. 34–38. This book of articles was originally presented and discussed at a symposium at the Graduate Theological Union in 1996.

finally to locate and underwrite the transcendent uniqueness of Christianity prevented him from probing Shinran's thought. In his view, the entire significance of Shin tradition lies in its similarities with Christianity—which only highlight its character as a merely human creation and thus a foil to what he sees as true religion. Although Barth's discussion may now appear excessively polemical, Jan van Bragt also expounds the same basic model of Shin as double in nature:

The Buddhist Pure Land school contains within itself an unresolvable, living, and possibly creative, tension between its own particular religiosity and the mainstream of Buddhism. When going away too far from that mainstream, it is apt to fall into a kind of folk religion that is hardly recognizable as Buddhism. But on the other hand, when trying to stick too closely to the logic of that mainstream, it tends to lose its own originality and religious dynamism—as well as its inner affinity with Christianity.⁵

According to this view, the “particular religiosity” or “religious dynamism” of Shin Buddhism lies in those elements that at once lend it an “inner affinity with Christianity” and bring it into tension with “the mainstream of Buddhism.”

There are different ways of handling this model of internal polarization, but the central question here is less the particular manner in which it is shaped than the effect of taking it as a starting point for understanding Shin. This is because once the conceptual split is made, there seems to be little interest in an understanding that reintegrates the divided elements or recognizes them as adequate in comparison to the polar traditions.

A subtle extension of this same model is found in the field of interreligious dialogue. In an ingenious sleight of hand, it is argued that Western scholars need to uphold the basic character of Shin in the face of “elitist” or “modernist” Shin scholars who may resist the notion that their tradition is in essence similar to Christian religiosity, and who may stubbornly insist on continuities with Mahāyāna tradition. In this view, the original bifurcation of Shin is once again simply assumed, and once again the significance of Shin tradition is located in its likeness to Christianity. What is new is the justification of these moves by labeling resemblance to Christian religiosity “Shin specificity” and nonresemblance “mainstream Buddhism.” Thus, for Shin

⁵ Bragt 1993, p. 56.

Buddhists to give weight instead to elements of their tradition dissimilar to Christianity—for example, the aspiration to realize nirvana that Barth notes—amounts to a “reductionist” act of effacement of what is distinctively Shin. It has even been suggested that Mahāyāna thought stands in a relation to Shin religiosity analogous to the relationship of Greek philosophy and Christianity.⁶ In this view, as with Barth and others, Shin would seem to have its center in a Christian-like religiosity, and to stand in distant and uncertain relation to Mahāyāna tradition.

2. Readings of *The Collected Works of Shinran*

As stated above, Shin has often been dealt with in the West by the imposition of a kind of internal polarization, or by situating it in relation to, and at some point between, the more stable and integral coordinates of Protestant Christianity and general Mahāyāna Buddhism. The problem is not with a comparative method, which may be both effective and inevitable. Further, the view of Shin against the backdrop of a contrast between Mahāyāna Buddhist thought and Protestant religiosity is not necessarily entirely without grounds. It turns on the apparent shift in emphasis from meditative and other practices to eradicate delusional attachments in many Mahāyāna traditions to a conception of “shinjin,” or the entrusting of oneself to the wisdom-compassion of Amida Buddha, in the Shin tradition. In the West, however, this shift has been perceived as moving across an insuperable breach, thereby distancing the Pure Land teaching irrevocably from Mahāyāna tradition and bringing it, despite its use of traditional Buddhist symbols and concepts, into broad alignment with forms of religiosity similar to, and properly accommodated within the frameworks of, a Protestant Christian outlook.

I wonder if it is not time to reconsider the assumption that progressive refining of this comparative framework will lead to deepened understanding of Shin tradition and its significance. Is it not necessary to devise a new approach to understanding—an approach that enables contemporary access to the resources of thought and religious life within the tradition? This would bring the historical manifestations and traditional formulations of teaching and practice into interaction with contemporary perspectives—whether Western (including Christian) or Asian—seeking to create an exposition of Shin Buddhism that genuinely deepens our present understanding of the tradition. The question I wish to focus on here is: How is it possible to move

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

beyond the paradigm of bifurcation and polarization for grasping Shin?

