

# The Fundamental Problem of Shinran's Thought

## PART ONE

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**W**HEN WE SEEK to inquire into Shinran's thought as a problem of religious philosophy, we must approach it from a slightly different angle than that of traditional Buddhist research as pursued up to now. Modern thought, especially the problems of Western thought, or more precisely, the religious problems modern man embraces as he faces modernity—of God, the world, and the human way of being—that is, the problems established by modern western religious philosophy and the thought system engendered through their resolution, form the focus of my concern. From this perspective, I wish to dwell on two or three related problems.

### I. *The Significance of Teaching in Teaching, Practice, Realization*

#### THE TRUTHFULNESS OF THE PURE LAND

As to revealing the truthfulness of its teaching, nothing surpasses the *Larger Sutra of Infinite Life*.

With these words begin the work known as *Teaching, Practice, Realization*,<sup>1</sup> whose very first statement confronts us with the problem of TEACHING. In a sense, this statement is not limited merely to the Chapter on Teaching of *Teaching, Practice, Realization*, but is expressive,

\* This is a translation of the first section of "Shinran shisō no konpon-teki mondai," which is chapter two of the author's essays in Y. Takeuchi and Ishida Yoshikazu, *Jōdo bukkyō no shisō: Shinran*, Vol. 9 (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), pp. 82–87. We thank the author for permission to translate it here, and Mark Unno for his editorial assistance. Annotation has been provided by the translator.

rather, of *Teaching, Practice, Realization* as a whole, in which vein one could argue that it was to explicate this singular statement that this work was conceived. *Teaching, Practice, Realization* unveils the proposition that the *Larger Sutra of Infinite Life* holds the truthfulness of its teaching, a proposition explained from the standpoint of religious existence. As such, these words comprise the premise as well as the conclusion of *Teaching, Practice, Realization* in its totality. In the following, then, we will proceed to examine the text of the Chapter on Teaching with an eye to explaining the meaning of this passage. It should be unnecessary to state that these explanations comprise nothing more than preliminary observations. As the meaning of these words and the greater truth they allude to were, as aforementioned, recorded for the first time in the pages of *Teaching, Practice, Realization*, its Chapter on Teaching can be regarded as amounting to little more than preliminary remarks. As such, my attempts at explanation constitute loosely woven thoughts on one small aspect of the Chapter on Teaching.

"The truthfulness of its teaching" refers to the truthfulness of the teaching of the Pure Land. The term Pure Land should convey to us that its truthfulness is of a transcendental dimension, of the order of the other shore. That is to say, it is neither an affair of the world of this shore nor a truth immanent within man. It is not a truth that can be ferreted out by man who, from the standpoint of man, arrives at truth by intellection, rationalization, self-verification. To man's intellectual and rational capacity, the truth it manifests is beyond his power to conceive. As in the saying, "Only the buddhas can impart to another the wisdom of the buddhas," it is an order of truth the ordinary person would never have come abreast of on his own, the term ordinary person here being used to indicate humanity in general.

At every turn we find the common stock of humanity comprised of immanentists, rationalists, anthropocentrists. This is especially true of the modern person who, nurtured on the spirit of modern times, hails the autonomy of reason and the myth of self-evident truth. Yet immanent in humankind is a burgeoning multiplicity of values and rationales in whose pursuit people are engaged. Is their pursuit alone

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<sup>1</sup> *Teacing, Practice, Realization* here refers to Shinran's major work, *Ken jōdo kyōgyōshō* [Teaching, Practice, Realization] *monrui*, popularly known as the *Kyōgyōshinshō* [Teaching, Practice, Faith, Realization].

sufficient to impart them the fulfillment of life's ultimate goal? Does it hold the key to humankind's happiness and peace befitting noble Reason? I'm afraid we cannot say this is always the case.

Attesting to this situation is the deadlock of the modern spirit in the present age. Enthralled by modern science and the flourish of technological progress it has ushered in, people have at length lost sight of that land of happiness in the world beyond. Optimism in the modern age fuels the belief that it is possible to simply braid together human potentiality and human reality into the rope of so-called progress. But linking these two is actually a far more complicated task not easily achieved. It was once thought that bringing the two elements together from their separate ends of the spectrum would be sufficient to have them attract one another, so that with the passage of time the two would easily fuse. But as the two forces were brought into closer and closer proximity—this requiring a considerable period of time as has transpired for the modern age in its entirety—as expected their counterforces started to come into play, causing the elements to repel one another.

This contradiction and conflict between human potentiality (ideal values) and human reality have in this age given rise to various symptoms on the stage of world history, in the form of world historical events taking place on grand scale, regarding which it should be unnecessary to comment further. As such the denial of anthropocentrism—what once was doubts as to the reliability of human liberalism—has now come to govern the intellect of modern man. People are again taking account of human nature's dark side as chronically evil-ridden (in contrast to modern optimism that denies this aspect out of a conceptual idealism), are beginning to turn an eye to the truth of the religious concept of human ego, of man possessed of self-love, self-enfatuation, self-conceit.

