

For copyright reasons, the frontispiece and all other illustrations in this volume have been blacked out. We are in the process of applying for permission to reproduce these illustrations electronically. Once permission is gained, the illustrations will be made available. We apologize for the inconvenience.

The Awakening of Faith in the Myokonin Asahara Saichi

SATŌ TAIRA

IN THE INTRODUCTION of Japanese spirituality to the West, the greatest emphasis has been placed on the dynamic figures of the Zen sect. With their enigmatic words and forceful actions they have made interesting figures of study, a study aided by the vast collection of Zen literature and mystical writings, and by the highly visible profile maintained by the Zen sect throughout Japanese history. Japan has, however, another tradition of deep spirituality, one which represents in many ways an antithesis to the Zen approach. This is the Shin Buddhist tradition of the myokonin, the "wondrous, good people." Writings on them in English have been largely confined to a few articles by D. T. Suzuki, who says:

They are distinguished generally by their good-heartedness, unworldliness, piousness, and lastly by their illiteracy, that is, their not being learned in the lore of their religion and not being at all argumentative about what they believe. . . . they are not intellectually demonstrative, they just go on practicing what they have innerly experienced. When they express themselves at all, they are unaffected, their words come directly from their innermost hearts and refer directly to the truth of their faith.¹

* Adapted from the article "Myōkōnin Asahara Saichi no nyūshin ni kansuru ichikōsatsu: Toku ni sono oya to no kankei o megutte" (The Spiritual Awakening of the Myokonin Asahara Saichi: With Emphasis on Saichi's Relation to His Parents), in *Shinran Kyōgaku*, Volume 39 (November 1981), pp. 56-71.

¹ D. T. Suzuki, *A Miscellany on the Shin Teaching of Buddhism* (Kyoto: Shinshū Ōtaniha Shūmusho, 1949), p. 71.

The simplicity and illiteracy of the myokonin meant, of course, that they seldom attained positions of religious leadership and rarely left records of their spiritual insights. Even within the Shin sect their position has been largely peripheral. Writings on them began to reach the general public only with the work of D. T. Suzuki, who viewed the myokonin as representing one of the purest forms of Japanese spirituality.²

Biographies and other such works did exist prior to this. Such late Edo Period (1603-1867) publications as the *Biographies of Myokonin* and *Further Biographies of Myokonin*³ record the words and deeds of some 150 myokonin, men and women alike, who lived during that era. Other biographies appeared later, principally in the form of booklets devoted to a particular myokonin, such as *The Record of the Way of Life of Shōma (Shōma Arinomama no Ki)*.

These works were compiled by Shin priests on the basis of interviews and secondary reports; they invariably take the form of narratives in the third person, with the compiler's own commentary and interpretation comprising the greater part of the text. This makes it hard to achieve any kind of contact with the living personalities of the myokonin themselves.

For this reason the diaries of Asahara Saichi 浅原才市 (1850-1932) are of particular value, providing a record of the spiritual insights of one deep in this tradition. Saichi was a woodworker who lived in the town of Kobama in Iwami Province, present-day Shimane Prefecture. He was a shipwright until his early fifties, when he changed trades and became a maker of geta (Japanese wooden clogs), a job he continued until his death at 83.⁴

As Saichi sat carving his geta he would note down verses on shavings and scraps of wood (*see illustrations*). They are artless expressions of

² See D. T. Suzuki, *Japanese Spirituality*, translated by Norman Waddell (Tokyo: Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, 1972). At the beginning of his chapter on Saichi, Dr. Suzuki writes, "I first heard of Myokonin Saichi from Professor Nishitani Keiji almost two years ago [in 1943]. . . . Upon reading [his poems] I felt that Japanese spiritual insight was here manifested in its pure form" (p. 177).

³ The former work, *Myōkōnin Den* (Biographies of Myokonin), compiled by Kōsei and Sōjun, and edited by the latter, was published in 5 volumes between 1842 and 1858. *Myōkōnin Den Zokuhen* (Further Biographies of Myokonin), was compiled and edited by Zō-ō, and published in 1850.

THE AWAKENING OF FAITH IN THE MYOKONIN SAICHI

his inner, spiritual life; his very lack of erudition made them, if anything, all the more direct and alive. As these verses accumulated Saichi copied them into grade school notebooks, and they eventually comprised quite a large collection. Entered over a period of seventeen years, from the spring of 1915 until his death early in 1932, they are estimated to number upward of ten thousand. Over 3,500 of these poems were edited by D. T. Suzuki and appear in his *The Collected Poems of Myokonin Asahara Saichi*.⁵ Another 1,600 are found in the two-volume *The Poems of Myokonin Saichi* edited by Kusunoki Kyō.⁶ The Suzuki and Kusunoki editions account for over 5,000 of Saichi's poems, even taking into consideration the duplication of one notebook (notebook 7 in Kusunoki's second volume reproduces notebook 27 of the Suzuki edition). The remaining poems were in some thirty other notebooks in the possession of the Teramoto family, which were unfortunately lost during the Tokyo air raids of World War II. Another ten notebooks or so remain unpublished to date for various reasons. We may estimate, then, that for the period represented by these notebooks, Saichi was composing verses at an average rate of two a day.

Important biographical information on Saichi is provided in Teramoto Edatsu's *My Memories of Asahara Saichi*.⁷ This is an account written by the intimate friend who first introduced Saichi to the world.

This work has until now been the sole source of information on the awakening of faith in Saichi. Because much of it was written nearly 20 years after his death, however, it inevitably contains various errors and embellishments. A valuable source of cross-reference and additional in-

⁴ Ages given in this article are based on the old Japanese system of calculation, in which the first year of life is counted as age one, and the New Year marks the common birthday of everyone in the country. Thus all ages are one or sometimes two years higher than under the Western system.