Let us begin by considering the readings of John Keenan and Thomas Kasulis in relation to this question. Though widely dissimilar in approach, both discussions may be viewed as inheriting issues that have previously arisen within the framework of bifurcation described above. Keenan raises the question of the relation of Shinran to general Mahāyāna thought by focusing on the absence of direct reference to “emptiness” or *śūnyatā* in Shinran’s writings. Thomas Kasulis, deliberately adopting a stance of “privileging the Asian over the Eurocentric” (p. 17, footnote), explores Shin’s apparent lack of ethical norms, one of the most common and persistent criticisms of Shin thought brought by Christian theologians, but with an eye to hints in Shinran for our contemporary situation. Interestingly, despite their differences, both authors have recourse to the notions of *mappō* and of mythic narrative in addressing the problems they raise. I will begin with brief consideration of the two articles.

Shinran’s Thought and Emptiness

John Keenan points out that the pivotal Mahāyāna concept of emptiness plays little direct role in Shinran’s writings. According to Keenan, this is a matter of critical significance, for the doctrine of the emptiness of all things is central to Mahāyāna philosophy. He therefore asks: Why does Shinran ignore the doctrine of emptiness?

Keenan’s approach resembles the paradigmatic interpretation of Shin outlined above, for he grasps Shinran in terms of a departure from general Mahāyāna thinking. I would suggest, however, that a shift of perspective in Keenan’s own approach to emptiness may be useful in grasping Mahāyāna thought, and that this shift results in eliminating the implied divergence from basic Mahāyāna thinking that he emphasizes in Shinran. Keenan speaks repeatedly of the “*doctrine of emptiness*,” tending to find in “the emptiness of all things” a metaphysical assertion. For him, emptiness is a mode of “logic” or a “pattern of philosophic thought” that functions in the realm of conceptual comprehension and propositions about the world. I suspect, however, that even had Shinran employed the term “emptiness,” it would not have referred primarily to a doctrine, but would have been used synonymously with suchness, dharma-body, nirvana, and so on. In other words, it would have referred to reality beyond conceptual grasp, or reality that is realized in the eradication of delusional, dichotomous thinking. Shinran states that this reality is “formless.”

Formless reality or emptiness is characterized by the nonduality of subject and object. While Keenan begins with an insistence on the doctrine of emptiness as fundamental to Mahāyāna, it may also be said, approaching the same realization of reality from the opposite side of the subject-object dichotomy, that a new conception of wisdom lies at the heart of Mahāyāna, a wisdom characterized by a thoroughgoing nonduality. Thus, in awakening, the aspect of subjectivity is termed “wisdom” and its object “emptiness.” Why, then, does Shinran not refer to emptiness? It is not because he must deny “the emptiness of all things.” He prominently quotes T’an-luan (476-542), for example, who expresses emptiness in the following passage without expressly naming it:

In saving beings, one perceives no object of salvation. The bodhisattva, in observing sentient beings, sees that in the final analysis they are nonexistent. Although he saves countless sentient beings, in reality there is not a single sentient being who realizes nirvana. Manifesting the act of saving sentient beings is thus like play.⁷

The “nonexistence” of the object of wisdom-compassion expresses emptiness as nonduality. Rather than emptiness as a proposition about the world, the operative word for Shinran would have been practice. The bodhisattva *practices* wisdom by transcending dichotomous thought and perception and thereby sees emptiness. For Shinran, as indeed for Mahāyāna tradition, emptiness was regarded as an aspect of contemplative practice, not a metaphysical principle to be grasped merely intellectually by ordinary thought. The “logic of emptiness” or “pattern of philosophic thought” that Keenan refers to should perhaps also be understood as basically an element of meditative practice directed to the transcendence of dichotomous thought.

