

Myōkōnin Osono

YANAGI SŌETSU

1

In a place called Tahara in Mikawa there stands a stone monument. It commemorates the woman myōkōnin Osono, and the following haiku is inscribed on it. It is said to be Osono's dying verse.

A lily flower
Just nodding,
"Yes, yes."

A white lily flower with its drooping head—Osono saw it as a figure just nodding, "Yes, yes," and herein expressed in verse the depth of her faith. When you think of it, nowadays putting up a monument like this would probably be thought of as an act stifling freedom, or as equivalent to a fainthearted attitude of submission to outside forces. There would probably even be doubts about whether faith is possible in such a negative, passive state of mind.

However, are we sure that accepting the word of the Buddha obediently and without passing judgment on it is not what faith is? Calculating it with our own intelligence and stating our agreement or disagreement is not a way of life that has entrusted everything to the Buddha. Teachings such as "Put a stop to calculations," or "Do not oppose things," are informing us of the purity and depth of the voice that utters an obedient "Yes." This response, "Yes," does not signify a personal judgment of approval or consent, or the like. It is merely "Yes"—not a matter of acceptance or refusal, but a voice that precedes the appearance of such judgments. In the case of saying,

* This is a translation of "Shinnyo Osono," in *Yanagi Sōetsu myōkōnin ronshū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1991), pp. 243-254.

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“Yes,” because you have understood, the self has not yet been extinguished. But the “Yes” that we are considering here is a “Yes” in which even those conditions have ceased to exist. Is it not a matter of the believer’s day-to-day life being lived in this simplehearted “Yes”?

Once, a certain person said to Osono, “No matter how much I listen to the sermons, my mind is still dull. Please give me some kind of brief teaching.”

Osono said, “You are dull, too, are you? Well, I seem to be another dull one. However, since Oyasama has called us to Him dull as we are, it can’t be all that bad!”

The person said, “Even so, it is said that faith is essential, but I have no idea when I will be able to get that faith.”

Osono said, “Getting faith is a matter of nothing more than saying, ‘Yes.’”

Once, Osono visited the Head Temple of the Shin Sect in Kyoto, and, at the guardhouse, forgot herself and became totally engrossed in talking about the Pure Land teachings. A priest who happened by tapped her on the back and spoke to her.

“Where do you think this is? Aren’t you in front of the Head Temple? No idle chattering! While you are being negligent, the winds of impermanence will come blowing after you!”

Osono turned toward the priest and tersely replied, “How could there be any negligence in Oyasama?!” To that reply, even the priest had no answer. What Osono was asserting is that, “I am full of negligence. But the Dear Buddha, for my sake, is never negligent—not even for an instant.” I think that this straightforwardly describes Osono’s faith as a Shinshū believer.

Often there were gatherings, centered around Osono, of fellow devotees. The wife of a certain household said, “Osono, when you come here, fellow devotees gather together, and you seem to have such happy discussions. But, I must be some kind of a heretic, because the only thing that interests me is this world, and I don’t like anything that has to do with the next life.”

Having heard this, Osono said, “Is that right? You’re that way, too, are you? That’s exactly the way I am. Every day I do talk about the Dharma, but I don’t like the Buddha Dharma. Actually, I detest anything that has to do with the next life, and it’s things having to do

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with this world that I like. However, the happy thing about it is that Oyasama is kind enough to be fond of those who dislike the next life and like this world, and lets them be among the first to go to the Pure Land. That is what is more joyful than anything. This is what I discuss every day." It is said that this housewife's heart was touched by Osono's reply, and that from that time on she became a Shinshū follower.

What is thankworthy about the Shinshū teaching is the point that it does not require qualifications of anyone in order to be saved. If qualifications were necessary, how many people would attain salvation? Amida instructs us by calling on us to "Come just as you are." The mission of the Nembutsu sects is to warmly teach us that ordinary though we may be, or rather, all the more because we *are* ordinary, there is a path to being saved.

2

One day Osono and several other fellow devotees had gathered together in the Portrait Hall of the Head Temple and, as usual, were enthusiastically conversing about the Teachings. A priest who was listening nearby expressed his thanks, saying, "I have heard something deserving of gratitude. How wonderful it is to have become the companion of the guest of honor!"

Osono, having heard this, said, "What knowledge could you have of it as a companion? As a companion, your coming death and rebirth in the Pure Land is something that is uncertain. And yet, it is precisely because you, yourself, can be received as the guest of honor of the Original Vow that you can escape even death."

The priest, having heard this, is said to have deeply expressed his gratitude, saying, "I have received advice worthy of extreme gratitude. This is the great joy of my life!"

This anecdote makes it clear that, whoever you may be, "You are the one, more than anyone else, who is the honored guest of the Buddha," and it is this that could be said to be the limitless virtue of the Nembutsu teaching. However, one should not misunderstand this. It is not that you will become the guest of honor when your qualifications are complete. It is something that is caused solely by the great compassion of Amida.