⁵ D. T. Suzuki, ed., *Myokonin Asahara Saichi Shū* (The Collected Poems of Myokonin Asahara Saichi) (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1968); hereafter referred to as Suzuki, ed., *Collected Poems*.

⁶ Kusunoki Kyō, ed., *Myōkōnin Saichi no Uta* (The Poems of Myokonin Saichi), two volumes (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1949, 1977); hereafter referred to as Kusunoki, ed., *Poems*.

⁷ Teramoto Edatsu, *Asahara Saichi-ō o Kataru* (My Memories of Asahara Saichi) (Tokyo: Chiyoda Jogakuen, 1952); referred to hereafter as Teramoto, *Memories*.

formation has been found in the records of Nehanji,⁸ the family temple of the Asahara household. Much of this material has been used here to fill in details regarding Saichi's life and spiritual development.

This essay examines Saichi's relationship with his parents on the basis of the above documents, in an attempt to reveal something of the process through which Saichi became a myokonin. Due, perhaps, to the influence of the pietistic Edo period biographies, myokonin spirituality has often been stereotyped as a kind of natural religious genius, a product of unusual moral rectitude, or even the result of their very lack of education. Saichi's life, however, demonstrates that the myokonin must, like all people, endure the trials and tribulations of this world; this should help correct the misunderstanding that the myokonin had an inborn capacity to perceive the spiritual dimensions of life.

As an introduction to the religious experience of Saichi, I would first like to give a brief overview of the concept of spiritual development as viewed by Shinran Shōnin (1173-1262), the founder of the Shin Buddhist sect. For Shinran, the path to pure spirituality involves a three-step process of deepening reflection,⁹ by which the practitioner attains to the world of "faith alone."¹⁰

As described in Shinran's chief work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, sincere aspiration begins with the awakening of religious consciousness and the desire for the attainment of Buddhahood through the power of Amida's Name. At the first stage, this takes the form of an ethical, moral desire to practice good and cultivate merit. Here the practice of nembutsu is viewed as one ethical discipline among many, on the same level as all acts of moral good.

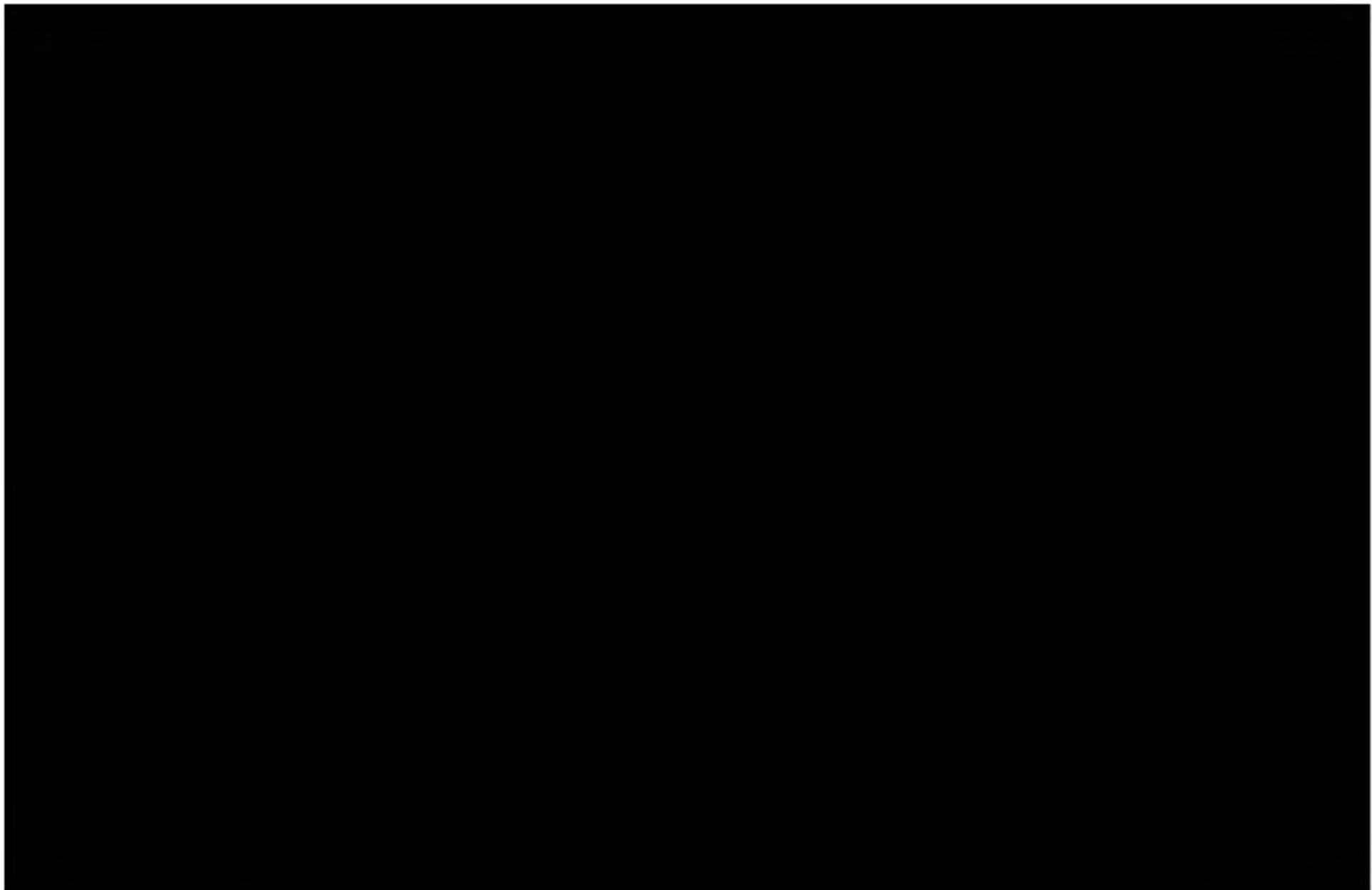
⁸ A Shin sect temple originally located in the town of Ida, Shimane Prefecture, but moved in 1975 to the city of Gōtsu in the same prefecture due to Ida's decline in population.

