

TRACT ON STEADILY HOLDING TO [THE FAITH]

PREFATORY NOTES

This short treatise (*shō*) known as “Shūji”¹ (literally, “steadily holding to” or “holding on”) is a compilation by Kakunyo of Shinran’s sayings on the Shin teaching. At the time of Kakunyo (1270–1351) who was the great grandson of Shinran, divergent views prevailed concerning the interpretation of the doctrine of Rebirth by Nembutsu. Wishing to hold up against the prevailing heterodoxies the view which he learned as orthodox from his predecessors, he selected five topics, on four of which the founder’s views are quoted while on the remaining one the compiler expresses himself. These selections were given to Gwanchi, of the province of Hidachi, at whose request in fact they were selected. The author wants to see all his readers hold on faithfully to the founder’s teaching as stated in this tract. Hence the title “Tract on Steadily Holding to [the Faith as held by the Holy Master of the Hongwanji],” that is, by Shinran Shōnin.

The following will be found helpful for a better understanding of the text.

According to the Jōdo teaching, the Buddha accompanied by a host of Bodhisattvas comes to greet his devotees to the Land of Purity and Happiness when they are about to pass away. Therefore, thoughts they may cherish at “the last moment” of death have a deciding influence over their future course of existence. If they cherish wrong thoughts they are bound for hell, but if they have the right kind of thoughts they will surely see the holy host appearing among the purple-coloured clouds to take them up to Heaven. This is the belief entertained by followers of the Jiriki (self-

¹ 執持鈔

power) school. Those of the Tariki (other-power), on the other hand, hold that what is most efficient as the cause of rebirth in the Pure Land is to have the right thought even for once in their "ordinary hours," that is, while they are actively living, which ensures their joining the "order of steadfastness." When this joining takes place, they are assured of rebirth in the Pure Land, hence of enlightenment, no matter what thoughts they may have at the last hour of death. We can, according to them, never be sure of our thoughts while we are at the point of death, for we may die in agony with no time for recollection and mental adjustment. What conditions the rebirth is not the thought we may happen to hold at the last moment of death, but the right one awakened in our ordinary moments of life. This means that the rebirth is a matter of faith and not of merit accumulated by good works. Have a faith thoroughly established in the Original Vow of Amida and he will see to it that we are reborn in his Pure Land when this earthly life comes to an end. But as long as we rely on the merit of good deeds performed by our "self-power," which is always found limited in every way, we can never be sure of attaining our object. Work cannot in its nature be "the efficient cause" of rebirth in Amida's Land. "The efficient cause" comes from Amida, and without our being supplied with it by his grace, we are left helpless in our aspirations. The Name, "Namu-amida-butsu," is "the efficient cause" supplied by Amida for our rebirth in his Land; therefore, by cultivating faith in him and calling his Name, the devotees are ushered into the "order of steadfastness," whereby they have the assurance of rebirth or Nirvana. (In the Jōdo teaching generally, Nirvana is used in the sense of enlightenment. Rebirth and Nirvana and Enlightenment are synonyms.)

The idea of merit-transference, we must know, is really at the bottom of the whole system of thought which makes up the teaching of Shin as distinguished from the Jōdo.

All the merit Amida has accumulated for innumerable eons by his good and unselfish deeds is vowed by him to be transferred on to all sentient beings so that the latter, however evil-minded and crime-committing and deficient in true wisdom, will be thereby directed towards the Pure Land. If they were to rely upon their own resources, they would never be delivered from the whirlpool of birth-and-death because they are by nature too limited in knowledge and virtue to achieve their own final emancipation. Amida as Eternal Life and Infinite Light turns all his wisdom and love and virtue towards all sentient beings and causes them to look up to him and awaken a faith in their hearts which assures them of being reborn into his Land of Purity. The whole mechanism of rebirth, or salvation to use Christian terminology, is set to work when the devotee utters even for once from the very depths of his being—that is, moved by the other-power of Amida, the miraculous phrase, “*Namu-amida-butsu*,” which vibrates with Amida’s transcendental wisdom and all-embracing love.