In short, Shinran does not expound emptiness precisely because he does not teach a path to Buddhahood in which it is an element or concretization of practice. His concern is to articulate an alternative path to awakening, one that does not require the fulfillment of meditative practice. The question, therefore, is not “Why does Shinran neglect emptiness?” but “How does reality that is referred to as emptiness in other forms of Mahāyāna tradition disclose itself in Shinran’s path?”

As stated above, emptiness should not be considered a metaphysical principle standing apart from the practice of wisdom; emptiness is what the bo-

⁷ “Chapter on Realization,” *Teaching, Practice, and Realization*, CWS I: 174.

dhisattva practicing wisdom sees. Here, emptiness and wisdom arise together. This nonduality also characterizes reality as it discloses itself in Shinran's path through the functioning of the Pure Land mythic narrative. In other words, engagement with the narrative may be seen to fulfill the function that meditative practices fulfill in other Buddhist paths, and to lead to an apprehension of reality that is characterized by nonduality, a nonduality that is apprehended as emptiness in other forms of Mahāyāna.

The fundamental difference is that in Shinran's Pure Land Buddhist path, delusional thinking is not eradicated. As he states: "Our desires are countless, and anger, wrath, jealousy, and envy are overwhelming, arising without pause; to the very last moment of life they do not cease, or disappear, or exhaust themselves."⁸ This is life pervaded by blind passions, which Shinran sees as the fundamental mode of human existence. At the same time, the awakening to such existence is accompanied by a transformation, which Shinran speaks of repeatedly. He states, for example: "The minds, good and evil, of foolish beings . . . are immediately transformed into the mind of great compassion."⁹ Or: "Evil karma, without being nullified or eradicated, is made into good, just as all river waters, upon entering the great ocean, immediately become ocean water."¹⁰ The delusional thinking of ignorant beings is transformed into wisdom-compassion without ceasing to be delusional thinking; evil karma is transformed into virtue without being eradicated. This is the mode of the disclosure of the nonduality of blind passions and enlightenment, or samsaric existence and nirvana that in other forms of Mahāyāna thought is expressed, "Form is none other than emptiness; emptiness is none other than form."

Shinran states that transformation occurs of itself, without any calculation on the part of the practitioner. Or perhaps, the falling away of calculative thinking with regard to the teaching and the emergence of the world in which "our desires are countless, and anger, wrath, jealousy, and envy arise without pause" occur together and are in themselves transformative and disclosive of reality. Here, there is a concomitant duality and nonduality of sentient being and Buddha, or this world and the Pure Land. Further, Amida Buddha is both form disclosed by formlessness, and inconceivable.

It is impossible to discuss here how such transformation might occur in

⁸ *Notes on Once-Calling and Many-Calling*, CWS I: 488.

⁹ *Hymns of the Dharma-Ages*, CWS I: 408.

¹⁰ *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone'*, CWS I: 453.

engagement with the narratives of the Pure Land path.¹¹ Keenan states, however, that Shinran “cannot grant privilege to the language of emptiness, which in many traditions functions as a metalanguage emptying all language claims of their final validity.” I wonder if it is not “language of emptiness” itself that can function to “empty all language claims,” but engagement with that language of emptiness, which is meditative practice that breaks through discursive thought carried on in ordinary language. As Keenan notes, in the Pure Land path delineated by Shinran one does not break through the delusional linguisticity that he sees as characterizing human existence and apprehend emptiness. Nevertheless, there is a metalanguage that works to empty all language claims of their final validity, for this is the function of the nembutsu.¹² The Name arises as the horizon of human existence and pervades all our ordinary use of language. This is what Shinran means when he states: “With a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are empty and false, totally without truth and sincerity. The nembutsu alone is true and real.” Or: “The medicine of Amida’s Vow destroys the poisons of our wisdom and foolishness.”¹³

Evil and the Postmodern Consciousness

Kasulis’ reading of Shinran in large part parallels the exposition given in the central glossary entries of CWS and in *Shinran: An Introduction to His Thought*;¹⁴ although not noted by Kasulis, this includes some elements that remain controversial in Japan.¹⁵ What is particularly valuable in his article, however, is his systematic comparison of Shinran with postmodernist thought, and his suggestion that the ethical thinking found in Shinran may be helpful in pondering our contemporary situation. Kasulis’ strategy may be seen as an end-run around one of the major obstacles to an appreciation of Japanese Pure Land thought for modern students: an apparent emphasis on human powerlessness and evil (in the Buddhist sense of all action that leads

¹¹ I have taken up this topic in Hirota 1991 and Hirota 2000.