⁹ See the *sangan tennyū* 三願轉入 section of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*; *Shinshū Shōgyō Zensho*, Vol. II (Kyoto: Ōyagi Kōbundō, 1958), pp. 165-166; hereafter referred to as SSZ.

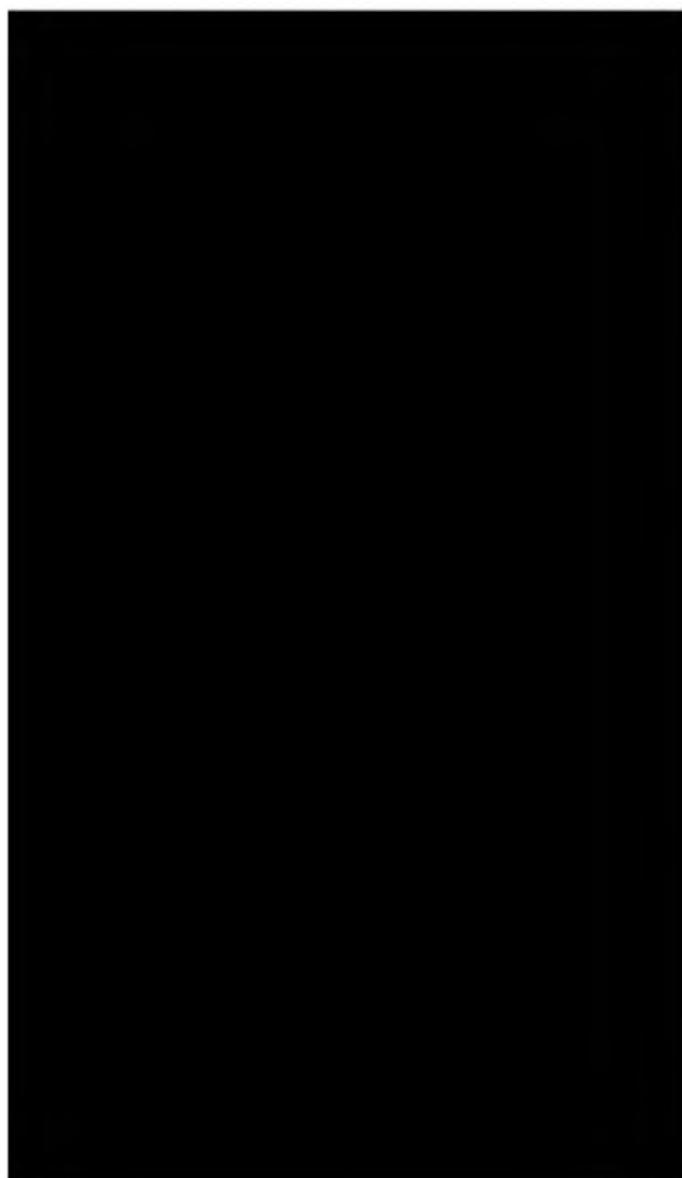
¹⁰ Faith alone: *yuishin* 唯信. Absolute faith in the Original Vow of Amida Buddha. The Original Vow is the 18th of Amida's vows listed in the *Larger Sutra of Eternal Life*, in which Amida pledges not to attain Buddhahood until he has first saved all beings. The implication of this in Shin thought is that, since Amida has in fact attained Buddhahood, consequently all beings are already saved; faith is the complete awakening to this fact.



A profile of Saichi, c. 1920



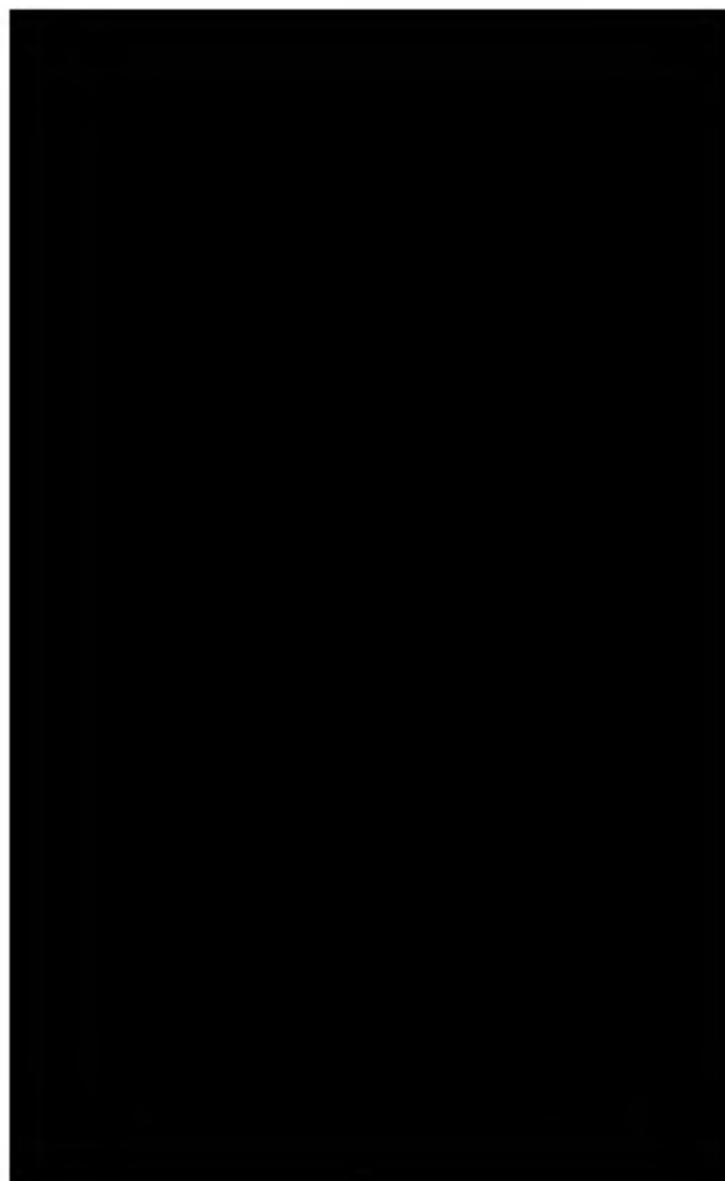
Anrakuji, c. 1922; Saichi is the one standing second from the left with clasped hands