THE TEXT

1

The Holy Master of the Hongwanji said:

The Welcoming Buddha¹ is meant for those who believe in Rebirth by Works, because they are devotees of self-power. To wait for the Last Moment, to rely upon the Welcoming Buddha—this is said of those who believe in Rebirth by virtue of Works. As to those devotees [of other-power] who cherish a true believing heart, they abide with the Order of Steadfastness,² because of [Amida’s] all-

¹ This refers to the Jōdo belief as stated in the Prefatory Notes that the Buddha with a host of Bodhisattvas appears before the devotee when he is at the point of death, in order to welcome him to the Land of Purity and Happiness.

² This is the stage where the faith is firmly established with no possible regression. It is reached while in this life and is the assurance

embracing Light from which no beings are excluded. And as they abide with the Order of Steadfastness, they are sure of Nirvana. There is no need for them to wait for the Last Moment, nor for the Welcoming Buddha: this is the idea of the Eighteenth Vow.¹ To wait for the Last Moment, to rely upon the Welcoming Buddha—this is the idea of the Nineteenth Vow² in which Rebirth by Works is promised.

2

Further he said:

This self who is unable to distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, who has no claim even for little deeds of love and compassion, and yet who is willing just for name and gain to pose as teacher—[how shameful!]. What is of the foremost importance for one who wishes to be reborn in the Pure Land is a believing heart—and all other things are of no concern whatever. Rebirth is the greatest event of life and is not the matter for the ordinary man to achieve by himself, it is altogether to be left in the hands of Amida. Not only we ignorant beings but even Bodhisattvas, included of Rebirth in the Pure Land when the present span of life comes to an end. In the *Wasan* we read:

Any one who obtains the true believing heart
Instantly abides with the Order of Steadfastness [in this life],
If he is thus qualified to abide in the condition of no-retro-
gression

He is firmly assured of attaining Nirvana [in the Pure Land].

¹ The Eighteenth Vow is as follows:

"If after my obtaining Buddhahood all beings in the ten quarters should not desire in sincerity and trustfulness to be born in my country, and if they should not be born by only thinking of me for ten times, except those who have committed the five grave offences and those who are abusive of the true Dharma, may I not attain the Highest Enlightenment."

² The Nineteenth Vow is as follows:

"If after my obtaining Buddhahood all beings in the ten quarters awakening their thoughts to enlightenment and practising all deeds of merit should cherish the desire in sincerity to be born in my country and if I should not, surrounded by a large company, appear before them at the time of their death, may I not attain the Highest Enlightenment."

ing Maitreya of one more birth, cannot measure the incomprehensible wisdom of the Buddha. How can we then of little wisdom measure it? I repeat most emphatically that [the matter of Rebirth] is to be entirely left with Amida's Vow. [Those who take to this view] are known as the Other-power devotees in whom the awakening of a believing heart has taken place.

Therefore, as regards myself I have no idea as to my destiny whether I am bound for the Pure Land or for hell. According to my late master (that is, Hōnen Shōnin, of Kurodani), "You just follow me wherever I may be." This being what I have been told by him, I am ready to go wherever he is bound for—even for hell be it. If I did not happen to see my good master in this life, I, ignorant as I am, may not know where else to go but to hell. But being instructed by the holy master I have been enabled to hear Amida's Original Vow and to understand the reason of His all-embracing Light from which no beings are excluded. Thus to be detached from birth-and-death—which is difficult, and to be assured of Rebirth in the Pure Land—which is also difficult: this is most certainly not due to my power. Even if my holy master deceived me as to trusting in Amida's Buddha-wisdom and reciting the Nembutsu—which might really be the deed for hell but which he made me think to be the efficient cause of my Rebirth in the Pure Land, and even if I should thereby fall into hell, I would have no regret whatever.

The reason is: if there were no chance at all for me to see my clear-sighted master, my destination would decidedly have been no other place than the evil path. But if I, deceived by my good master, should fall into the evil path, I would not be all by myself, I would have my master with me. My destination after all may be hell, but inasmuch as I have made up my mind to follow my late holy master wherever he is bound for, whether it be for a good existence or for an evil one, I have no choice of my own.

[Comments Kakunyo] "This is the attitude of mind assured by the other-power devotee who has given up the self-power faith."