¹² See Hirota 1993.

¹³ For the first quotation, see Hirota 1982, p. 44 and CWS I: 679; for the second, “Chapter on Shinjin,” *Teaching, Practice, and Realization*, CWS I: 107.

¹⁴ Ueda and Hirota 1989.

¹⁵ Some of the emphases are not represented in most Japanese writings, and several elements of it, such as the exposition of Shinran’s conception of karma, have been controversial. See Ueda 1986.

to further entanglement in samsaric existence and not to awakening) that has seemed to many readers in the West so extreme as to extirpate its Buddhist character. This emphasis is often interpreted to mean that the Japanese Pure Land teaching was Buddhism tailored for the masses, who had no access to the path save faith, since they were incapable of study and unwilling to devote themselves to practice.

Kasulis' article makes two basic moves in relation to this issue. First, by taking as his emphasis the notion of *mappō*, he brings about a shift of the focal point of evil from the individual practitioner to the age or environment. In this way he softens the Pure Land assertion of personal powerlessness to achieve enlightenment. Second, by bringing a concept of "*mappō*-consciousness" into comparison with "postmodern consciousness," he is able to formulate a contemporary stance for grasping the notion of *mappō*, which has seemed unjustifiably pessimistic to the modern mindset. Regarding Kasulis' overall aim of drawing from Shinran's thought hints for our own postmodern ethics, one cannot help wondering whether his concluding remarks regarding Shinran's discovery of "the compassion that is as universal and alive as Amitāyus, as unhindered and bright as Amitābha" (p. 33) are genuinely persuasive, or whether reliance on such transcendent agency might not seem to a hardened postmodern mind little more than clutching to old metanarratives. Here, however, I will focus on the question, raised above, of whether Kasulis' approach provides a way of leading us beyond an initial bifurcation in approaching Shinran.

Viewed in terms of the paradigmatic approach to Shinran sketched in section 1 above, Kasulis' discussion may be seen as displacing Shinran's thought from close proximity to the Protestant pole and moving it some distance towards the Mahāyāna. This realignment allows for a stance in Shin that contrasts with a number of modernist assumptions (which Kasulis carefully outlines) and that affords comparison with postmodern thinking. The resulting delineation of points of convergence between Shinran and postmodern thought is cogent and illuminating. From a Shin perspective, however, there appears to be a large price to pay for the incorporation of the postmodern mind as a form of *mappō*-consciousness. Thus, although Kasulis speaks of "privileging the Asian over the Eurocentric . . . by interpreting postmodern consciousness as a form of *mappō*-consciousness" (p. 17, footnote), one must ask whether there are not areas of "*mappō*-consciousness" that fall by the wayside because they find no corresponding elements in "postmodern consciousness" to support comparison.

A full consideration of Kasulis' wide-ranging exposition is not possible here, and, as stated before, on the whole its presentation of Shinran appears both apposite and succinct. Further, he moves in the direction of overcoming the imposition of internal dichotomy by taking Shinran's conception of *mappō* as a point of departure. My concern, however, is with what this procedure tends to eliminate from consideration. In a word, Kasulis dispenses with Shinran's thoroughgoing conception of evil, which both modern and postmodern consciousness appears to find indigestible and which has long prevented Westerners from accepting Shin as genuine Buddhism. My concern is not simply that a prominent concept in Shinran appears neglected, but rather that precisely that concept that is crucial to a unitive view of Shinran's thought has dropped from consideration.