Poem on woodshaving

*Dō de kō de no
Omoni o torare.
Omoni torarete
Raku raku to.*

The heavy burden of pondering
this-and-that
Has been lifted from me.
Released from the heavy burden,
I live free and at ease.



Poem pencilled on wood

*Namu Amida morōte
Tonaeru nembutsu wa,
Ichimi no jihi ga riyaku nari.
Hōsha no nembutsu kore
kara deru zo.
Go-on ureshi ya,
Namu Amida Butsu.*

Chanting "Namu Amida,"
The nembutsu I have been given;
The benefit is the taste of
all-embracing compassion.
The nembutsu of gratitude flows
forth from this!
Such kindness fills me with joy—
Namu Amida Butsu!

THE AWAKENING OF FAITH IN THE MYOKONIN SAICHI

Next comes the stage of single-minded nembutsu, practiced as the ground of all merit and the source of all ethical activities, the supreme good transcending all others. With sole concentration on the nembutsu, the religious fervor of the practitioner reaches a peak.

Shinran, however, criticizes this approach to nembutsu, saying, "These people seek salvation through the power of the Original Vow with minds still bound by moral concepts of good and evil. Such single-mindedness is rooted in self-power."¹¹ Elsewhere he says, "Faith cannot appear in those who take the auspicious Name of the Original Vow to be the root of their own, personal merit."¹² The phrase "still bound by moral concepts of good and evil" means that one holds with the principle of linear cause and effect, believing that pleasure results from good and pain from evil. This way of thinking has yet to transcend the realm of ethical discrimination. "Those who take the auspicious Name of the Original Vow to be the root of their own, personal merit" are not yet free from the attachment to "self-power" found at the base of man's ethical strivings. Here the ethical mind takes what is purely religious, the nembutsu pledged in the Original Vow, and attempts to appropriate it as a personal technique for the attainment of salvation. The practitioner still holds to self-power and has yet to attain the pure heart of faith imparted by the Original Vow.

The final stage on Shinran's path is attained when the practitioner has left behind the predilection to self-power underlying his ethical strivings and enters the world of true faith, trusting his birth in the Pure Land entirely to the nembutsu given us in the Original Vow. At this stage, the believer awakens to the fact that the Buddha's salvation has always been his. With this realization, the nembutsu is transformed from an ethical practice to an expression of gratitude for the compassion of Amida. This is the purity of faith manifested in the spirituality of the myokonin.

Regarding the myokonin, Shinran writes in his *Gathas on the Two Gates of Entering and Leaving the Pure Land*:

An ordinary person, filled with passions, comes to be embraced through relying on the power of the Buddha's vow

¹¹ SSZ, Vol. II, *Kyōgyōshinshō*, p. 158.

¹² SSZ, Vol. II, *Kyōgyōshinshō*, p. 165.

SATŌ

such faith, extremely rare, is that of the myokonin, the most excellent of beings.¹³

Shinran, here as in all his writings, puts primary emphasis on "faith alone." This is especially evident when the quotation above is compared with the sutra and commentary passages which inspired it. The *Meditation Sutra*, one of the three Pure Land Sutras, likens the practitioner of the nembutsu to a white lotus flower, the symbol of enlightenment.¹⁴ In his *Commentary on the Meditation Sutra*, Shan-tao (613-681) praises the practitioner of the nembutsu as a myokonin, *myoko* referring to the "wonderfully beautiful" lotus flower and *nin* to the "person" who practices.¹⁵ In both the sutra and the commentary emphasis is placed on the practice of nembutsu. In contrast, Shinran considers faith in the nembutsu, not its practice, to be of greatest importance. The myokonin is thus the person of pure faith. This dimension of "faith alone" is also evident in the following passage from the *Tannishō*: "For me, Shinran, there is no other choice except to put faith in the words of my good teacher Hōnen, who told me, 'Just say the nembutsu and you will be saved by Amida.'"¹⁶ This Shin Buddhist emphasis on faith in the nembutsu alone provided, I believe, the single necessary factor for the appearance of the myokonin, a phenomenon not seen in other schools of Pure Land Buddhism.

II

Saichi was born in the small village of Kobama on the Japan Sea coast. His childhood was not to be a peaceful one. In 1860, when Saichi was 11 years old, the Asahara household was broken apart by the departure of Saichi's father Yoshirō, who entered a small Buddhist hermitage near the cemetery of Anrakuji Temple in the same village. His subsequent lifestyle was to have a great influence on Saichi's development. Dwelling in poverty and solitude, he embarked on a path of world renunciation he was to continue for the rest of his life. He sup-

¹³ SSZ, Vol. II, *Nyūshutsu Nimon Ge*, p. 484.

¹⁴ SSZ, Vol. I (1957), *Kanmuryōjūkyō*, p. 66.

¹⁵ SSZ, Vol. I, *Kangyōsho*, p. 558.

¹⁶ SSZ, Vol. II, *Tannishō 2*, p. 774.

THE AWAKENING OF FAITH IN THE MYOKONIN SAICHI

ported himself selling flowers gathered in the fields and by helping at nearby Nehanji Temple; with his tattered robe and straw sandals, he was looked down upon as a beggar-monk by the townspeople.

