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Shinran's 'Practice'. The Shin Buddhist Turn in the Buddhist Understanding of Practice

Abstract

In Buddhism, the fundamental question regarding practice is what practice will allow one to overcome the suffering of *samsara*. Shinran offered a unique answer to that question based on the transformation of his understanding of Buddhism brought about through his encounter with Hōnen, a Buddhist thinker who advocated exclusively practicing the recitation of the *nenbutsu*. This paper aims to clarify the significance and originality of Shinran's grasp of what that practice is through a careful reading of his works.

Shinran holds that his encounter with Hōnen's teaching led him to shift from the self-power practices of the Path of Sages to the Other Power of the Pure Land tradition. After describing the traditional view of practice laid out in the Path of Sages, which aims to attain enlightenment through severing one's mental afflictions and developing wisdom through meditative concentration, I discuss Hōnen's understanding of the *nenbutsu* as an Other Power practice selected in Amida's original vow. From Hōnen's perspective, people are incapable bringing about the sort of transformation that was sought after through those traditional, self-power practices such as keeping precepts and engaging in mediation. Rather than engaging in such an impossible endeavor, Hōnen advocated reliance on the compassionate action of Amida's original vow, which promised to bring all who relied on it to ultimate enlightenment.

Then I discuss how Shinran developed Hōnen's ideas to shift the significance of practice to one entirely based on Other Power faith. Shinran does not focus on the act of vocal recitation of the *nenbutsu*, but instead emphasizes the importance of the experience of hearing the significance of the name of Amida as explained by awakened predecessors and the arising of faith toward that message. From Shinran's perspective, the name of Amida represents the virtues of true suchness that have already been fully realized entirely independent of the actions or intentions of the individual practitioner. For Shinran, recognizing and accepting the virtues that are shown to exist through the Amida's name is the key to being liberated from *samsara* and is possible in an instant of insight that is available to anyone regardless of their abilities or actions.

Through these considerations, this paper shows how Shinran's emphasis of Other Power faith is an essential element of his clarification of the True Pure Land Buddhism as the consummation of Mahayana Buddhism.

Keywords: Shinran, Hōnen, *nenbutsu*, self power, Path of Sages, Other Power, Pure Land tradition, faith, vocal recitation of the *nenbutsu*, True Pure Land Buddhism

Introduction

In Buddhism's long history, 'practice' (*gyō* 行) has been discussed in a variety of ways. At the root of these discussions is the question of what practice will allow one to transcend the suffering of birth and death.

This chapter focuses on the understanding of practice found in the thought of Shinran, who lived in medieval Japan and had a large influence on Japanese Buddhism by clarifying and systematizing the true essence of the Pure Land teachings as Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗, or Shin Buddhism. A decisive event in Shinran's life was when he turned from the teachings of the self-power Path of the Sages (*jiriki shōdō mon* 自力聖道門) to Other Power Pure Land teachings (*tariki jōdo mon* 他力浄土門). This opened for him a way of living that 'discard[s] sundry practices and [takes] refuge in the Original Vow [*hongan* 本願].'¹ This was a decisive turn away from the understanding of practice upon which the former kind of Buddhism was premised. Shinran made clear the meaning of Buddhist practice based on the power of the Original Vow, that is, 'Other Power.'

Drawing from his twenty years of religious training and study, Shinran declared that practice based on self-power cannot be true practice. I will therefore first describe Shinran's perspective on the understanding of practice that had been seen as self-evident before him. Then, I will examine the views of Shinran's teacher Hōnen, which led Shinran to see calling the name of Amida Buddha (*shōmyō nenbutsu* 称名念仏) as true practice. Then, based on the above, I will make clear the nature of Shinran's own understanding of practice.

Shinran's Perspective on Practice

A Buddhist seeks to discover how they themselves can leave behind birth and death, and, if they can discover such a path, to understand concretely its nature. Therefore, when pursuing the Buddhist way, one is confronted with the unavoidable question of how to understand oneself, as well as how to understand the problems of humanity that become apparent through this seeking. Shinran understood himself as a 'foolish being' (*bonbu* 凡夫). He would repeatedly say this.

Foolish beings: none other than ourselves [...]

¹ *The Collected Works of Shinran* 1997: 290. Slightly modified.

Foolish beings: as expressed in the parable of the two rivers of water and fire, we are full of ignorance and blind passion. Our desires are countless, and anger, wrath, jealousy, and envy are overwhelming, arising without pause; to the very last moment of life they do not cease, or disappear, or exhaust themselves.²

Foolish beings are those who until the moment of death live with continually arising, never perishing ignorance and blind passions (or mental afflictions). Shinran's above words show that he held that losing sight of this truth is to deceive and misperceive oneself. This is Shinran's perspective regarding himself as well as humans in general.