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There is a parable that Osono was fond of and related to her fellow devotees. It is said that the young devotees wanted to hear this story from Osono over and over again. The story was called "The Dumpling Soup Talk." When she heard, "Osono, Osono, please tell us the story about the dumpling soup one more time!" Osono would, happily as usual, begin the tale.

"Well, it gets to be that evening, and the maid prepares the soup, puts the dumplings into it and sets the fire burning from below. Now then, in dumplings there is no desire to be boiled, but, left on their own, they will be thoroughly boiled by the strength of the fire, right? Just when you think they have been thoroughly boiled, the maid immediately does them the favor of scooping them up!" It is said that when you have heard this story from Osono's lips, you have indeed heard something worthy of gratitude.

Gradually Osono's reputation spread throughout the district, and, as the fellow devotees who were grateful to her increased, it seems that in their midst there appeared those who were envious, as well as those who spread rumors that her belief was a heterodox faith-attainment, that is, it was a faith that was mistaken. Then, at last there even appeared one who formally accused her, and since the matter could not be left unresolved, it came about that Osono was summoned to an examination of her faith.

First, she was closely examined with the question "What is your understanding?" Understanding means one's comprehension and interpretation of one's belief. Osono thereupon replied, "I never thought, not even in a dream, that today I would come to a palace like this. But, because of your honorable command, I have now been allowed to come here. This is my understanding."

What a beautiful reply in summary of faith in the other-power this must be said to be! When he heard this, even the priest who was examining Osono was deeply touched and struck with admiration.

I quote the following story, which appears in the book *Shinja Meguri*:

At a certain temple in Echizen there was a training institute. Many priests and fellow devotees gathered there, and it was extremely prosperous. At that time, Osono, on her way to the capital, was visiting some fellow believers in the same province for a discussion. A certain

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person reported this fact at the institute, saying, "Recently an old woman named Osono has come from Mikawa. It is said that she recommends a heterodox (pacification of the mind), and this is something that is inexcusable. Because it is said that she prevails upon people far and wide, if we let her go on in that way, it will be a matter of throwing her and, it goes without saying, the people who are guided by her down to Hell. Therefore, we should promptly summon her and make her repent." The institute thereupon sent a messenger to Osono. All of the fellow devotees at Osono's meeting were worried and prevented her from going to the training institute, but Osono did not show the slightest signs of anxiety. "They told me to come, and so I'll go! Namu-Amida-Butsu, Namu-Amida-Butsu," she said. And she went along together with the Nembutsu.

The principal priest at the institute said, "Are you Osono of Mikawa?"

"Yes, I am."

"I have heard that in this province you have recently been recommending a heterodox pacification of the mind. That is an extremely shameful thing. And not just for you. When you go so far as to mislead other people, it is even worse! Hurry and make your repentance and conform to the Correct Meaning!"

When the priest had spoken these harsh words, Osono, with a cheerful smile, joyfully said, "I am utterly mistaken. What would I do if I weren't mistaken? It's precisely because I *am* mistaken!"

The priest said, "No matter how happy you might be, if you are mistaken, you won't get to go to the Pure Land. If you were to die now, you would have to fall immediately into the flames, wouldn't you?!"

Whereupon Osono said, happily, "Yes. What would I do if I didn't fall? It's precisely because I fall that I will be saved!"

"That disregards the pledge of the Original Vow! How could you be reborn in the Pure Land in violation of the pledge?!"

Having been vehemently admonished in this way, Osono said, happily, "It has been taught that precisely by going so far as to disregard the pledge of the Original Vow does one abandon nonexistence and existence."

"No! If you disregard the pledge, you won't get to be reborn in the Pure Land!"

Whereupon Osono said, happily, "Ahh! I'm grateful to hear that! If I were able to be reborn in the Pure Land on my own, how could anyone else help me?!" No matter what was said, she had no feeling of alarm. With regard to everything, she simply rejoiced at her own good fortune.

"This old woman is crazy! No matter what I say, she is delighted. We should let somebody like this be. There is nothing we can do about it."

When Osono heard the priests whispering various things like this to each other, she said, happily, "Ahh! Could it be such a joyful thing to be crazy?! They have been so kind as to mistake this Hell-bound devotee for a devotee bound for Paradise."

At this point the matter got out of hand for many of the priests. The principal priest changed his countenance and, raising his voice, severely scolded Osono. "There will be no idle chatter . . . make no further mistake about it! The Abbot of the Nagahama Branch Temple is listening from the inside room here. Don't talk nonsense!"

"Of course! A big commotion if an honorable person with enough food to eat understands, but I would be surprised if he *didn't* understand," said Osono, even more happily.