Kasulis takes up the concept of evil through a consideration of the best-known statement in *Tannishō*, "Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will."¹⁶ Kasulis is surely correct when he states that "Shinran is not talking about people in terms of an external standard of good and evil, but rather is referring to the way people view themselves" (p. 26). Shinran says as much in his own explanation of the statement. For Kasulis, however, this perspective is taken as justifying the paraphrase: "Even do-gooders may be born in the Pure Land; how much more so those who are not." We find here that the term "evil" turns into a mere negative—*not* perceiving oneself as a "do-gooder"—while for Shinran the expression surely means, "How much more so those who are *evil-doers*."

Deemphasis of Shinran's conception of evil results in a broad sense of *mappō* ranging from "Kamakura *mappō*" as the consciousness of the age to Shinran's existential awareness of *mappō*. From a Shin perspective, however, it may be useful to distinguish two kinds of "*mappō*-consciousness," one arising from an intellectual grasp of the teaching and the other reflecting a religious transformation. The nature of the issue may be illustrated in the following way. In relation to "*mappō*-consciousness," Kasulis speaks repeatedly of "relinquishing all sense of self-agency" so that one "relinquishes karmic conditionedness" (p. 34). "If I give up that [conditioned] 'I,' there is only the working of the Vow" (*ibid.*). The question is: How does one give up the 'I'?

¹⁶ Hirota 1982, p. 23; CWS I: 663. Note that this statement is not Shinran's original expression, but is found elsewhere attributed to Hōnen (Daigobon *Hōnen Shōnin Denki*, section 7).

From a postmodern perspective, perhaps, as well as from a perspective of the Path of Sages (for example, Zen), one abandons the self through acts of practice or through a religious decision. In the Japanese Pure Land tradition, we see an example of such self-abandonment in Ippen, and Kasulis' expression for the achieved state, "there is neither Amida nor Shinran," is indeed reminiscent of Ippen.¹⁷ From Shinran's perspective, however, belief that such an act or decision is possible is unduly optimistic. It is here that Shinran parts company with the above traditions. For Shinran, it is precisely the inability to accomplish such self-abandonment that binds one to samsaric existence. Further, it is this inability that Shinran terms "evil."

Kasulis states: "Shinran's deep sense of *mappō* convinced him that such a plan [as the Path of Sages] could never work for him. So he entrusted himself completely to the exemplar of his mentor, Hōnen, and in so doing, entrusted himself to the working of Amida's Vow" (p. 28). Shinran does state in *Tannishō* 2 that he entrusts himself utterly to the words of his teacher Hōnen. He goes on, however, to explain the difference between faith as a choice of a course of action based on the conviction of the truth of a teaching (what his followers have come in order to seek from him) and his own realization of shinjin as entrusting in which "nothing else is involved." In the case of his attainment of shinjin, even if he were deceived by Hōnen's words, he would feel no regret, "for hell is to be my abode whatever I do." Operative here is a self-awareness not simply of postmodernist perspectivalism, but of evil in Shinran's sense: to the very end of life, delusional and distortive self-attachment does not disappear.

Elsewhere I have stated that at the heart of Shinran's Pure Land path lies an existential Mahayanic awakening to nonduality, manifested in particular in the nonduality—without obliteration of the distinction—of falsity and truth, or samsaric existence and true reality, or blind passions and wisdom-compassion. Nonduality concretized in this way—and sustained in the awareness of persons who achieve no eradication of false conceptualization and self-attachment through meditative practices—is the characteristic quality of the Shin Buddhist path.¹⁸

It is in Shinran's delineation of the transformation of one's existence into

¹⁷ Cf. the poem attributed to Ippen: "Say the nembutsu/ and there is neither/ Buddha nor self/ Namu-amida-butsu/ Namu-amida-butsu," Hirota 1989, p. 66. For a comparison of the thought of Ippen and Shinran, see pp. lxxii-lxxvi of this book.