Saichi's father's decision to leave home does not appear to have been altogether sudden or unexpected. He had been ordained at Nehanji at the age of six, receiving the Buddhist name Saikyō, and had lived there as an acolyte until he was 18. During his years as a householder he maintained his ties with that temple as a lay assistant, most likely shaven-headed. Evidence suggests that he always preferred the religious life to the secular; even his marriage seems to have been prompted mostly by his filial duty to continue the Asahara family line.¹⁷

After his departure, his wife returned to her parents' home taking Saichi along with her. She remarried soon after to a man of the same village named Yamamoto Wahei, and it was arranged for Saichi to become a carpenter's apprentice at the home of his paternal grandmother, the Kondō family. Thus Saichi was left homeless and virtually an orphan from a very young age, although ironically both parents continued to live their separate lives in the same village. In this unhappy state of affairs, Saichi completed his apprenticeship and began to work in a shipyard.

As Saichi commenced his career as an ordinary member of society, the otherworldly presence of his father Saikyō must have been a constant source of tension for him. It may well have been in blind reaction to his father's way of life that Saichi began seeking diversion in such pursuits as gambling.

Just as in Shinran's above-mentioned outline of spiritual development, Saichi's awakening to the Buddhist teachings began with the stirrings of moral consciousness. While he was in his early twenties and employed as a carpenter at the Tsunozu shipyards in San'in, Saichi was arrested on a gambling charge. According to Teramoto Edatsu's account, the young police officer in charge of the case gave him such a severe reprimand that he swore he would make an effort to become a

¹⁷ Based on Teramoto, *Memories*, plus much new information found in the records of Nehanji. See the author's article, "Myokonin Asahara Saichi no chichioya Saikyō ni tsuite" (On the *Myokonin* Saichi's Father), in the *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (March 1985).

SATŌ

responsible citizen. In an earnest attempt to keep his promise, he started making the rounds of the Buddhist temples in the area, where he would quietly listen to sermons.

The self-reflection brought on by his arrest resulted in a complete turnabout in the direction of Saichi's life. Until then he had been driven by the pursuit of self-centered desires—what Buddhists call the three evil paths. Once awakened to his moral responsibility, however, he vowed to “become a human being,”¹⁸ and quickly abandoned his former ways to seek a life of moral virtue. By turning to the Buddhist teachings in his search for inner peace, Saichi's decision reflects the influence, if only subconsciously, of his father Saikyō, who at the price of renouncing the world had finally won peace of mind.

In his search for moral truth, Saichi had now progressed beyond the stage of blind reaction evidenced by his earlier gambling activities. He still remained, though, in fundamental opposition to the religious world view of Saikyō. Resting in the Buddha's compassion, Saikyō could renounce the world from a position transcending the duality of good and evil. Saichi, still bound by moral considerations, could only regard the transcendent world view of his father as wholly antagonistic to every ethical and humanistic value he held. To those whose way of thinking is confined to the ethical perspective, the transcendence of ethics can only appear as the denial of ethics. Such individuals regard themselves to be righteous by virtue of their own moral efforts. For Saichi, then, the more earnestly he searched for truth on the conscious level, the more peaked his defiance to his father's religious outlook became.

Saichi, now twenty-five, took a wife named Setsu and settled in Kobama, though his job as a shipmaker entailed frequent trips to other areas. The new household may have offered Saichi an opportunity to start anew, after the bitter experiences of childhood. Thinking it the pious thing to do, he decided to invite his father to live with him and his wife. According to Teramoto, Saichi pleaded with his father to give up the solitary life he had been leading and to join their new household. From Saichi's ethical point of view, this was the highest virtue to which he could aspire in his relationship with his aged parent. The offer did not sit well with Saikyō, though, who flatly refused to con-

¹⁸ As related by Kusunoki in his postscript to *Poems*, Volume 1, p. 243.

THE AWAKENING OF FAITH IN THE MYOKONIN SAICHI

sider it. He spent the rest of his life in the shack-like abode he was accustomed to, and never ventured to live in the home of his son.

This episode was crucial for both of these truth seekers; had Saikyō assented the situation would have been ruinous to both their religious careers. Saikyō refused to let Saichi be complacent with the mere ethical level of existence. The childhood affection that Saichi felt for his father had to be rejected once and for all, along with his conceptions of filial duty. It was such sternness that enabled Saichi's later religious faith to flower.

His father continued to live the same beggar-like existence day after day. In a poem Saichi wrote after faith had awakened in him, he recollects the period and expresses the humiliation he felt at that time:

Saichi's heart is the heart of a demon,
Saichi's heart is a great serpent.
You hoped Father would hurry and die.
You fool, you fool, you utter fool!
How wretched I am! How wretched!
Namu Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu.¹⁹

On January 3, 1891, Saikyō passed away at the age of 83. Saichi was 45 at the time. Their confrontation remained unresolved even as Saikyō breathed his last. Nevertheless, his death must have had a profound influence on Saichi's feelings regarding their relationship. When the object of contention vanishes, the thoughts that gave rise to the contention lose their foundation, and all that remains is the ego which underlaid them. No longer distracted by his father's physical presence, Saichi was forced to consider the true condition of his own spirit. Saichi later wrote:

Father's only bequest:
Namu Amida Butsu.²⁰

From this it is clear that, impressed in Saichi's mind, the figure of his father had merged with the formless Namu Amida Butsu.

¹⁹ Teramoto, *Memories*, p. 91.

²⁰ Teramoto, *Memories*, p. 32. The original notebook containing the poem from which these words came has been lost.

SATŌ

III

With his father's death, Saichi's desire for enlightenment was inflamed. Having realized the futility of attempting to cultivate merit through moral deeds, Saichi's final hope was "Father's only bequest: *Namu Amida Butsu*." Saichi was left with a deep consciousness of guilt by his realization of the resentment he felt toward his father, a resentment occasioned by his own frustrated attempts at ethical self-power, and expressed in his wish that "Father would hurry and die." In this state of desperation, he was equally conscious of the nembutsu as the sole, absolute means to salvation.

