

1 (readings ita)

The Easy Path

IN THE PREFACE to his great translation of Hōnen's biography, Ryugaku Ishizuka states:

Japanese Buddhism, though tracing its origin to the Buddhism of China and India, has always had characteristic features of its own. But until Hōnen appeared, the Buddhism of all the three countries was fundamentally one. All Buddhist propagandists, Indian, Chinese and Japanese alike, down to Hōnen's time, had chiefly stressed the duty of observing the Buddha's precepts and meditation upon the truth, in order to [gain] the attainment in the present life of the heights of Buddhahood. On the other hand, Jōdo Buddhism's outstanding message was that, as common mortals are entirely too weak both in intellect and will to apprehend and observe all the strict requirements of the Law, as ordinarily taught by all the Buddhist sects, they should abandon such attempts as fruitless, and put their whole dependence upon the mighty power of the Buddha Amida's Primal Vow, and call upon his sacred name in the simple faith, that by his grace alone can they be born into the Buddha's land, however unworthy they may be.¹

Is this message of Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212) still to be considered Buddhism? Is Buddhism still possible without the practice of morality (*sīla*), mental concentration (*saṃādhi*), and wisdom-insight (*prajñā*), the Three Learnings that have constituted the foundation of the traditional Buddhist path ever since it was taught by Śākyamuni Buddha?

So radically did Hōnen's message depart from tradition that it is no wonder it drew severe criticism and protest from the champions of the traditional path. Jōkei 貞慶 (1155–1213), an illustrious monk of the Hossō 法相 school based in Kōfuku-ji in Nara and a contemporary of

¹ *Hōnen, the Buddhist Saint*, trans. by Harper H. Coates and Ryugaku Ishizuka (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1981), I: xx (Translator's Preface). "Original Vow" in the translation has been changed to "Primal Vow," which we will use throughout this book.

Hōnen, deplores the movement launched by Hōnen as follows in a petition submitted to the emperor:

The sole-practice followers say: “The games of *go* (*iki*) and parcheesi (*sugoroku*) do not violate the sole-practice; neither are the relations between women and priests (*nyobon*) nor the eating of meat hindrances to birth in the Pure Land. Practicing the discipline in this Latter World is as rare as having a tiger in the marketplace. And it is a fearful mistake. A person who has scruples about committing evil is one who does not place his reliance on the Buddha.”

Because this kind of rough talk (*sogon*) spreads throughout the land and captures people’s thoughts, it becomes an enemy of the Dharma. It is essential that the teaching of birth in Paradise promote the practice of the discipline, the karmic cause for birth in the Pure Land. If you ask why this is so, I reply that, were there no regulations, then it would be impossible to maintain the Six Roots of Merit; and when one permits the doors of the senses [to remain open] at will, then the Three Poisons [illusion, envy, anger] easily arise. When one entangles oneself in the conditions for illusion, then the window for meditating on the Buddha (*nenbutsu*) is not serene; and when one muddies the heart with envy and anger, the waters of the Jeweled Lakes (*hōchi*) cannot be clear. Is not the experience of these good karmic states the Pure Land itself? Accordingly, we intently employ the practices of the discipline as the karmic cause for birth in the Pure Land.... The movement is popular in the capital and in nearby provinces; and it is said that as far [north] as Hokuriku and the various provinces along the Eastern Sea (Tōkai) and other circuits, monks and nuns of the sole-practice movement successfully propagate these notions. Except by Imperial Edict, how can they be restrained? The purpose of this request is entirely concerned with these matters!

The Buddha’s Law and the Imperial Law are as body and mind: each should see to the well-being of the other, and then the welfare of the state will be assured. In these times the Pure Land movement has begun to arise and the activities of the sole-practice to flourish. But can we also say that these are times when the imperial power has been restored? Moreover, the Three Learnings [morality, wisdom, meditation] are about to be abandoned and the Eight Sects are declining. Time and again how the government of society is in disarray!¹²

¹² Robert E. Morrell, *Early Kamakura Buddhism: A Minority Report* (Berkeley, California: Asian Humanities Press, 1987), 86–87.

If we do not have here an entirely accurate representation of the “sole-practice” (*senju* 専修) movement of nenbutsu launched by Hōnen and his followers, we certainly can hear the voice of an eminent monk of high aristocratic background who, alarmed at the rapid spread of the nenbutsu movement, is urgently calling for the intervention of the state to protect the Dharma. For him, the Buddha’s Law and the Imperial Law are inseparable, and it is this traditional alliance, the very foundation of the established order, which he sees threatened by the new popular movement.³

It is not that Jōkei denies the Pure Land faith itself. How could he, seeing that it was also based upon the scriptures preached by the Buddha, and that it already had a long tradition in the land? In fact, he even mentions the nenbutsu and the ideal way it should be practiced. Nenbutsu, for him, is none other than to meditate (*nen* 念) upon the Buddha (*butsu* 佛), its literal and original meaning, and this can only be done properly when based upon the strict observance of the moral precepts and mental purification.⁴ But it was precisely this idea of nenbutsu as a form of meditation that was being rejected by Hōnen in favor of the vocal recitation of the name of Amida Buddha (*shōmyō* 稱名 *nenbutsu*). Not only were practices such as precepts, meditation, worship of Buddhas, and other good acts and meritorious deeds declared by Hōnen to be unnecessary, but even the nenbutsu practiced as a form of meditation with a view to visualize the Buddha and his Pure Land was repudiated as another “difficult path” for ordinary people to follow. It was this radical departure from the meditational practice of nenbutsu, already a long-established tradition within Heian Buddhism, that marked the culminating point of ever-increasing popularization of the Pure Land faith and practice and brought about a revolutionary change in Buddhism.⁵ In the words of Hōnen,

³ Concerning the socio-political implication of Hōnen’s nenbutsu movement, see Tamura Enchō, “Senju nenbutsu no juyō to dan’atsu” *Nihon bukkyō shisōshi kenkyū: Jōdokyō hen* (Kyoto: Heiraku-ji Shoten, 1959), 58–92.