When discussing Shinran's view of humans, we should also mention the thirteenth section of the *Tannishō* 歎異抄:

If the karmic cause so prompts us, we will commit any kind of act.³

Shinran states that a human can commit any kind of act due to the deeds of themselves and many others, the results of these deeds, and various environments and conditions. In the background to this statement is Shinran's experience of having been exiled as a criminal. These words are also deeply related to his way of life: he walked alongside those at the lowest levels of society who, stepped on and kicked as if they were stones, were forced to live lives in which people took no interest. Shinran saw them as brethren: 'we, who are like stones and tiles and pebbles.'⁴

Based on the above, we could say that Shinran saw 'humans' as beings living with two decisive limitations. First, they are unable to cut off blind passions, and, second, they are tossed around and bound by the results of their actions as well as the various environments and conditions they find themselves in. In his Buddhist search, Shinran exhaustively sought a Buddhist path that would bring such beings beyond suffering and confusion.

By now, Shinran's perspective on practice is surely clear. He was concerned with how practice on the Buddhist path could be opened to those who have accepted the fact that they cannot run away from the reality of being a foolish person. This can be neither a practice that is predicated on elimination of blind passions as an absolute necessity, nor a practice that holds the adjustment of individual circumstances and experiences, or the development of individual abilities to be a necessary condition for liberation. An eye to the existential state of humans as foolish beings made him acutely question the nature of practice in Buddhism.

² *The Collected Works of Shinran* 1997: 488.

³ *The Collected Works of Shinran* 1997: 671.

⁴ *The Collected Works of Shinran* 1997: 459.

While Shinran studied and trained for twenty years on Mt. Hiei, pursuing the Path of Sages that aims to cut off delusion and realize awakening, at the age of twenty-nine he left this behind and met his lifelong teacher Hōnen. He then put his trust in the Other Power Buddhist path that is based on the Original Vow of Amida Buddha. In his magnum opus *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証, he declares that the *Larger Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life* (*Bussetsu muryō jukyō* 仏説無量寿經) is the true teaching of Buddhism, and states the following.

To reveal the true teaching: It is the *Larger Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*. The central purport of this sutra is that Amida, by establishing the incomparable Vows, has opened wide the dharma-storehouse, and full of compassion for small, foolish beings, selects and bestows the treasure of virtues. [The sutra further reveals that] Śākyamuni appeared in this world and expounded the teachings of the way to enlightenment, seeking to save the multitudes of living beings by blessing them with this benefit that is true and real.

Here Shinran says that the object of the true teachings found in the *Larger Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life* are ‘small, foolish beings’ (*bonshō* 凡小), or the ‘multitudes of living beings’ (*gunmō* 群萌). These words clearly express the nature of human beings that Shinran was concerned with and that we have described above. This clearly shows that for him encountering the ‘true teaching’ is to encounter the Buddhist path that is realized while living as a foolish being. Therefore, the various practices that had been seen before Shinran as a necessary part of the Path of the Sages completely lose their meaning for those who have realized that they are foolish beings. This is because, after facing the fact that they cannot cut off blind passions and are bound by their karma, to continue to hope for results on the Buddhist path via these practices is not only an attempt to explain away the existential state of humans, but also involves continuing to dream about an unrealizable Buddhahood.

Sentient beings, having long followed the Path of Sages—
The accommodated and temporary teachings that are provisional means—
Have been transmigrating in various forms of existence;

So, take refuge in the One Vehicle of the compassionate Vow.⁵

Here we can see Shinran’s perspective. It would lead him to both make thoroughly clear the meaning of a Buddhist practice completely different than the Path of the Sages and find it necessary to consider the meaning of the word ‘practice’ itself.

⁵ *The Collected Works of Shinran* 1997: 344.

Shinran's Teacher Hōnen and His Understanding of Practice

For Shinran, making clear the meaning of practice on the Buddhist path was accompanied by a fundamental question: what is practice for foolish beings? A decisive event in his exploration of practice that would lead him to turn from the self-power teachings of the Path of the Sages to the Other Power teachings of the Pure Land was his encounter with the teaching of the sole practice of reciting the Buddha's name upon meeting his teacher Hōnen. Therefore, here I want to explore Hōnen's understanding of practice.