Spurred by his guilt, Saichi embarked on the exclusive practice of the Name. For a time, he confined himself to the Nembutsu Samadhi Hall of Gokurakuji, the village's Jōdo sect temple, where he applied himself assiduously to the constant repetition of the Name. Strict religious observance marked his daily life as well. He never failed to perform morning and evening devotions, he attended sermons regularly at local temples, and he even helped with temple affairs. This was the life he led from the time of his father's death until the establishment of his own faith some fifteen years later.

This rigorous devotion was the actualization of a tendency latent in Saichi for quite some time. In the only extant poem of his earlier years, written when he was 31, Saichi says:

What have I learned in these 31 years?
Only a lot of monkey-wisdom.
Giving up my monkey-scheming,
I just recite *Namu Amida Butsu*.²¹

The moral element here is still strong, with nembutsu viewed as a method of ethical training—little of the joy that fills his later verses can be seen.

Saichi had engaged in other devotional activities as well. At the age of 33, he made a three-month pilgrimage to Kinki, Hokuriku, and Shinano to visit the historic sites sacred to Shinran Shōnin. Two years later, in 1880, he took the confirmation ceremony at the Honganji head-

²¹ Found in the records of Nehanji. This poem appears to have been transcribed by someone other than Saichi, as it is not in his hand.

THE AWAKENING OF FAITH IN THE MYOKONIN SAICHI

quarters in Kyoto, receiving the Buddhist name Shaku Shūso. Saichi's wife Setsu also underwent this ceremony in 1891, receiving the name of Shakuni Kōryū.

Saichi's renewed devotion after the death of Saikyō gives some idea of the sincerity with which Saichi sought to live up to the legacy bestowed upon him: "Father's only bequest: Namu Amida Butsu."

Even in the fastness of his stern religious life, however, Saichi's life was not free of incident. Following the common Japanese custom, a husband for Saichi's only daughter Saki was adopted into the household to ensure the continuance of the Asahara family name and to provide support for Saichi and his wife in their final years. This marriage ended in failure, however, as did another to a second adopted husband. Saki finally left the household and married a third time to a man named Umeki Unosuke, with whom she emigrated to Korea in 1902.²²

Left without guarantee of support in old age, Saichi's position was quite insecure. It appears to be about this time that he left the physically demanding work of shipbuilding and turned to geta-making, a more sedentary occupation which he could continue throughout old age.²³ It was probably also about this time that he began receiving frequent instruction from the priest of Anrakuji, Umeda Kenkyō, who was to be his teacher for the rest of Saichi's life.

In the midst of a collapsing world, his personal efforts frustrated, Saichi continued in his earnest search for salvation. His sole guide was the legacy left him by his father, the realization of Namu Amida Butsu. In his search, even his relationship with his wife provided no escape from the utter loneliness he felt:

How wretched this heart, this devil's heart!
Her heart, too, is a devil's heart.
A wretched lot we are,
Snarling at each other every time we meet.
Sure proof I am in hell!
How wretched I am!

²² This information found in the Asahara family records, preserved at the Yunotsu town hall.

²³ See the author's article, "Asahara Saichi no tegami" (A Study of a Newly-discovered Letter by the Myokonin Saichi), in *Shunju*, No. 261 (September 1984), pp. 11-15.

SATŌ

Namu Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu.²⁴

Long years of struggle, of “snarling at each other every time we meet,” must have passed before Saichi could express the humility revealed in the last two lines of this poem, written after his attainment of faith.

In the desperation of his search at this time, it is said that Saichi reached such an impasse that at one point he nailed his home altar shut, declaring, “The difficulty of Amida’s message is too much for me.”²⁵

When Saichi was 59 his mother Sugi passed away. As best we can tell, Saichi’s attainment of faith occurred when he was approaching 60, hence these two events roughly concur. There is no direct evidence linking Saichi’s attainment with his mother’s death, but he was undoubtedly deeply affected by the event. In a poem from one of his later journals he writes:

Father, age 84, borne away to the Pure Land.

Mother, age 83, borne away to the Pure Land.

Should I get there too one day,

We three, parents and child together, will rescue all beings.

Such kindness fills me with joy!

Namu Amida Butsu.²⁶

Saichi’s realization that he had been compassionately embraced by Amida Buddha (referred to as Oya-sama, literally meaning “parent”) coincides with the final severing of his ties with his parents.

It is intriguing to speculate on the exact content of Saichi’s first notebook, now lost, for it would shed much light on the earliest phase of Saichi’s religious transformation. All that is known about it is that it was a plain school notebook, entitled “The First Notebook of a Layman’s Joy in the Dharma” (*Daiichi Hōetsucho Ubasoku*). Fortunately, at least some of its contents are known to us through quotations found in the Teramoto book. Judging from those entries, the poems are not as polished as those of his later years, but they vividly

²⁴ Teramoto, *Memories*, pp. 104-105.

²⁵ An anecdote related to the author by Yamamoto Ine, a native of Saichi’s village.

²⁶ Teramoto, *Memories*, p. 19. Saichi himself gives the age of his father’s death as 84; more accurately, as stated earlier, his father died at age 83.

THE AWAKENING OF FAITH IN THE MYOKONIN SAICHI

convey to us Saichi's state of mind around the time that he embarked on his journey into the world of faith. Among the entries is a poem of unusual length and humility, of which this is one part:

Numberless the ranks of evil men
Yet of all people in the world
My heart is the worst of all.
Though I may not have actually said it in words,
In my heart I wished my father dead.
I wondered why he didn't die.
It's amazing the earth hasn't yet cracked open under me,
This mass of monstrously evil karma. . . .²⁷

A sorrowful tone of confession is detected in these lines. Saichi had accepted his father's bequest, *Namu Amida Butsu*, and made efforts to practice it single-mindedly, but he had failed to realize that his desire to see his father dead implicated him spiritually in the crime of patricide. Till then his attachments to self-power had confined him to the ignorance of ego-centered discrimination, and he remained unaware of his own profound guilt. Without the light that sunders the shroud of ignorance, he could never realize that he was "this mass of monstrously evil karma."