⁴ Jōkei’s understanding of Pure Land Buddhism and nenbutsu is expressed in the Kōfuku-ji Petition that he drafted; see particularly article six, “The Error of Ignorance Concerning the Pure Lands,” and article seven, “The Error of Misunderstanding the Nenbutsu” in Morrell, *Early Kamakura Buddhism*, 80–85.

⁵ Concerning the difference between Hōnen’s nenbutsu and the traditional Tendai nenbutsu as represented by Genshin’s *Ōjōyōshū*, see Inoue Mitsusada, “Fujiwara jidai no Jōdokyō no tokushitsu” *Shintei Nihon Jōdokyō seiritsushi no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1975), 112–21.

Let devotees of the present day give up their so-called meditations as if they were required by the Law. Even though a man would meditate upon the images of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in Paradise, the fact is he is incapable of picturing to himself the Buddhas as represented in the images made by such famous sculptors as Unkei and Kōkei. Even though he tries to meditate upon the things which beautify the Land of Bliss, he finds it hard even to picture to his mind the beauties of the flowers and fruit of the cherry, plum and peach of this world with which he is so familiar. So simply believe the words in Zendō's Commentary, which says, "That Buddha is now present in the Land of Bliss, having already attained enlightenment. All ye sentient beings ought to know that His great Primal Vow was not in vain, and that if you call upon His name you shall without fail be born into the Pure Land. Put your whole trust in that Primal Vow and call upon His name with all your heart. If you thus call, the three mental states will come of themselves."⁶

The idea of sole-practice (*senju*) originates from Shan-tao 善導 (Zendō, 613–681), the Chinese Pure Land master whom Hōnen deeply respected and faithfully followed and in whom the doctrinal development of the Chinese Pure Land thought reached a culminating point.⁷ From a wide variety of Buddhist practices, Shan-tao chose five as the "right practices" (*shōgyō* 正行): recitation of the Pure Land sūtras, contemplation on Amida and the Pure Land, worshiping Amida, calling upon Amida's name, and praising Amida and offering to him. For Shan-tao, "right practices" meant the practices that are solely based upon the Pure Land sūtras and directed solely to Amida and his Pure Land. Hence, for him the right practices meant the sole-practice, whereas their opposite, the "sundry practices," were the above-mentioned five kinds of acts devoted to other Buddhas and objects of devotion. Shan-tao then went a step further when he singled out from the five right practices the calling upon the name of Amida Buddha as the "true act of settlement (of enlightenment in the

⁶ Coates and Ishizuka, *Hōnen*, 398. The "three mental states" refer to sincere mind, deep mind, and the aspiration for enlightenment by directing merit, which are mentioned in the *Sūtra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life* (*Kan muryōjubutsu kyō*) as the necessary state of mind for practicing nenbutsu.

⁷ For Shan-tao's Pure Land thought, see Mochizuki Shinkō, *Chūgoku Jōdo kyōrishi* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1942), 180–96; see also Shan-tao's passages on the sole-practice quoted in Hōnen's major work, *Senjaku hongan nenbutsu shū*, in *Shinshū Shōgyō Zensho*: *Hensansho*, ed., *Shinshū shōgyō zensho* (Kyoto: Ōyagi Kōbundō, 1941; hereafter SSZ), I: 934–40.

Pure Land)" in distinction to the other four practices, which he called "auxiliary acts." Shan-tao, however, did not reject auxiliary acts, nor by sole-practice did he mean nenbutsu only.

It was Hōnen who drew a radical conclusion from Shan-tao's soteriology by eliminating all practices other than nenbutsu as unnecessary and made Shan-tao's sole-practice synonymous with the exclusive practice that rejects all practices other than nenbutsu. In the well-known passage in his *Senjaku hongan nenbutsu shū* (Passages on the nenbutsu selected in the Primal Vow; hereafter, *Senjaku shū*), an epoch-making document in the history of Japanese Buddhism, Hōnen states:

If you desire to free yourself quickly from birth-and-death, of the two excellent teachings leave aside the Path of Sages and choosing, enter the Pure Land way.

If you desire to enter the Pure Land way, of the two methods of practice, right and sundry, cast aside all sundry practices and choosing, take the right practice.

If you desire to perform the right practice, of the two kinds of acts, true and auxiliary, further put aside the auxiliary and choosing, solely perform the act of true settlement. The act of true settlement is to say the Name of Buddha.⁸

As the above words indicate, the idea that one has to select (*senjaku* 選擇) one practice to the exclusion of others preoccupied Hōnen's mind in his quest for salvation. For him, nenbutsu was the practice because it was the act "selected in the Primal Vow" (*senjaku hongan* 選擇本願)—hence, the title of his work, "Passages on the Nenbutsu Selected in the Primal Vow."⁹

It was indeed this idea of selecting one practice as the only way of salvation and concentrating on it single-heartedly that characterized the entire new Buddhist movement that followed Hōnen, what the scholars

⁸ Quoted in *The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way: A Translation of Shinran's Kyōgyōshinshō* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1983; Shin Buddhism Translation Series), I: 136; *Senjaku shū*, SSZ, I: 62.