The Abbot, who had heard all of this from the beginning, commanded, "Bring that old woman here!" When Osono quickly appeared before him, the Abbot offered her a cushion to sit on and expressed his respect and admiration by politely saying, "How well you have informed me! I have appealed to Amida, and this is his form! Today, for the first time, true understanding has been revealed in form and made known to me!"

After that, Osono's reputation increased and increased, and finally she came to be seen off and welcomed in a palanquin.

The attitude of scholar-priests who, with ridicule, affronted a rural believer, was no match for the faith of this old woman. And, as for her heterodox (pacification of the mind), on the contrary, there is no orthodox (pacification of the mind) that is different or greater than Osono's understanding.

Furthermore, in this woman, endowed with a firm grip on her faith, anything definable as fear had disappeared. And one is impressed by the fact that she had a prompt and definite answer to any kind of a question.

A certain person expressed his understanding: "I have decided that the one and only thing that I ask for is help."

Osono thereupon said, "If what you ask for is help, then what you don't ask for is, even more so, help. It is the help that is viewed by the asking self as unneeded that is joyful."

When a certain person said, "There's just nothing that can be done about this devotee!" Osono replied, "You, too, have a lot of things that you will receive help for."

One notices that the state of mind of a believer such as this is completely different from that of people in general. The moment of abandoning self-power and the moment of other-power doing extra work are the same moment. Therefore, it is the lamenting, itself, that is the fact of being immediately taken into the light of Amida's compassion.

One day, Osono was walking through the town of Ise, reciting the Nembutsu, as usual. A woman who passed by heard her voice and said to herself, "The old woman is going along reciting empty Nembutsus."

Osono overheard this and said, "Well spoken! Well spoken! Well spoken! It's because I don't know where to find a virtuous teacher," as she ran after the woman.

The woman thereupon looked back and said, "You don't have to get angry!"

Osono, with great joy, said, "I'm not angry. I want to express my thanks. What would I do if I could be saved by the (merit of the) Nembutsus that come from this old woman's lips?! The empty Nembutsus that come after having been saved are much more joyful. How well you have taught me! How well you have informed me!"

It was said that usually Osono's way of reciting the Nembutsu, when heard from nearby, sounded as if it lacked enthusiasm and thankfulness. A certain person, ridiculing this, criticized her: "Osono, Osono. Your Nembutsus don't even amount to dregs!"

Osono, without being perturbed at all, said, "Thank you. That sermon of yours is something I'm hearing for the first time! What would I do if the Nembutsus that I recite did amount to dregs, or whatever? How thankful, how thankful . . . that they don't amount to dregs! Namu-Amida-Butsu, Namu-Amida-Butsu."

It is called invoking the Buddha, but a Nembutsu in which it is my

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power that does the invoking, how much meaning could it have? It is precisely when all traces of myself have vanished that the light of the Nembutsu will begin to shine. Only when it becomes an empty Nembutsu in which not even dregs remain can it be said to be the true Nembutsu. It is not a matter of myself doing the Nembutsu. Isn't it that we can only begin to call it a Nembutsu when it becomes a mere Nembutsu in which there is no myself nor any remains of myself?

A woman was suffering because she could not attain faith. Osono saw her plight and said to her, "If I were to teach you a secret formula whereby you could definitely pacify your mind, would you be interested in trying it for two or three years?"

The woman said with great joy, "If only it (could pacify my mind), I would do anything!"

Osono thereupon said, "'No objections, no demands' . . . please say those words until two or three years have passed."

The woman happily returned home and repeated the words. After two or three days she came along again and said, "I have done as you said and repeated those words from morning until night for three days, but nothing has happened. I feel as strange as ever inside. Is this state of mind all right?"

Osono said, "No objections, no demands."

The woman said, "But . . . nothing has happened. My mind is the same as always."

Osono thereupon said again, "No objections, no demands."

It is said that at that time the woman became aware, for the first time, that we are received into salvation just as we are, ordinary though that may be. She changed completely. She became extremely cheerful. Osono guided many suffering people with simple words and methods like this.

In this way, her admirers gradually increased, and her reputation spread further and further. She is said to have passed away in her seventies in the Kaei era (1848-1853). She was, then, a person who lived in the latter Tokugawa period, and her name is thus included early in the *Myōkōnin-den*, which was compiled in the Ansei era (1854-1859).

People who live in and are endowed with a deep faith because they live in rural areas and have no particular education are, in praise, called "myōkōnin." Myōkō signifies the white lotus flower, and these believers are thus referred to as being pure like the lotus. Great scholar-

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priests and chief priests of temples are all well and good, but we need to closely examine the fact that the Buddha Dharma is all the more sound and vitally alive among poor, unknown believers.

These myōkōnin include many women devotees. Osono of Tahara is one typical representative. When we look at these people, we have the distinct sense that we are looking at the living Buddha Dharma. As long as Buddhism survives, the words and deeds of the myōkōnin Osono will be remembered throughout the ages.

TRANSLATED BY RON HADLEY