When and from where did this light issue? It had always been present. The light shining upon Saichi was the *Namu Amida Butsu* into which he had poured his life. With the penetration of the light of Dharma, the light of Other Power, into the core of his existence, Saichi was made aware of the monstrously evil karma of one who had wished the death of his own father. With this insight into the true nature of his helplessness, he realized the futility of his reliance on self-power, enabling the absolute compassion of Other Power to come forth. Thus his encounter with Other Power came at the same time as his encounter with his true self. Or rather, in the moment of encounter, both Self and Other Power were fully discovered.

The Japanese word for encounter is *deai* 出合. It literally means "to come out" (*de*) and "to meet" (*ai*). It aptly expresses the nuance that "meeting" can only occur with "coming out" (*ekstasis*), in the sense that true encounter can occur only when one has come out of the world

²⁷ Teramoto, *Memories*, pp. 22-23.

one is the center of. We encounter the true man or the true Dharma only when we leave our self-centered discriminations, our conceptualizations of "self" and "Dharma."

Thus in the true encounter with self, ego-centered duality is left behind and the self becomes self-as-it-is. At the moment of full realization of self-as-it-is, the separation between self and Dharma disappears.

"Meeting" (*ai*) also carries the connotation of a moving together into unity; the encounter with self is the absolute unification of that self which has transcended the duality of ego consciousness. In the encounter of this self with Dharma, the primordial unity of self and Dharma is realized. In this lies the existential actualization of "the identity of opposites" (*coincidentia oppositorum*) and "the self-identity of absolute contradiction" of which the philosophers speak.

This encounter with self brought Saichi to the realization of his "monstrously evil karma." In Shin this is the realization of "the evil man who entrusts himself to Other Power,"²⁸ a term which implies a turning away from the self-centered performance of good to complete dependence on Other Power. Saichi writes:

In Other Power
There is no self-power, no Other Power.
All is Other Power: Namu Amida Butsu.²⁹

"Other Power" in the first line is Saichi's experience of absolute Other Power. In the second line, he alludes to the relative, dualized "Other Power" that stands opposed to "self-power." The true experience of Other Power is of the absolute Other Power that transcends our conceptual thinking—in this there is no discrimination between self and other. "The evil man who entrusts himself to Other Power" discovers his true self in the midst of Other Power, as expressed in the last line, "All is Other Power."

Upon the realization of his true nature as "this mass of monstrously

²⁸ From *Tannishō* 3; SSZ, Vol. II, p. 775. The full context of this phrase is: "The essential intent with which [Amida] made the Vow . . . was the attainment of Buddhahood by the person of evil; hence the evil person who entrusts himself to Other Power is precisely [the one possessed of] the true cause for birth" (Hirota trans., *Tannishō: A Primer*, Kyoto: Ryūkyō University, 1982, p.61).

²⁹ Suzuki, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 174.

THE AWAKENING OF FAITH IN THE MYOKONIN SAICHI

evil karma," Saichi earnestly sought refuge in Other Power. A pure faith in the great compassionate heart of Amida was born in him.

The Parent (Amida) and myself are joined in spirit.
Of course we're joined: self and Other Power are one
[in Namu Amida Butsu].

We often hear about unity,
But there's no unity as perfect as this.³⁰

Nothing is as intimate as Parent and child;
Your spirit and my spirit are together as one.
Namu Amida Butsu has become my soul.³¹

Parent's mind and child's mind,
Between them there is no restraint.
Namu Amida Butsu is both Parent's "Come!"
and child's "Yes!"³²

In all the world there is but one Parent, one child;
Parent and child in Namu Amida Butsu.
Reciting nembutsu full of joy.³³

The number of Saichi's poems celebrating the "parent-child" relationship ("Parent," of course, referring to Amida, and "child" to Saichi) is too great to count. When we become aware of the absolute compassion of Amida Buddha, a compassion which forgives and accepts even that which we would be afraid to show our own flesh-and-blood parents, then we become truly as children and achieve the realm of peace of the Compassionate Parent.

But this parent-child unity is not the unity of one who has never experienced separation. Saichi's realization of himself as a great sinner, one who "wished his father dead," is not the realization of one who has yet to leave his relationship of childish reliance on his parents. It is possible only from a position of full independence.

³⁰ Kusunoki, ed., *Poems*, Vol. I, pp. 132-133.

³¹ Kusunoki, ed., *Poems*, Vol. I, p. 93.

³² Suzuki, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 71.

³³ Suzuki, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 449.

SATŌ

IV

Through his confrontation with his parents, Saichi severed his natural relationship with them and found himself absolutely alone. In that state he encountered the Parent of Great Compassion. The unity expressed in the poem above is, therefore, a unity which has been re-attained after a passage through separation, possible only after a complete severance has taken place. There is a poem which expresses this well:

The Name of the Parent cuts too well,
Too sharp to feel is the Parent's Name.
Not conscious of the borderline between "Namu"
and "Amida Butsu"—
Such is the sharpness of the six-syllable Name.
Self and Other Power are one, through the kindness and
compassion of the Parent.
To this does Saichi surrender.³⁴

This poem brings to mind a line from one of Shan-tao's hymns: "Like a keen sword is the Name of Amida: With one recitation all evil is removed."³⁵ It is likely that Saichi had just heard a sermon on this phrase when he wrote the verse above. Yet there is in his understanding something unique, profound, and subtle. The keen blade of *Namu Amida Butsu* cuts so well that one is unaware that the cut has been made. The cut here is between "Namu" and "Amida Butsu," that is, between the self which supplicates and the object of supplication.