⁹ This is the way the title of Hōnen's work is translated in the above translation of Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō*. Literally, "selected" modifies the "Primal Vow" rather than the "Nenbutsu," and thus "The Passages on the Nenbutsu of the Primal Vow Selected [by Amida]" would be the more accurate literal translation of the title. In terms of the meaning intended by Hōnen, however, it is after all the nenbutsu that is selected in the Primal Vow (selected) by Amida.

have called the Kamakura New Buddhism (*Kamakura shin bukyō* 鎌倉新佛教) as against the traditional eight sects.¹⁰ Representing the *Zeitgeist* of the time when the Heian regime was crumbling and the feudal order of the Kamakura era (1185–1333) was emerging, Hōnen heralded the radically new approach to the problem of human salvation, the “easy” and popular way that, however, demanded a total devotion. He was followed by others like Shinran, one of his dedicated followers who further radicalized his Pure Land message; Nichiren, who preached chanting the name of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*daimoku* 領題) instead of the name of Amida Buddha as the only way of salvation; and Dōgen, who insisted upon mere sitting in meditation (*shikan taza* 只管打坐) as the only path to attaining Buddhahood. The age in which these figures appeared and delivered their messages of salvation was profoundly different from the height of the Heian period when the Buddhist sangha, supported by the state and the nobles, offered an eclectic and comprehensive system of practices designed to harmonize various doctrines and appeal to people of diverse backgrounds and capacities. Schools and denominations were there before the rise of the new Buddhist movements, but they were neither sectarian nor exclusivistic in their methods of practice leading to liberation from birth-and-death. Different voices were heard on salvation, but they were neither so urgent nor so straightforward as the messages of salvation delivered by the leaders of the new Buddhist movements. Clearly, times had changed, and it is to the social condition of the late Heian period to which we must turn our attention if we are to have an adequate understanding of the rise and spread of these sectarian movements that eventually came to dominate Japanese Buddhism.

The twelfth century was a period when fundamental change of profound consequence was taking place in Japanese society.¹¹ The cen-

¹⁰ The idea of “selecting” (*senjaku*) as the chief motif of the Kamakura New Buddhism is pointed out in Chiba Jōryū, Kitanishi Hiromu, and Takagi Yutaka, *Bukkyōshi gaisetsu: Nihon hen* (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1969), 94–95. The best introduction to the fundamental spirit and nature of the Kamakura New Buddhism is still, in my mind, Ienaga Saburō’s *Chūsei bukyō shisōshi kenkyū* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1955; revised and enlarged edition), 1–109. My discussion of Kamakura Buddhism is heavily indebted to it. See also Stanley Weinstein, “The Concept of Reformation in Japanese Buddhism,” *Studies in Japanese Culture*, ed. by Saburo Ōta (Tokyo: Japan Pen Club, 1973), II: 75–86.

¹¹ The following discussion of the social change in twelfth-century Japan is primarily based upon George Sansom, *A History of Japan to 1334* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958).

tralized imperial system, based upon the Chinese model and the legal bureaucratic system devised after the Taika reform in the seventh century, had nearly collapsed and Japan was entering into a medieval feudal order led by powerful local military leaders and landowners. According to the social order envisioned, and to a certain degree implemented, by the Taika reformers and the imperial loyalists, all the land and people belonged to the imperial house as its public domain. But the privatization of some land and the people attached to it had already begun in the Nara period. The so-called manors (*shōen* 莊園) of the powerful noble families in the court and the capital and the influential monasteries and shrines began to eclipse the economic basis of the imperial system. George Sansom describes the rise and development of the manor as follows:

Thus the manor was strictly speaking an illegal growth, but it developed upon such a scale and served the interest of so many powerful persons that the state was bound to recognize it, the more so since almost all the nobles and officials in the capital and all the great monasteries and shrines lived upon income received from manorial rights. It was for this reason that the illegal and the legal systems grew up side by side without any great conflict.¹²

The economic erosion of the imperial system by the manors reached its peak during the tenth and eleventh centuries, when the powerful Fujiwara families wielded an almost absolute power. Along with the development of the manors, the privileged lands that were exempt from taxation and administrative control by the local government, there also was growth in the power of the local landlords and magnates, who had either their own lands or acted as the administrators on behalf of absentee landlords in the capital. In order to protect and extend their large estates, the landlords had to retain military power and often resorted to naked physical power; this led to the rise of the professional warrior class. The decline of the central imperial authority, economic and military as well as administrative, reached its lowest point in the latter half of the twelfth century, when the real power of the whole country belonged to the two most powerful military families, the Taira and the Minamoto. The rivalry and conflict between these two great warrior families accounted for much of the social confusion of twelfth-century Japan.

¹² Sansom, *History of Japan*, 356.

The established Buddhist orders, whose power and prosperity had been thoroughly enmeshed with the secular socio-political system since Nara, contributed in no small measure to the bleak social atmosphere of the late Heian era. The disorderly conduct of the monk-soldiers, especially those of the Tendai headquarters at Enryaku-ji, the rivalry between powerful Tendai monasteries such as Enryaku-ji and Onjō-ji as well as between Enryaku-ji and Kōfuku-ji of Nara (which was being patronized by the Fujiwara family), added to the general social confusion of the time. Tōdai-ji and Kōfuku-ji, the symbols of old Nara Buddhism, were ravaged by Taira troops in revenge for the monasteries' support of the Mochihito revolt (1180). Upon hearing this news, the Regent Kujō Kanezane wrote as follows in his diary, the *Gyokuyō* 玉葉:

Although this may indeed be attributed to the fate of the times, my sorrow at the time [when I heard the news] was deeper than when you would have lost your parents. I was born accidentally in this time, and have met these circumstances. This is in accordance with my past karma; would I therefore have anything to depend on in my next life? If the world becomes settled, I would be able to fulfill my long-cherished aspiration to retire quickly to mountains and woods. The old aspiration to have the right mind at the moment of death is the most essential thing in my life.¹³

As if to match this social turmoil, nature also wrought tremendous havoc in twelfth-century Heian Japan. George Sansom describes the grim social condition in the following way:

Though the misfortunes of the late Heian period are of earlier origin than the rise of the Taira clan, the last years of their power saw an awful accumulation of disasters. Whatever its cause, the failure of the regime was plainly attested by the frequency of robbery, arson, and murder in the very heart of the imperial city, offences which the armed forces of the Taira were unable to suppress. The government did resort to drastic measures, arresting and punishing criminals with ferocity; but the results were not good. The condition of the city was lamentable. It has been described in a celebrated work called *Hōjō-ki*, which is the notebook of a not very unworldly recluse living in a small hut in one of its suburbs. His name was Kamo Chōmei. His work contains, as well as an obviously first-hand description of Fukuwara, a striking account of material conditions in the capital in the years from 1177 to 1182. It is a dreadful tale of

¹³ Quoted in Akamatsu Toshihide, *Shinran* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1961), 24.

storms, earthquakes, conflagrations, plagues, starvation, and cold, when infants could be seen clinging to the breasts of their dead mothers and shivering men stole images of the Buddha for firewood and corpses remained unburied. In the city proper, excluding the suburbs, over forty-two thousand corpses lying in the street were counted in two months. It was a world of pollution, and famine struck not only the capital city, but also all the surrounding provinces and the western seats of Taira power.¹⁴

In view of this disastrous situation in late Heian society, it was only natural that the idea of the age of the Last Dharma (*mappō* 末法) appealed with great force to thoughtful Buddhists of the time.

The idea of the progressive decline of the Buddhist dharma, although of Indian origin, was systematically formulated in China, especially after the severe persecution of Buddhism in the sixth century. According to this formulation, the Buddhist dharma is to undergo three stages of progressive decline. There were several divergent theories on the three stages. One of them, the most popular during the late Heian period, held that after the *parinirvāna* of the Sākyamuni Buddha the period of the Right Dharma (*shōbō* 正法) continued for one thousand years, during which both the teaching and the practice existed and people attained enlightenment through them. It was then followed by the period of Semblance Dharma (*zōhō* 像法), which lasted another thousand years during which there were the teaching and practice but no enlightenment. Finally, the period of Last Dharma (*mappō* 末法) set in to last for ten thousand years, during which there would remain only teaching but no practice or enlightenment.¹⁵ According to this theory, the *mappō* period would begin in Japan in the latter half of the eleventh century—according to the traditional Chinese dating of the Buddha's *parinirvāna* (941 BC)—when Heian society already showed serious signs of disintegration.

Although the idea of *mappō* had been known in Japan long before the late Heian period, now for the first time it became "real" and found

¹⁴ Sansom, *History of Japan*, 286. Fukuwara, in present-day Hyōgo Prefecture, is the location to which the capital was temporarily moved in 1180.

¹⁵ For a brief discussion of the various theories of the three periods, see Inoue, *Jōdokyō seiritsushi*, 108–12; Tamura, "Mappō shisō no keisei," *Nihon bukkyō shisōshi kenkyū*, 277–308. Weinstein's article, "The Concept of Reformation in Japanese Buddhism," discusses the significance of the *mappō* idea for the leaders of the Kamakura New Buddhist movements, 79–80. On the idea of the decline of Buddhism, see Jan Nattier's recent comprehensive study, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley, California: Asian Humanities Press), 1991.

wide acceptance among people from all walks of life. Sufferings were visible everywhere and the impermanence of life was not a mere doctrinal teaching. As Tamura Enchō puts it:

Although the concept of *mappō* in Japan was taken as announcing the common fate of the nobility in the process of downfall, rather than being a problem concerning the easiness and difficulty of practice and the possibility of attaining Buddhahood, the conflicts and confusions caused by the Taira and the Minamoto, along with the natural disasters that accompanied them, finally made even the lower classes of common people experience vividly the advent of *mappō*.¹⁶

Buddhism started out as a religious movement addressing the problem of suffering and impermanence of life; it began as a religion promising liberation from these fundamental problems of human life. Yet it was precisely this fundamental mission of Buddhism that the established Buddhism of late Heian society proved unable to fulfill. Reasons for this failure were many. First of all, there was the obvious fact that the Buddhist sangha was extremely corrupt and at least partly responsible for the social turmoil of the day. The established Buddhism was also part and parcel of the crumbling old order, sinking with it and desperately trying to hold on to the secular privileges it had been used to.

It is one of the greatest ironies of history that Buddhism, a religion that began with such a clear rejection of worldly values and order, was universally turned into a religion of the society and the state, a social and cultural religion that guarantees worldly security and happiness. This universal metamorphosis of Buddhism, however, was perhaps nowhere more thoroughly established than in the late Heian Buddhism. As a religion completely submerged in the earthly spirit of Shinto and even institutionally amalgamated with it, as a religion that lost the transcendent orientation toward the world and was satisfied with praying and performing magical rituals for the welfare of the nobility in this world as well as in the next life, it was far from being in a position to satisfy the souls crying out for liberation from the very conditions of human existence. Its message of this-worldly promises did not interest those seeking salvation from the world; its message of Buddha-nature inherent in every human being did not convince those who had a deep awareness of the massive presence of

¹⁶ Hōnen (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1959), 63–64.

evil and sinfulness in themselves as well as in their society; its promise of realizing Buddhahood in this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成佛) and its vision of the world consisting of dharmas mutually interpenetrating and harmonizing were no longer persuasive to those who were possessed by the idea of the *mappō* and witnessing the complete disintegration of their society.

Clearly, the last days of the Heian era called for a religious message that promised supramundane salvation and not worldly security; a religion of individuals, not a religion of the state and family; a religion that looks at humanity and the world without the old religious perspectives and squarely faces the stark realities of life. The traditional answers appeared not merely unconvincing but also unworkable in the age of *mappō*. The yearning for salvation was more urgent than ever, but the old messages were unacceptable.