Hōnen established the Pure Land school by breaking away from the teachings of Path of the Sages that had been passed down in Japan until his time. These teachings held that by cutting off blind passions one could achieve the awakening of nirvana. Like Shinran, Hōnen sought a Buddhist path that he, himself, could pursue, but in the course of that seeking he realized not only that he was a confused 'foolish being' who engages in the ten unwholesome behaviors (*jūaku* 十惡) and is unable to cut off blind passions, but also that on the Path of the Sages there was no way he could leave behind birth and death because such a path is premised on the elimination of blind passions. After years of struggle, he encountered in the Pure Land teachings a path to Buddhahood on which he could stand.

Hōnen makes clear that practice on the Buddhist path for foolish beings is the *nenbutsu*, the 'practice chosen in the Original Vow.' Hōnen describes this practice as follows in the third chapter of his magnum opus, *Senchaku hongan nenbutsu shū* 選択本願念仏集.

Amida Tathāgata, in the distant past when he was the Hōzō Bodhisattva, moved with impartial compassion and wishing to save all beings universally, did not choose in his Original Vow concerning rebirth the manifold practices, such as making images of the Buddha and building stupas. He chose the single practice of uttering the *nenbutsu* in that Original Vow.⁶

Hōnen explains that in order to include all sentient beings as the object of the Original Vow, Amida Tathāgata chose not the manifold good practices but solely the *nenbutsu*. Elsewhere Hōnen also states that the significance of the Original Vow lies in it equally bringing all sentient beings to rebirth in the Pure Land (*issai shujō byōdō ōjō* 一切衆生平等往生). He makes clear the reason that the Original Vow does away with the myriad practices and chooses the sole practice of the *nenbutsu* by going back to the Tathāgata's impartial compassion, in other words, his 'mind of the vow' (*ganshin* 願心) that tries to have all sentient beings

⁶ *Senchaku hongan nenbutsu shū* 1997: 37. Slightly modified.

be equally reborn in the Pure Land. In the background of this discovery of the significance of the ‘mind of the Vow,’ lies Hōnen’s encounter with himself as a foolish, ordinary beings as well as his encounter with the teaching of the Original Vow, in which such self-recognition is an essential element. These encounters served as the basis for Hōnen’s choice of the *nenbutsu* as practice. If this is left unclear and the relative difficulty and superiority of various practices are discussed, then one will be unable to escape from a hierarchical way of thinking that holds that the *nenbutsu* is an easy practice for those with inferior spiritual abilities who cannot carry out difficult practices. Furthermore, the meaning of Hōnen establishing the Pure Land school would be left incomplete. Hōnen is confirming that the *nenbutsu* is the practice for foolish beings to leave behind birth and death particularly in the context of correspondence between the teachings and the capacities of human being of his times. In other words, that choice arose in the context of his decisive realization regarding the human capacity for self-liberation and the Dharma of the Original Vow directed toward such human beings.

Hōnen’s elucidation of this *nenbutsu* served as the intellectual background for Shinran’s understanding of practice. Here we should take note of Hōnen’s investigation into the Original Vow that necessitated this understanding of practice, that is, of Amida’s Name (*myōgō* 名号). Hōnen states that in order to have all sentient beings equally be reborn in the Pure Land and transcend suffering and confusion, only the easy practice of the *nenbutsu* was chosen in the Original Vow. At the basis of this understanding of practice is Hōnen’s recognition of the actualization of the great compassion by which Amida Tathāgata equally saves all sentient beings. Shinran, while passing on his teacher’s thought, elucidated practice in the context of the Other Power path in an even more thorough fashion.

Shinran’s Understanding of Practice

Drawing from the thought of Hōnen, which made clear the significance of the *nenbutsu* as the Original Vow’s chosen practice, Shinran states the following regarding practice.

The great practice is to say the Name of the Tathāgata of unhindered light. This practice, embodying all good acts and possessing all roots of virtue, is perfect and most rapid in bringing them to fullness. It is the treasure ocean of virtues that is suchness or true reality. For this reason, it is called great practice.⁷

⁷ *The Collected Works of Shinran* 1997: 13.

Shinran states that reciting the Name is a 'great practice' that is always already making the virtue of suchness complete. At the basis of his understanding is Hōzō Bodhisattva's seventeenth vow, which states that if the buddhas of the innumerable worlds do not praise and recite the Name of Amida Buddha, he will not become a buddha. In other words, buddhas that have perfected improving themselves and bringing benefit to others are the ones who truly understand the meaning of reciting the Name as a great practice and praise it. These buddhas are the ones who recite the name, not ordinary sentient beings. The responsibility of sentient beings is to *listen* to the meaning of the Name of Amida Buddha that is praised and recited by these buddhas. They do not themselves engage in the recitation of the Name as a good practice. Therefore, Shinran's understanding of practice clearly rejects the importance of 'good practices' that are part of the calculating acts of practitioners engaging in practice. This is clearly expressed in the *Tannishō* as well: 'The *nenbutsu*, for its practitioners, is not a practice or a good act.'⁸ This is a very important part of Shinran's understanding of practice.