¹⁸ Hirota 2000, p. 164.

evil (blind passions) that is at the same time nondual with wisdom-compassion (Amida Buddha) that we find the answer to the question, posed above, of how one relinquishes attachment to self. Such relinquishment arises of itself in the awakening to the evil of one's existence as a human being. As we have seen above, the disregard of emptiness as an appropriate element of practice and the view of human existence as involved in evil (delusional self-attachment; blind passions; false conceptuality) are closely related in Shinran's thought. Thus, raising the question of the "neglect" of emptiness and achieving a comparison of *mappō* and postmodernist thought by disregarding Shinran's conception of evil are similar in their assumptions. Further, our consideration of both approaches suggests that different kinds of questions—questions of how the path functions and is traversed rather than of doctrine and conviction—in fact probe Shinran's thought more deeply and may open up approaches to it that avoid falling into the paradigm of bifurcation.

3. Toward a Holistic Approach to Shinran's Thought

In order to achieve a sharpened, more illuminating comprehension of the lived significance of the Shin tradition now or at various points in the past, an approach is necessary that would, I believe, have two characteristics. First, it would grasp Shin Buddhist tradition at a point prior to bifurcation into Christian-like and nonChristian-like elements, and hence would not originate from the division of Shin into two aspects and from a choice of which is properly the focus of research and which is to be deemphasized. Second, an effective approach for a unitive grasp of Shin would bring the tradition into a dialogical framework. By this, I mean that one would probe the resources of the tradition for presenting an intelligible self-understanding by being sensitive to the demands of engagement inherent in the tradition. There are significant reasons within Shin Buddhist tradition itself for adopting such an approach.

As we have seen, the common perception of Shin tends to locate it along a line of tension between poles of mainstream Mahāyāna Buddhism and Christian religiosity. This framework is often regarded as characterized by a polarity between "emptiness" as metaphysical view or meditative realization and faith as belief. The issue of engagement, however, can encompass various forms of practice and conceptions of "faith," and thereby open up inquiry at a point prior to the distinction between them and thus prior to the objectification of Shin under existing Western categories. This is critical,

because Shin is precisely that stream of Buddhist tradition that most radically brought into question the nature of genuine engagement, and sought through that questioning to discover a form of engagement both authentic and available to persons of all capacities and all modes and stations of life.

It is impossible here to discuss in detail the resources within the Shin tradition that provide for an approach that is at once nonbifurcating and disclosive without the imposition of the usual polarized framework.¹⁹ I will simply mention and illustrate briefly several characteristics of the tradition that might contribute to the formation of such an approach.

The Character of Engagement in the Shin Buddhist Path

There are three central characteristics of the Shin Buddhist path that have not been adequately recognized, even in Japan, but now should be explored in order to achieve today a more penetrating grasp of the tradition. The Shin Buddhist path should be recognized to be centrally pragmatic in orientation; inherently concerned with language, most notably as the hearing of the teaching and the verbal act of practice (*nembutsu*, saying the Name of Amida Buddha), but also in relation to the fundamental linguisticity of human existence; and dialogic in its dynamics and conceptual structures. When engagement with Shin is understood in these terms rather than in terms of Christian-like religiosity and non-Christian-like metaphysics, an approach to comprehension opens up that allows for interpretation of the texts, practices, and historical manifestations of the tradition with significance resonances with contemporary thought.

By *pragmatic*, I mean that although Shin is commonly viewed as a system of “faith,” it is not a set of “truth-claims” or doctrinal propositions to be accepted as true descriptions of the cosmos in the ordinary sense. Rather, as Karl Barth notes, “it is not Amida or faith in him . . . which is the really controlling and determinative power” in Shin tradition. It is often assumed that the relationship between practice and shinjin in Shinran’s thought is one of mutual exclusion, so that his radical development of the conception of shinjin results in a Buddhism with no place for practice. In fact, however, as seen in the title Shinran applied to his magnum opus, *The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way* (*Ken jōdo shinjitsu kyō gyō shō monrui*), it is practice that holds the pivotal position in his thought. It is not that shinjin or persons’ entrusting of themselves to Amida’s Vow is

¹⁹ I have taken up these issues in Hirota 1993, and more briefly in Hirota 2000, pp.186-195.

understood as itself a kind of, or replacement for, practice; rather, genuine practice (nembutsu) is enacted by persons who have attained (i.e., been given) the Buddha's mind as shinjin (actual hearing of the teaching). Although Shinran states that shinjin is the true cause of birth in the Pure Land and of attainment of Buddhahood, this shinjin is inseparable from practice (nembutsu, Name as concretizing the practice of Buddha), and as in other forms of Buddhism, practice is the foundation of the conception of the path. Rather than "faith" simply as belief or worship, then, it is the category of engagement with the path that provides the appropriate means for approaching Shin tradition and that allows for a vision of Shin within the context of Buddhist tradition. Moreover, it is the linguistic character of the Shin path (hearing the teaching and saying the nembutsu) that constitutes its accessibility to human beings regardless of capacity for conventional religious practice.