How then to get out of this dilemma? How to take the reality of *mappō* seriously and yet find liberation still possible? This was the central issue that agonized the many religious souls of the late Heian period. The answer lay in finding an “easy path” of salvation that could work for everybody, high and low, men and women, monks and lay, good and evil alike. And it was Hōnen who ushered in this new approach by boldly formulating an “easy path” and setting the tone for all the new forms of Buddhism that were to follow him.

Basing his judgment upon Tao-ch’o’s (562–645) *Passages on the Land of Happiness*, Hōnen declared at the outset of his *Senjaku shū*:

The present time is the age of the Last Dharma, the evil age of five defilements. The Pure Land Path is the only road through which we can enter [into enlightenment].¹⁷

The traditional Path of Sages (*shōdōmon* 聖惣門) can no longer work. There are two reasons for this: “We are too far removed from the great sage (Sākyamuni Buddha), and the truth is profound but our understanding feeble.”¹⁸ Here we find Hōnen’s deep awareness of the time (*ji* 時) and the capacity (*ki* 機) of people to practice the path of enlighten-

¹⁷ SSZ, I: 929. “The five defilements” (*gojoku* 五濁) refer to the five marks of degeneracy that accompany the Last Dharma-age: the impurities of the age (*kalpa*), impurity in view, impurity of blind passion, degeneration of sentient beings’ mind and body, and the shortening of their span of life (Nakamura Hajime, *Bukkyōgō daijiten*, 1981, p. 369).

¹⁸ SSZ, I: 929.

ment, an awareness that underlay his message of the sole-practice of nenbutsu. We have to pay careful attention to our own capacity and the time we are situated in, lest our whole effort come to nothing: "The practice of the Buddhist path requires that we truly weigh ourselves well and discern the time."¹⁹

This was not a mere general statement but one based upon his own existential awareness. Hōnen weighed his own capacity in the following way:

Having a deep desire to obtain salvation, and with faith in the teachings of the various Scriptures, I practice many forms of self-discipline. There are indeed many doctrines in Buddhism, but they may all be summed up in the three learnings, namely the precepts, meditation and knowledge, as practised by the adherents of the Lesser and Greater Vehicles, and the exoteric and esoteric sects. But the fact is that I do not keep even one of the precepts, nor do I attain to any one of the many forms of meditation. A certain priest has said that without the observance of the *sīla* (precepts), there is no such thing as the realization of *saṃādhi*. Moreover the heart of the ordinary unenlightened man, because of his surroundings, is always liable to change, just like monkeys jumping from one branch to another. It is indeed in a state of confusion, easily moved and with difficulty controlled. In what way does right and indefectible knowledge arise? Without the sword of indefectible knowledge, how can one get free from the chains of evil passion, whence comes evil conduct? And unless one gets free from evil conduct and evil passions, how shall he obtain deliverance from the bondage of birth and death? Alas! What shall I do? What shall I do? The likes of us are incompetent to practice the three disciplines of the precepts, meditation and knowledge.

It was in the midst of this deep frustration and despair, combined with an intense longing for salvation, that Hōnen came to find the light in the message of the nenbutsu taught by Shan-tao. Hōnen continues his story:

And so I inquired of a great many learned men and priests whether there is any other way of salvation than these three disciplines, that is better suited to our poor abilities, but I found none who could either teach me the way or even suggest it to me. At last I went into the Library at Kurodani on Mount Hiei, where all the Scriptures were, all by myself, and with a heavy heart, read them all through. While doing so, I hit

¹⁹ Quoted in Tamura, *Hōnen*, 64.

upon a passage in Zendō's *Commentary on the Meditation [Contemplation] Sūtra*, which runs as follows:—"Whether walking or standing, sitting or lying, only repeat the name of Amida with all your heart. Never cease the practice of it even for a moment. This is the very work which unfailingly issues in salvation, for it is in accordance with the Primal Vow of that Buddha." On reading this I was impressed with the fact that even ignorant people like myself, by reverent meditation upon this passage, and an entire dependence upon the truth in it, never forgetting the repetition of Amida's sacred name, may lay the foundation for that good karma, which will with absolute certainty eventuate in birth into the blissful land. And not only was I led to believe in this teaching bequeathed by Zendō, but also earnestly to follow the great Vow of Amida. And especially was that passage deeply inwrought into my very soul which says, "For it is in accordance with the Primal Vow of that Buddha."²⁰

The light of salvation that shone upon Hōnen here was not so much the practice of nenbutsu as such—which was a known practice at the time—as the Primal Vow of Amida who, out of his deep compassion for the sentient beings unable to follow the Path of Sages, laid the foundation for an "easy" way of salvation. The nenbutsu became the sole-practice for Hōnen because he suddenly realized that "it is in accordance with the Primal Vow of that Buddha." It was this discovery of the power of the Primal Vow that led Hōnen to the exclusive practice of nenbutsu as the sole-practice sufficient for salvation.²¹

Unlike other Pure Land thinkers before him, as we have mentioned, Hōnen did not understand the nenbutsu as a form of meditation, which would have made it another "difficult" practice. Ishizuka has aptly written,

²⁰ Coates and Ishizuka, *Hōnen*, 185-87.

²¹ The vow that Hōnen is referring to is the eighteenth Vow, the most important among the forty-eight Vows, uttered and fulfilled by Bodhisattva Dharmakara (Hōzō). The story of this bodhisattva, which constitutes the basis of the Pure Land faith and practice, is given in the *Larger Sūtra of Immeasurable Light* (*Daimuryōju kyō*). Since the knowledge of this story is presupposed in our treatment of Hōnen's and Shinran's thought, readers who are not familiar with it are referred to chapter 5 of this book, where a summary of it is given. At any rate, in the eighteenth Vow Dharmakara presents a minimum practice of nenbutsu done in sincere faith as the condition for birth in the Pure Land. Since all of his Vows, the story goes, came to be fulfilled as the karmic reward of his long and arduous bodhisattva practice, it is believed that, therefore, those who practice nenbutsu will without fail attain birth in the Pure Land.