If this is the case, what did Shinran see as the meaning of the *nenbutsu*? He states the following regarding *Namu Amida Butsu* 南無阿彌陀仏 (lit., 'I take refuge in Amida Buddha'):

[T]he word *Namu* means to take refuge (*kimyō*) [...] Thus, *kimyō* is the command of the Original Vow calling to and summoning us [...] *Aspiring for birth and directing virtue* indicates the mind of the Tathāgata who, having already established the Vow, gives sentient beings the practice necessary for their birth. *The practice* is the selected Original Vow.⁹

Here, Shinran is developing his original understanding of *Namu Amida Butsu*, the Tathāgata's Name. He holds that the Name is a command in which Amida Buddha's Original Vow summons sentient beings. In other words, Shinran interprets *Namu Amida Butsu* as—regardless of who is doing the reciting—the functioning of the Original Vow that is continually calling out to sentient beings living amidst birth and death. *Namu Amida Butsu* is thus the practice of the Original Vow that continually functions as a voice calling out to sentient beings, commanding them to 'take refuge (*namu*) in Amida Buddha('s Original Vow)'. It is for this reason that Shinran heard in the Name itself Amida Tathāgata's 'mind of the vow' that led him to give rise to his Original Vow, engage in practices, and redirect the merit of these practices to sentient beings.

We could refer to Shinran's understanding as the 'Shin Buddhist shift' in Buddhist practice.

⁸ *The Collected Works of Shinran* 1997: 665. Slightly modified.

⁹ *The Collected Works of Shinran* 1997: 38. Slightly modified.

Thoroughly realizing that humans are none other than foolish beings, Shinran first inquired into the nature of the practice that must be elucidated in this context. With regard to this issue, Hōnen made clear that the *nenbutsu* is the practice chosen in the Original Vow, which states that all sentient beings will equally be reborn in the Pure Land. Hōnen showed that it was because of nothing other than the great compassionate Original Vow—which does not abandon anyone, regardless of the depth of their blind passions and transgressions—that the easy practice of the *nenbutsu* was chosen. Adopting this perspective and further deeply reflecting on the meaning of the *nenbutsu*, Shinran completely rejected the idea that it is a practice in which ordinary sentient beings *engage*. This was a fundamental turn away from the approach of the Path of the Sages: self power-based practices and seeking enlightenment through these practices. Shinran then made clear that the significance of the *nenbutsu* for sentient beings lies in the command of the Tathāgata’s compassionate Original Vow, which continually functions for people living in all karmic circumstances and regardless of the depth of their blind passions and transgressions. For this reason Shinran came to understand the task of sentient beings to be to listen to the Name of the Original Vow and attain the ‘mind of faith’ (*shinjin* 信心) that arises based on the mind of the vow of the Tathāgata. This understanding of practice as the practice of the Original Vow, or the calling of the the Original Vow shows that the deciding factor of the realization of the Path to Buddhahood through Other Power is the ‘mind of faith’, not human action. This Shin Buddhist turn in the understanding of practice is thus inseparable from his understanding of faith.

Conclusion

Let us summarize what I have argued in this paper. Shinran’s understanding of practice is distinguished by his thorough questioning of the kind of practice that is suited for foolish beings. This inquiry was based on his deep contemplation regarding the existential situation humans find themselves in as foolish beings. The ‘chosen *nenbutsu* of the Original Vow’ that Shinran was taught by his teacher Hōnen gave his inquiry a clear direction. Shinran, making even clearer the significance of this *nenbutsu*, then elucidated practice as follows:

- (1) The true practice of reciting the Name is always already making the virtue of suchness complete.
- (2) Buddhas, not ordinary sentient beings, are the ones engaging in the practice of reciting the Name.
- (3) The recitation of the Name is not a good deed or practice of practitioners.

- (4) The Name (*Namu Amida Butsu*) is not simply a name that refers to Amida Tathāgata but a command by which the Tathāgata's Original Vow beckons sentient beings.
- (5) It is the task of practitioners to listen to the Name recited by buddhas and realize true faith in the Name of the Original Vow.

In this way, Shinran clarified the meaning of practice in the Pure Land teachings and its position in Shin Buddhism (which he calls the 'consummation' of the Mahāyāna), thereby showing the significance of practice in a Buddhist path founded upon Other Power.

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