I will focus here on the third of the intertwined characteristics of engagement mentioned above, its dialogical character. By this I mean not only that practitioners understand that, while within their own historical and cultural context, they must fully engage and be engaged by the tradition so that it becomes present to them, but further that the character of the engagement itself is understood to be inherently dynamic and transformative. I wish to point out aspects of engagement—the dialogical character of its conceptual structures—in part to show how such an approach might be employed to avoid the imposition of the bifurcating framework described above, but also because it may offer hints regarding other approaches in which presuppositions about Buddhist "philosophy" in the reading of texts or "lay religiosity" as a sociopolitical category may tend to dissolve issues of the path.

The Dialogical Structures of Path and Reality in Shin Buddhism

Here, I will take up briefly the two sides or stances involved in engagement—that of the practitioner and that of Buddha or dharma (reality and the verbal disclosure of reality). By sketching the conceptual dynamic on each side as conceived and experienced by practitioners in engagement, it will be possible to suggest how Shinran delineates the process of engagement and the transformed existence of the practitioner. This will serve as a means for grasping the Shin path—including the shift in Buddhist tradition found at its roots from meditative practices and disciplines to conceptions of entrusting oneself to wisdom-compassion—without presupposing the patterns of bifurcation we have considered above. In this way, it will be possible to stake out

appropriate groundwork for the comparison of the Shin path both with other Buddhist traditions and with Christian forms of religiosity.

When focus is placed on issues of engagement, dharma in its verbal manifestations is considered not as a system of abstract propositions or truth-claims to be intellectually comprehended or believed with conviction but as an articulation of reality realized through a person's engagement. Similarly, the practitioners addressed or described in the teaching are not simply ordinary persons in the world, but those transformed through their engagement with dharma. Therefore, whichever side we begin with, we inevitably find it inseparable from the opposite side. If we follow Shinran's basic organizing principle of the Buddha's "giving" or transferring the virtues of wisdom-compassion to beings (*ekō*), and his statement that Amida engages beings and gives them all of the elements of the path—teaching, practice, shinjin, and realization—then it is natural to begin with the side of dharma.

Although this has gone unrecognized in the scholastic tradition, Shinran's thought uniquely emphasizes two overlapping but distinct conceptual frameworks by which Amida Buddha is conceived. One is the concept of two kinds of dharma-body—dharma-body as dharma-nature or formless reality and dharma-body as compassionate means (*hōben hosshin*, Amida Buddha). Here, Amida is understood as reality taking conceptual form in order to make itself known to ignorant beings. The second framework for understanding Amida is the concept of "fulfilled body" (*hōjin*, *sambhogakāya*) of Buddha in all its virtuous adornments, which is the manifestation of Buddhahood attained through the fulfillment of bodhisattva vows and aeons of practice. For Shinran, Amida as fulfilled Buddha-body is above all characterized by the unhindered light of wisdom that pervades all worlds and works to awaken all beings, for the Primal Vow that informs Amida's Buddhahood was precisely the vow to bring all beings to supreme enlightenment.

Perhaps the concept of the two dharma-bodies may be understood to present a vertical paradigm by which Amida Buddha is seen to emerge into history and human awareness as form from formless reality. Amida as fulfilled Buddha-body would then be seen as a horizontal paradigm following a line of time formed by the narrative of the former king Dharmākara taking vows, performing bodhisattva practices, and at length becoming Amida Buddha and establishing the Pure Land. These two paradigms are interlocking but stand together somewhat like an optical illusion that can be grasped in either way, but only singly, not simultaneously.