Meditation was the predominant feature of all nenbutsu practice before Hōnen. Genshin taught that in the act of invocation of the sacred name a mental picture should be formed of the compassionate Buddha, while Kakuban kept in mind the significance of the virtues inherent in the invocation, which, to him, was much the same as the *Dhāraṇī* or mystic incantation of the Shingon. With Yokwan that alone was an efficacious invocation of the Buddha which was invariably preceded by mental concentration, and, without this, a million repetitions would be useless. Thus all the types of nenbutsu before Hōnen were so dependent upon this subjective element of meditation, that if a devotee should be mentally too dull to apprehend all the implications of his act of invocation or fail at any point in his meditation, the efficacy of his nenbutsu was all but entirely negated.²²

According to Hōnen, nenbutsu as the easy path reflects Amida Buddha's universal compassion to save all sentient beings regardless of their conditions, spiritual, social, or material. Asking why Amida particularly chose in his Vow the nenbutsu, rather than other practices, as the practice necessary for our birth in the Pure Land, Hōnen says that, although it belongs to the ultimate mystery of the Buddha's mind, he chose nenbutsu because it can be easily practiced anywhere and at any time, and by all classes of people, even the poorest.²³ It is also "the most excellent way, because Amida's name represents all the virtues inhering in him, or, in other words, stands for his very personality, and so when one calls his name he reveals himself just as anyone responds when his name is called."²⁴

In a letter of Hōnen we find his glowing faith in Amida's compassionate will, manifested in his Vow for universal salvation:

When we consider the capacity of the sentient beings living in the age of Last Dharma for the birth in the land of utter bliss, we should not doubt our birth because of the paucity of our practice; a single or ten invocations are enough for it. We should not doubt because we are sinners; it is

²² Coates and Ishizuka, *Hōnen*, 42 (Historical Introduction). *Nembutsu* in the translation has been changed to "nenbutsu," which we will use throughout this book. Genshin (942–1017), Kakuban (1095–1143), and Yokwan (Yōkan; 1054–1132) are all important monks who had been involved in some form of Pure Land practice prior to Hōnen, but they did not champion the sole-practice of nenbutsu as Hōnen did.

²³ *Senjaku shū*, SSZ, I: 943–45.

²⁴ Coates and Ishizuka, *Hōnen*, 45 (Historical Introduction).

said that Amida does not dislike the person who has deep roots of sin. Nor should we doubt because the times have waned; even the sentient beings living after the dharma has completely disappeared can still attain birth, how much more would those living in the present age [of Last Dharma]? We should not doubt because we are evil; [even Zendō] confessed himself to be an ordinary being laden with blind passions. Although there are numerous Pure Lands throughout the ten directions, we aspire for the Western Paradise because even the sentient beings who have committed ten evils and five grave offenses can be born there. Among all the Buddhas we take refuge in Amida because he comes in person to welcome us when we utter his name three to five times. Among all the practices, we have recourse to nenbutsu because it is Amida's Primal Vow. Now, when we ride on the Primal Vow of Amida and aspire for the birth, it being Amida's Vow, there is no reason that it cannot be attained. In order to ride on the Primal Vow, all you need is simply to have a deep faith. To be born in the body of a human being, which is hard to be born in; to meet with the Primal Vow, which is hard to meet with; to awaken the aspiration for enlightenment, which is hard to awaken; to leave the village of transmigration, which is hard to leave; to attain birth in the Pure Land, which is hard to be born into, is the joy of joys. Although we believe that even those who have committed ten evils and five grave offenses can be born in the Pure Land, we should be careful not to commit even a trifle sin. Even a sinful person can be born, how much more would a good person? Believing that even the practice of a single or ten invocations is not without benefit, we should call upon the Buddha ceaselessly. One can attain birth even with a single invocation, how much more would one who makes many invocations?²⁵

The easy practice made possible by Amida's Vow requires an act of faith: "In order to ride on the Primal Vow, all you need is simply to have a deep faith." Here we see another spiritual characteristic of the new popular Buddhist movements that began with Hōnen, namely the emphasis on faith. The easy practice, however easy it may be, still requires the faith to accept it; if nothing else, the faith to accept the unbelievably easy path and to practice it single-heartedly.

An important consequence of this emphasis in the new Buddhist movements on the easy path and faith was that the traditional division within Buddhism between monks (*shukke* 出家) and laity (*zaike* 在家) was turned into a distinction between believers and non-believers. Now the

²⁵ Quoted in Tamura, *Hōnen*, 49–50; *Saihō shinan shō*, SSZ, IV: 220–21.

identity of the lay Buddhists became much sharper and stronger and that of the religious less pronounced than in the traditional Buddhism. If faith and the easy practice are the only conditions for our salvation, it is only natural that the religious authority of the monks becomes relativized. What matters now is whether or not you have faith, not the ability to follow the arduous path to enlightenment preached in traditional Buddhism. Hōnen himself is said to have led a pious religious life, one in which he adhered to the precepts required of the monk who has renounced the secular life. But it was only a matter of time before others would come along who would draw a bold logical conclusion from the new religiosity initiated by Hōnen.

The sense of crisis brought to the traditional Buddhist teaching by the widespread belief in the idea of the *mappō*, the emphasis on easy practice and faith, the exclusive loyalty to a single path of salvation, and the emergence of lay Buddhists with a clear sense of religious identity, were phenomena unheard of in the long history of monastically oriented Buddhism, not merely in Japan but indeed the world over. These trends gave rise to an entirely new form of Buddhist community, essentially resembling the early Christian church, which was radically different from the traditional sangha. It was a community of believers with an egalitarian spirit, a community with a strong sense of belonging on the basis of an individual decision of faith. It consisted of believers who responded to the message of liberation from the world and considered themselves as being “in the world” but not “of the world,” and of a new type of religious leaders who considered themselves “neither monk nor lay”—as Shinran, a dedicated follower of Hōnen, was later to describe himself.