3

Further, he said:

The monk of Kōmyōji (that is, Zendō¹) comments on the significance of the Eighteenth Vow dealing with Rebirth² through the Nembutsu³ as is given in the *Dai-muryōju-kyō*:⁴ "There are no beings, good or bad, who are reborn [in the Pure Land] without riding on Amida-Buddha's Great Vow which functions as the most efficient agency [for the event of Rebirth]." The idea is: however good a man may be, he is incapable, with all his deeds of goodness, of effecting his Rebirth in Amida's Land of Recompense. Much less so with bad men. Except for the three (or four) evil paths of existence, where else can their evil deeds bear fruit? How can these be the cause of Rebirth in the Land of Recompense? Being so, good deeds are of no effect and evil deeds of no hindrance [as regards the Rebirth]. Even the Rebirth of good men is impossible without being helped by Amida's specific Vow issuing from His great love and compassion which is not at all of this world.

As regards the Rebirth of bad men, they have really no reason to hope for the Land of Recompense which is ruled by the Buddha of Recompense [that is, Amida]. But in order to demonstrate the incomprehensible power of Buddha-wisdom, Amida meditated on the matter for five

¹ 善導 (618-681). He was a great advocate of the Pure Land doctrine in the T'ang dynasty and chosen by Shinran Shōnin as one of the seven great fathers of Shin Buddhism.

² 往生: it literally means "to go and be born."

³ Nembutsu, 念佛, literally means "thinking of the Buddha," that is, of Amida. In this case it is to pronounce the Name of Amida, i.e., to recite "Namu-amida-butsu," believing in the efficacy of his Original Vow.

⁴ 大無量壽經, that is, the *Larger Sukhāvati-vyūha Sūtra*.

long kaplas and practised a life [of love and compassion] for an infinite number of kaplas for the sake of evil-minded beings, who have no other abode than the six paths of existence¹ or the four forms of birth², and who thus for ever have no opportunity whatever for emancipation. As His Vow is thus specifically meant for them, they need not feel humiliated because of their evil karma.

Therefore, unless you lose yourself in your reverential trust in Amida's Buddha-wisdom, how can your evil nature which is in you be the cause of your Rebirth in the Pure Land? The most certain thing is that, influenced by various evil conditions such as the ten evil deeds³ [especially the first four of them], the five grave offences,⁴ or acts committed against the Dharma, you are to sink into the three evil paths or to suffer the eight kinds of calamity.⁵ Being so, how can [evil karma] be of any other use?

Thus we see that as good is not the seed of Rebirth

¹ The six paths of existence are: hells, the world of hungry ghosts, the animal world, the world of fighting demons, the human world, and heavens.

² The four forms of birth are: those born from a womb, the egg-born, the moisture-born, and those that come into existence through transformation.

³ The ten evil deeds are: destroying life, theft, adultery, lying, talking nonsense, speaking evil of others, being double-tongued, greed, anger, and irrationality. The first four of these are especially grave, so they are called *shijū* (四重) "four grave", or *pārājika* (波羅夷), meaning "four heinous evil deeds."

⁴ The five grave offences are: patricide, matricide, arhat-murdering, causing dissension in the Brotherhood, and causing the Buddha's body to bleed.

⁵ The eight kinds of calamity are: (1) to be born in Hells, (2) in the animal world, (3) in the world of hungry ghosts—these three paths of existence are called "the three evil paths" wherein one can not hear the Dharma on account of severe pains and sufferings; (4) to be born in the Heaven of Longevity, (5) in the Uttarakuru—both of these are the worlds wherein one can enjoy much pleasure and longevity, but because of these sensual pleasures he has no chance to hear the Dharma, (6) to be blind, deaf, and dumb, (7) to be secularly wise, (8) to be born before the birth of and after the death of Buddha Sakyamuni.

in the Land of Bliss it is not needed for this purpose; so with evil, as aforesaid, [it is no hindrance to our Rebirth in the Pure Land]. That we are good or bad is due to our nature [as beings of this world]; and as to the other world there is no hope whatever in us except for our taking refuge in the Other-power. For this reason, Zendō's commentary reads: the Rebirth in the Pure Land of beings good or bad finds its efficient cause in Amida's Great Vow. "That there is no Rebirth without the Vow efficiently working"—this means that there is nothing surpassing Amida's Great Vow [as the efficient cause of Rebirth].