Saichi writes, "Not conscious of the borderline between 'Namu' and 'Amida Butsu'," meaning that these two have been severed with one stroke; "Namu," the self, and "Amida Butsu," Other Power, have been cut in two. In this act, what has actually been cut is the discriminating intellect which stood between "Namu" and "Amida Butsu" trying somehow to force them together: The keen edge of the Name has cut off the attachments of the rationalizing mind to its own self-power. With this severed, "Namu" is just "Namu" and "Amida Butsu" is just "Amida Butsu," and herein lies the realization of the ab-

³⁴ Suzuki, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 303.

³⁵ *SSZ*, Vol. 1, *Hanjusan*, p. 688.

THE AWAKENING OF FAITH IN THE MYOKONIN SAICHI

solite "Namu Amida Butsu" where both self (Namu) and Other Power (Amida Butsu) are one, and at the same time both independent and just as they are. This is the true experience of faith in Shin Buddhism, where self and Other Power are united in the transcendence of attachments to the discriminating mind.

This absolute Namu Amida Butsu appears with the cutting off of the world of discrimination by Namu Amida Butsu. This is the realm of absolute reality expressed in the line, "Not conscious of the borderline between 'Namu' and 'Amida Butsu'." Praising this transcendent realm with the words, "Such is the sharpness of the six-syllable Name," Saichi then returns everything to Amida: "Self is Other Power, through the kindness and compassion of the Parent."

The first statement can be viewed as an exclamation from the world of non-duality, and the second as Saichi's appraisal of this experience after returning to ordinary consciousness. At the moment of his return to the everyday realm of separation, Saichi sees the limited nature of the self before the infinity of Other Power. Saichi's very return to self thus gives rise to a pure faith absolutely passive to Other Power. Making geta in this state of faith, Saichi finds his ordinary life imbued with the workings of the non-dual Namu Amida Butsu.

Saichi's frequent use of the expression "The oneness of self and Other Power—Namu Amida Butsu" is probably due to the influence of the book *Letters (Ofumi)* by the Shin Buddhist priest Rennyō (1415-1499). Saichi studied this volume every day, absorbing its teachings as he held it in his left hand and traced each line with the index finger of his right. Sometimes he noted in the margin, "These words are also for me." In Saichi's copy of this work the pages are rubbed thin where his finger traced along the paper, and a large hole is worn where his left thumb touched the cover.

In the seventh letter of the third section of this book the following passage appears: "The two syllables 'Na-mu' refer to the self which believes in Amida Buddha. The four syllables 'A-mi-da-bu[tsu]' refer to the Other Power of Amida Nyorai which saves all sentient beings. 'Namu Amida Butsu as the oneness of self and Other Power' signifies this meaning."³⁶ Considering Saichi's devoted study of this work, it is only natural that it would exert a profound influence on his poetic ex-

³⁶ SSZ, Vol. III (1941), *Ofumi*, p. 461.

pression. This is evidenced in the following verse:

I want to be friends with Rennyō-sama;
 If we aren't friends the loss is mine.
 If we get along and I can hear his teachings,
 Then I will know the turning point between self-power and
 Other Power.
 With self-power abandoned and Other Power accepted,
 Namu is me and Amida is the Parent.
 The oneness of self and Other Power—Namu Amida Butsu.
 Namu Amida Butsu is Parent and child.³⁷

Here the expression "Parent and child" is used, but this does not refer to a relationship which has yet to experience separation. Expressions such as "no-mind," "non-discrimination," and "the mind of a child" are used to represent the experience of pure spirituality, but these must not be taken to indicate a non-differentiated, formless state. The infantile unity of parent and child needs once to be cut in the pain of separation, and with complete separation comes the moment of true unity.

The unity of emotional dependence before separation is simply another expression of the self-centered world view constructed by the intellect. This type of ego-centered world view inevitably comes to an impasse, and when this impasse reaches its extremity the dependency of the pre-separated state is finally cut off. Herein is achieved the faith of true independence, an independence rooted not in self but in absolute dependence on Other Power.

True faith is the non-discriminating faith attained in the transcendence of the dualism of self-power. Saichi's unity of parent and child is a unity which has passed through the tribulations inherent in the ordinary parent-child relationship, a unity born of a non-dual mind which accepts with simple faith the compassion of the Buddha. In this purity of faith the mind attached to self-centered discrimination is cut off, and one finds unity with Amida and all of existence. To merely remain in the parent-child state of undifferentiated unity is to never escape the primitive religious realm of mythical union, a realm thoroughly transcended by the myōkonin.

³⁷ Suzuki, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 309.

THE AWAKENING OF FAITH IN THE MYOKONIN SAICHI

I would like to conclude with a poem of Saichi's which aptly sums up his religious experience.

Suffering in heart, are you doubtful of Amida's compassion?
That would truly be a great misunderstanding.

The suffering of this evil man becomes a great treasure.

Please understand the point of this teaching.

Namu Amida Butsu is truly mysterious.

What is mysterious is that

Sea, mountains, food, lumber for building houses,

And everything else related to the life of an ordinary man,

All these are an embodiment of Namu Amida Butsu.³⁸

Everyone, please understand this well.

This is the compassion of the Parent.

Such kindness fills me with joy!

Namu Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu!

The Tatagatha possesses a truly mysterious power:

The means to turn Saichi into a Buddha.

Namu Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu!³⁹

TRANSLATED BY THOMAS L. KIRCHNER

³⁸ For Saichi the term "Namu Amida Butsu" takes on diverse meanings. In this case it refers to his experience of Amida Buddha as Dharma-in-itself.

³⁹ Suzuki, ed., *Collected Poems*, pp. 298-299.