An organization of voluntary choice, this new form of religious community reflected the rise of social consciousness in the commoners of the late Heian society.²⁶ The religious message was no longer confined to the élite few but addressed to everybody without distinction of religious standing, social status, sex, age, education, and knowledge, or even of moral merit and demerit. Often put into the popular *kana* script, easy to read and understand, the message of the “easy path” called forth a response of faith from people no longer satisfied with the subservient role they had to play within the structure of traditional Buddhism. In many

respects, indeed, these new movements in Buddhism resembled the Reformation in the West.

Let us now turn to the main concern of our study, Shinran, often called “the Luther of Japan,” a figure whose appearance is unthinkable without Hōnen but who eventually came to eclipse his master, not only in the revolutionary message he delivered but also in his fame and the influence he exerted upon later generations.

²⁶ See Tamura Enchō, “Senju nenbutsu no juyō katei,” *Nihon bukkyō shisōshi kenkyū*, especially 42–57.

Shinran, the *Bonpu*

SHINRAN 親鸞 (1173–1262) HAS BEEN HONORED by his followers as a saint (*shōnin* 聖人), but he would be the first person to disclaim the title if he were to hear it today. It is one of the great ironies of history that a person who had lived his entire life in constant awareness of his own ineradicable sinfulness came to be revered as a saint. The irony does not stop there. The one who did not want to be regarded as a teacher—the true teachers being Śākyamuni Buddha and the other Pure Land masters before him—or a leader, and the one who never even dreamed of being the founder of an independent sect, came to be honored as the founder of the largest Buddhist sect in Japan today. Yet a saint Shinran was, albeit in a very different way from the traditional Buddhist way of sainthood that was attained through a strenuous pursuit of spiritual perfection. Shinran, in contrast, became a saint by thoroughly giving up the effort to become a saint. His was a paradoxical way of sainthood.

Religion, whatever its transcendent origin may be, begins, as far as the human side is concerned, with an awareness of the problems intrinsic to human life: human finitude and frailty, the impermanence and transience of worldly things, sin and evil, inevitable sufferings, and the unexpected tragic events that shake up the “secure” order of life. Religion thus promises another world that is absolutely free from these problems, a transcendent order of being, epistemological or ontological, that is beyond the turmoils of this world. All religious traditions work with these two aspects of “reality” and with the inevitable tension felt between them. When a religious system becomes established and its doctrines generally accepted in a given society, however, it tends to settle comfortably within that society, have its view of reality skewed by that society, and thus lose sight of the problems that gave rise to it in the first place. It becomes so successful in persuading, or very often “forcing,” people to believe in the ideal world it preaches, that it becomes oblivious to the harsh realities of

life and out of touch with reality. It becomes intoxicated by its ideal vision of the world and mechanically repeats its message, while the social situation has changed radically and the new problems call for new answers.

This, probably, is one of the reasons that secular thinkers have criticized religion for covering up the reality of the world and seeking escape from it by making false promises of an unknown and unverifiable world somewhere beyond or behind (or hidden). And this, probably, was what led the young Barth to issue the following harsh warning on religion:

Religion, so far from being the place where the healthy harmony of human life is lauded, is instead the place where it appears diseased, discordant, and disrupted. Religion is not the sure ground upon which human culture safely rests; it is the place where civilization and its partner, barbarism, are rendered fundamentally questionable.... Religion must beware lest it tone down in any degree the unconverted man's judgment. Conflict and distress, sin and death, the devil and hell, make up the reality of religion. So far from releasing men from guilt and destiny, it brings men under their sway. Religion possesses no solution of the problems of life; rather it makes of the problem a wholly insoluble enigma. Religion neither discovers the problem nor solves it: what it does is to disclose the truth that it cannot be solved. Religion is neither a thing to be enjoyed nor a thing to be celebrated; it must be borne as a yoke which cannot be removed. Religion is not a thing to be desired or extolled: it is a misfortune which takes total hold upon some men, and is by them passed on to others...¹

The charge that religion is guilty of dishonesty for not facing up to the realities of life and the world may without much dispute be applied to the established Buddhism of the late Heian society, for it did not pay serious attention to the agonies of *mappō*, the age of the Last Dharma. The same cannot be said for Shinran's religious message, however. For it was above all his naked exposure, unmitigated by the traditional Buddhist answers, to the harsh realities of life, especially to the massive presence of evil in man, that led him to search for a new path of human salvation. What strikes us particularly in Shinran's life and work is the fact that, rather than the general rhetoric of the traditional laments regarding human misery caused by ignorance, greed, and anger, we are able to hear in him the highly personal voice of a man agonizing over his own plight.

¹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 258.

The entire works of Shinran, including his most systematic work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信證,² ring with the voice of a man in deep existential anguish over his own state of “sinking in an immense ocean of desires and attachments.”³ And it is this voice of an “unsaved soul,” Shinran, the *bonpu* 凡夫 (ordinary person) laden with “deep and heavy karmic evil and raging blind passions,”⁴ more than any of his religious messages, that still speaks forcefully to the hearts of modern men and women. Perhaps we may be allowed to say that the existential seriousness and honesty with which he grappled with the problem of his own sinful nature is as meaningful as the answer he eventually came up with. In fact, as we shall see later, the awareness of the problem and the answer itself are inseparable parts of the same reality for Shinran. The answer at which he arrived was opened up to him because he refused to be satisfied in a facile manner with the traditional answers, including those of the Pure Land masters before him, and pushed the problem to its utmost limit, where he had to give up the effort to solve it, and where this giving up turned out to be the only genuine answer to the problem.