4

Further, he said:

We talk about cause and condition in regard to the Light and Name. According to the Twelfth¹ of the Forty-eight Vows made by Amida, He vowed that His Light might be boundless. This is meant to embrace all beings who are the Nembutsu devotees. This Vow is fulfilled and His Light which knows no hindrance anywhere now illuminates all the worlds numberless as atoms in the ten quarters, shining for ever on the evil passions and evil deeds of all beings. When, coming in contact with this Light which serves as the condition [of Rebirth] for them, they feel the darkness of Ignorance gradually fading in them and are ready to see the seed of good karma germinate, they hear the Name which is the efficient cause of Rebirth in the Land of Recompense as is stated in the Eighteenth Vow which deals with Rebirth through the Nembutsu. We know by this that the holding of the Name is not of self-power but solely due to the energising effect of the Light. Therefore, we read that the Light as condition prepares the ground for the Name as cause to germinate.

¹ The Twelfth Vow is as follows: "If after my obtaining Buddhahood my light should be limited and not be able at least to illumine hundreds of thousands of kotis of Buddha-countries, may I not attain the Highest Enlightenment."

This is the reason why the master (Zendō) declares that "By virtue of the Light and the Name, Amida embraces all beings when their believing heart is awakened and they seek for Rebirth." "Their believing heart is awakened and they seek for Rebirth"—by this it is meant that the Light and the Name are like the parents who are bent on bringing up their child; but so long as there is no child to issue, there are no parents claiming the name; it is only when there is a child that they deserve the name of father and mother. In a similar way the Light is likened to motherhood and the Name to fatherhood, but there must be a seed of believing heart which comes out of them destined for Rebirth in the Land of Recompense. So, when a believing heart is awakened and Rebirth in the Pure Land is desired, the Name is recited and the Light embraces the devotee. If there were no devotees who would awaken a believing heart in the Name, Amida with His Vow to embrace all beings without a single exception would have to remain helpless. If Amida did not make His Vow to embrace all beings without a single exception, how could His devotees see their desire for Rebirth in the Pure Land fulfilled? For this reason [we have this chain of dependence completed]: The Original Vow and the Name, the Name and the Original Vow, the Original Vow and the devotee, the devotee and the Original Vow.

We read in the *Kyō-gyō-shin-shō* compiled by the Holy Master of the Hongwanji in which the author comments [on the idea expounded here]: "If not for the Name as a kindhearted father, the generating cause is wanting; if not for the Light as a loving mother, the condition for birth is insufficient: the Light as mother and the Name as father are, however, external conditions while the functioning-consciousness [or the mind] with the true right faith is the inner cause: and when the inner cause and the external conditions are properly united, the devotee attains the true body worthy of the Land of Recompense."

To illustrate this by analogy: when the sun is up only halfway around Mt. Sumeru, the other side of the mountain is well illuminated, but this side is still in the dark. When it approaches this side southwardly coming around from the other side, the night is dispersed. It is evident that the morning dawns with the sun rising. People generally imagine that the morning first dawns and then the sun rises—which is quite contrary to the statement I have just made. As the illumining rays of the sunlight of Amida-Buddha prevail, the darkness of the long night of Ignorance¹ is dispelled, whereby we take hold of the gem of the Name which is the efficient cause of Rebirth in the Land of Happiness.

5

My statement is:

Do not feel humiliated because of your being poorly endowed, for the Buddha is great love knowing how to save inferior beings. Do not cherish any doubt [as to Rebirth] because of your tendency to be remiss in reciting the Nembutsu, for in the sutra we have a passage beginning with "Even with one thought" The Buddha speaks no falsehood, and how can the Original Vow fail? That the Name is known as the right definite act [of Rebirth] is because when one relies upon the incomprehensible power of the Buddha, the work for Rebirth is definitely completed. If even when a man recites the Name through the power of Amida's Original Vow his Rebirth is a matter of indefinite

¹ 無明 (*avidya*).

² The passage is found in the *Larger Sukhāvati-vyūha*, which runs as follows: "All sentient beings, upon hearing the Name [of Amida], would awake a believing heart, *even with one thought* and rejoice in it. [Amida], with all the sincerity of heart, has transferred [all his own merit on all beings], wherefore those who desire to be reborn in his country would instantly be assured of their Rebirth and abide in the condition of no-retrogression, barring only those who have committed the five deadly sins and those who have abused the Good Law."

certainty; the Name is not to be known as the right definite act [of Rebirth]. [But that the Name is the efficient cause of Rebirth is illustrated in my own case. For] I [as an other-power devotee] am already the one who firmly holds on the Name as is given in the Original Vow; and it is now only left to me to rejoice at the completion of the work for Rebirth. It goes without saying, therefore, that my Rebirth is assured even when I do not again recite the Name at the time of my death.