Amida is seen either as Buddha compassionately emerging from formless reality or as the culmination of aeons of practice to save all sentient beings. In fact, it is above all the entire causal *narrative* of Dharmākara-Amida that is the emergence of dharma-body as compassionate means, that is, of comprehensible *form*. At the same time, the narrative progresses from the aeons of practice performed by Dharmākara toward Amida's Buddhahood as the formless light of wisdom. That is, conversely, the narrative itself moves toward attainment of the formless.

On the side of the practitioner, there is a similar interplay of conceptual structures. Here, it turns on two ways of conceiving reality and two consequent modes of engagement with it. Reality is conceived of as the Pure Land and as Amida Buddha. Engagement, then, is informed by aspiration for the Pure Land and entrusting of oneself to Amida Buddha. These are distinct modes of engagement, although here again this has gone unrecognized in the scholarly tradition. Elsewhere, I have applied the term "teleological" to the former and "interpersonal" to the latter to indicate the difference in orientation.²⁰ If the former is comprehended as incorporating a horizontal vector characterized by spatial distances and temporal progression, the latter may be thought to embody vertical vectors of immediate relationship between practitioner and Buddha. Since Shinran declares both the Pure Land and Amida to be the light of wisdom, we see that these two ways of conceiving reality and two modes of engagement are interlocking. Nevertheless, as with the conceptual frameworks applied to the apprehension of Amida Buddha, there remains an irresolvable and dynamic interplay between them for the Shin practitioner. Shinran's notions that practitioners realize wisdom-compassion as shinjin while remaining foolish beings, or that they attain birth in the Pure Land in the present while remaining in this world, arise from this dynamic.

What is the significance of this dynamic interplay of conceptual structures that comes to light when it is asked how the teaching engages practitioners, or how the engaged practitioners understand themselves and the teaching? Here it is possible only to note that the two forms of conceptual interplay are of course not unrelated; rather, they are integrated in the purpose and functioning of the Pure Land path as Shinran understood it. This was to bring unenlightened beings, who cannot break through the structures of their own conceptuality, to an apprehension at once of the falsity of modes of thought and perception rooted in a delusionally reified self, and of reality that cannot

²⁰ In Hirota 1991, pp. 17–45. See also Hirota 2000, pp. 40–65.

be grasped by false conceptuality. In order to achieve this purpose, a kind of thinking is necessary that enables, through engagement with it, apprehension of inconceivable reality while remaining in the realm of human conception and linguisticity, or, in traditional Mahāyāna terms, apprehension of non-duality through dualistic structures of thought. This thinking is manifested in the dynamic interplay of conceptual structures briefly outlined above, which are set in motion by the engagement of the practitioner.

With regard to our theme here, it may be noted that there has been an inclination not to recognize an approach to Shin through issues of engagement, which would grasp the tradition through its roots in Mahāyāna tradition. This has been the case both in the West and also in the sectarian scholastics of the temple bureaucracy in Japan, where a well-defined orthodoxy has been a primary concern. Western scholars have focused not on the dynamic process of engagement, but on more congenial categories such as emptiness or co-dependent origination as metaphysical concepts or doctrinal truth-claims as objects of faith. Both such categories are inappropriate to the core of Shin. Rather, focus on engagement would allow not only for more precise understanding of Shin, but also for new and more pertinent comparison with Christian forms of religiosity, for example, by bringing into conversation Shinran's conception of *shinjin* and the rich theology of love in Christian tradition. It is the dynamics of love—a term largely absent from Shin Buddhist thought—as paradoxically both divine gift and human capacity that might better illuminate the transformed existence of the person of *shinjin* than faith or conviction.²¹ Moreover, it is the highlighting of the category of engagement that may be Shin Buddhism's greatest contribution, as a long-enduring Buddhist tradition with a highly articulated doctrinal and commentarial heritage, to the field of Buddhist studies.

²¹ I have discussed a Pure Land Buddhist view of love in Hirota 1995, pp.113-115.

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