In actuality, religious man, in the case of *tariki* teachings as well as in that of *jiriki* teachings, thinks it required of him to seek the ideal by abandoning self to achieve spiritual progress, to issue the mind aspiring to enlightenment. Instead, though, the difficulty of transcending their very situation leaves them stranded in the interstices between human ideal and human reality. Adrift in the swirling eddy of human self-contradiction, they are in danger of being swept into the depths of oblivion. At this impasse they are taken up by the forces of transcendental



compassion, enabling them to step beyond that absolute contradiction in which they stood deadlocked. And so the transcendental nature of religious truth—nullifying the stress on self-reliance of the immanentist position—is meaningfully experienced as a living force only by those whose very being is actually caught in the depths of self-contradiction, those who stand at the so-called extremity of existence. This situation could well be compared with the sick person who tastes the bitterness of medicine for the first time.

#### FEAR OF DEATH AND SIN

But in this situation, the awareness of one's own limitations as a human being and of one's sinfulness—these having raised their head as sickness on the world historical plane—is a somewhat complicated problem since it is a malady whose pains we feel yet whose awareness does not come straightway. All people are the worst sinners, yet we have no awareness of it. All people exist in the grips of impermanence, yet we have no desire to inquire into the eventuality of death. And owing to our lack of awareness, our unwillingness to take up the problem, we are unable to reach a solution; we have not even got so far as to shirk our responsibility by putting off efforts toward a solution. Further, as the final hour approaches, it is invariably the case that we look for some way to defuse or lighten the gravity of the situation.

In fact, all of us know the problem intimately, so intimately that we feel nervous about it, that we try to avoid dealing with it in a bid for time. Here, we may cite the telling example of the patient who keeps putting off physical examination. When we think the illness tractable, a visit to the doctor is a pleasant affair and we are happy to comply with the doctor's orders. But when a serious condition befalls us and manifests ominous signs of life-threatening illness, we practically have to drag ourselves into the examination room. In our minds we try to second-guess the physician, thinking, surely the doctor will inform us of a negative prognosis but then again might not. But regardless of whether one undergoes examination or not, the pace at which one's condition deteriorates remains unchanged. The sooner one knows one's actual condition, the easier to adjust; even in the case when one is beyond hope this is definitely the more desirable option.

In major surgery, where we cross the line between life and death, it is

better to remain calm and to prepare ourselves for all eventualities, undergoing the procedure thinking the event of rescue unlikely. Shinran's thought, "Even were I surely destined for hell" (*Tannishō*), expresses the resolution to the religious problem he had arrived at—in effect: "I believe there is no other way for me than to follow the path of nembutsu." *Senjaku hongan* (the selection of the original vow over all other vows) is not simply *senjaku sesshū* (the promise to take up those who elect the nembutsu over all other means) that Dharmakara Bodhisattva or Amida Buddha or the Transcendent performs on their part. The Buddha's noble promise is our will, the Buddha's selection our decision. Caller and respondent must become one. Once we become aware of the nature of our illness, as we confront the critical symptoms of the modern spirit we can only pray that the scalpel of compassion and grace can be applied deftly to the mass of contradiction without further loss of time; we can only pray we find within ourselves the stoic courage to endure.

In the above, we have likened the denial of anthropocentrism and the denial and conquering of the human rationalist standpoint to laying open the patient with the scalpel of transcendental truth to expose human self-contradiction and extirpate the lesion. Under the scalpel the human subject and human reason are completely docile as they place their life in the hands of the operator. But for Reason to so comply, it must arrive at the decision to surrender itself completely, body and soul. As rational courses of action and resolutions of will are of all kinds, it should be evident that what the situation calls for is the qualitatively different resolve of a finely-tempered will.

And so, for the mind to reach that point of refinement, it has to have gotten there by our having been exposed to temptations of all sorts of makeshift means and magical formulas. Even in the present-day world, there is no dearth of spiritual miracle workers shaking their wonder cures in our faces. In short, in order for us to truly discover the true path for ourselves, we must minutely experience for ourselves that "to leave behind the defiled to aspire for the pure [is for us to proceed] bewildered in practice, bewildered in faith, with mind dark, awakening scant, evil heavy, sins great."<sup>2</sup> And so once we find ourselves in this situation, how much more ennobling and meaningful is the light of

<sup>2</sup> From the Chapter on Teaching; adapted.

compassion issuing from that transcendent quarter to the one who meets this light. Moreover, for those who stand on the threshold of conversion, yet whose faith has yet to mature, the order of the day is to "reflect patiently and deliberately on what one has heard,"<sup>3</sup> for it is through the infinite kindnesses [shown us by our teachers] over a long period of time that we are borne toward the critical point of encounter with the Transcendent.

TRANSLATED BY W. S. YOKOYAMA

<sup>3</sup> Shinran's admonition is here interpreted to mean: "Until you are satisfied with your understanding, ponder as long as you wish on what you have heard with no fear of falling behind." For a more literal translation see *The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way: A Translation of Shinran's Kyōgyōshinshō*, Volume I, SBTS series (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1983), p. 58. The same phrase also appears in *Passages on the Pure Land Way*.