As I observe, there are infinite varieties of karma which determine conditions of all beings; and so are their conditions of death: some die of disease, some die under the sword, some die drowned in water, some die burned by fire, some die while in sleep, some die from intoxication; these are all due to their past karma and there is no escape for them. When they meet death in these various ways, it is quite possible for them to cherish a wrong thought for which they were not prepared; how could they as ordinary mortals at that moment awaken the right thought of reciting the Name or the desire of being reborn in the Pure Land? If what they expected to take place all along in their ordinary moments fails, their hope for Rebirth will entirely be nullified. The attainment of Rebirth is therefore to be settled by One Thought¹ which they can hold in their ordi-

¹ "One Thought" is a momentous term in the philosophy of Shin and Jōdo. Its Sanskrit original is *eka-kshana* meaning "one instant" or "one moment." As we say in English "quick as thought" or "quick as a flash," "one thought" represents in terms of time the shortest possible duration, which is to say, one instant. The one instant of faith-establishment is the moment when Amida's Eternal Life cuts crosswise the flow of birth-and-death, or when his Infinite Light flashes into the darkening succession of love and hate which is experienced by our relative consciousness. This event takes place in "one thought" and is never repeated, and therefore is known here as "the last moment," "the end of this world," and I would say, it is even the coming into the presence of Amida. This moment of "One Thought" is the one in our life most deeply impregnated with meaning, and for that reason must come to us in our "ordinary moments of life" and not wait for "the last moment" in its relative sense.

nary moments. If their minds are in a state of uncertainty in their ordinary moments, Rebirth will be impossible for them. When in accordance with the words of a good master they awaken in their ordinary moments One Thought of trust in Amida, let this be regarded as the last moment, the end of this world, for them.

[How is it that the holding of the Name, "Namu-amida-butsu"¹ is the efficient cause of Rebirth?] *Namu* means "to trust," and to trust [in Amida] is for the sake of attaining Rebirth, it is also the desire [for Rebirth]. Further, as this desire is possible because of the truth that every deed and every good [performed by Amida] is transformed into the efficient cause of Rebirth for His devotees, it again means merit-transference.² When the trusting heart on the part of the devotee and its object of trust which is the Buddhawisdom of Amida are in correspondence, all deeds of devotion practised by Amida while in His stage of discipleship and all meritorious virtues resulting therefrom are in the most exhaustive manner absorbed in the Name, which thus becomes for all beings in the ten quarters the efficient cause of their Rebirth. Hence [Zendō's] comment: "Amida is no other than the Act," [that is, the Name is the efficient cause of Rebirth].

When a murderous deed is committed, this is surely the sufficient cause for the offender to go to hell; he may not

¹ "Namu-amida-butsu" (南無阿彌陀佛) is the transliteration of the Sanskrit, *namo'mitabhaya buddhaya*. *Namo* or *Namas*(= *namu*) means "adoration" or "salutation," and *amitabhaya buddhaya* means "to the Buddha of Infinite Light." So "adoration (or salutation) to the Buddha of Infinite Light" is the meaning of "Namu-amida-butsu." But in Shin the full form of "Namu-amida-butsu" is regarded as the Name of the Buddha Amida, because Amida perfected his Name as "Namu-amida-butsu" as embodying his great Vow which expresses his love for all sentient beings. Amida-butsu (阿彌陀佛) causes us to trust (= *namu*, 南無) Him as our saviour. "Namu" and "Amidabutsu" are therefore essentially inseparable, being two phases of his saving power. The idea of "Namu-amida-butsu" is not "Ask and you shall be given," but "to be caused to ask and be given."

² 廻向 (*pariṇāmanā*).

repeat such deed at his last moment; but as long as his karma committed in his ordinary moments is active, hell is the certain destination for him. It is the same with the Nembutsu: if a man believing in the Original Vow recites the Nembutsu, he should know that his Rebirth at that moment becomes a matter of utmost certainty.

[According to the postscript, this was written in 1326 when the author was fifty-seven years old, and copied for Gwanchi-bō of Hidachi province in 1340 when his age was seventy-one. He adds that all this is meant for the benefit of all beings.]