Shinran’s message of the grace of Amida is unthinkable without his relentless struggle with the presence of inexhaustible sin and evil in himself. One who does not know “the reality of religion” under the “law” does not truly know what grace is. What Barth says about St. Paul’s agony under the law may equally be said without any hesitation about Shinran’s experience:

Apprehension of the meaning of religion depends upon the clarity with which the dominion of sin over the men of this world is disclosed to our view. When we recognize the peculiar sinfulness of the religious man and see sin *abounding* in him, we are able to understand the meaning of grace more exceedingly abundant, and the necessity that the divine mercy should act in spite of sins.⁵

² The original title of the work is *Ken jōdo shinjitsu kyōgyōshō monrui* 頭淨土真実教行證文類 [Passages revealing the true teaching, practice, and realization of the Pure Land]. But it is commonly referred to as the *Kyōgyōshinshō* [Teaching, practice, faith, realization], and we will also use this common title. More will be said about this work later.

³ Shinran’s own description of himself in *The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1985; Shin Buddhism Translation Series), II: 279; *Kyōgyōshinshō*, SSZ, II: 80. Hereafter, this translation will be referred to as *True Teaching*.

⁴ *Tannishō*, SSZ, II: 773.

⁵ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 257.

It is impossible to think of Shinran without Hōnen, whose dedicated and loyal disciple he remained to the last minute of his life. But it was Shinran who drew the ultimate conclusion from the message of his master and pushed it to the extremity of paradoxicality, giving it the boldest formulation. And it was above all Shinran’s profound awareness of the human predicament that added a new depth and intensity to Hōnen’s message of nenbutsu. As Ienaga Saburō notes, whatever the points of doctrinal difference between Hōnen and Shinran may be, the fundamental religious difference between them is to be found in Shinran’s thought that an evil person possesses the true capacity to receive Amida’s salvific work (*akunin shōkisetsu* 惡人正機説, or *akunin shōinsetsu* 惡人正因説).⁶ The *Tannishō* reports the following famous words of Shinran:

Even a good person can attain birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will.

Though such is the truth, people commonly say, “Even an evil person attains birth, so naturally a good person will.” This statement may seem well-founded at first, but it runs counter to the meaning of the Other Power established through the Primal Vow. For a person who relies on the good that he does through his self-power fails to entrust himself wholeheartedly to Other Power and therefore is not in accord with Amida’s Primal Vow. But when he abandons his attachment to self-power and entrusts himself totally to Other Power, he will realize birth in the Pure Land.

It is impossible for us, filled as we are with blind passions, to free ourselves from birth-and-death through any practice whatever. Sorrowing at this, Amida made the Vow, the essential intent of which is the attainment of Buddhahood by the person who is evil. Hence the evil person who entrusts himself to Other Power is precisely the one who possesses the true cause for birth.

Accordingly he said, “Even the virtuous man is born in the Pure Land, so without question is the man who is evil.”⁷

⁶ Ienaga Saburō, *Chūsei bukkyō*, 4–5. There are scholars who do not attribute this particular idea to Shinran himself but to Hōnen or his other disciples (or even to Shinran’s followers) and do not find much difference in this respect between Hōnen and Shinran; see Tamura’s discussion of this matter in his “Akunin shōkisetsu no seiritsu,” *Nihon bukkyō shisōshi kenkyū*, 93–123. Ienaga also discusses this problem and defends his view, 8–14.

⁷ *Tannishō: A Primer*, trans. by Dennis Hirota (Kyoto: Ryukoku University Translation

It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that in this paradox of evil lies the crux of the entire teaching of Shinran. And behind this, needless to say, lay his profound awareness of the thorough depravity and sinfulness of human beings—not the least, of his own being.

SHINRAN GOES TO HÖNEN

The year 1201 was the crucial turning point in Shinran's life. It was in that year that he, after twenty years of life as a Tendai monk on Mt Hiei, the headquarters of the Tendai Order, decided to leave it and go to Hönen. The significance of this action, and the fact that it was a radical change in his life, is tersely expressed by Shinran at the end of his *Kyōgyōshinshō*:

I, Gutoku Shinran, disciple of Sākyamuni, discarded sundry practices and took refuge in the Primal Vow in 1201.⁸

It was in this year, therefore, that Shinran abandoned the traditional path of self-power and took refuge in the Other Power, the compassionate Vow of Amida that saves sinful beings just as they are.

We do not know exactly what led him to make this radical decision, but one thing seems clear: the traditional path of Buddhist practice that he followed on Mt Hiei did not work for him and he had to search for an alternative way of salvation. To be more exact, Shinran found himself to be utterly incapable of following the traditional "difficult path" because he found his passion-ridden nature hard to overcome. That he was in a very desperate situation is well attested to by the following words about his relationship to Hönen:

I have no idea whether the nenbutsu is truly the seed for my being born in the Pure Land or whether it is the karmic act for which I must fall into hell. Should I have been deceived by Hönen Shōnin and, saying the Name, plunge utterly into hell, even then I would have no regrets. The person who could have attained Buddhahood by endeavoring in other practices might regret that he had been deceived if he said the nenbutsu and so fell into hell. But I am one for whom any practice is difficult to

Center, 1982), 23–24. Unless otherwise indicated, the *Tannishō* quoted hereafter refers to this text and translation.

⁸ *True Teaching*, IV: 614; SSZ, II: 202.

accomplish, so hell is to be my home whatever I do.⁹

Shinran's wife, Eshinni, describes his attitude in one of her letters:

People would say all types of things about where the master [Hōnen] might go. They would even say that he was headed for an evil rebirth (*akudō* 惡道). Whenever people spoke such things, [Shinran] would reply, "I am one who believes that I would even go [with him], since from realm to realm and from rebirth to rebirth I am lost already."¹⁰

Shinran's going to Hönen was therefore a sort of "gamble," because he was not yet convinced that it was the right choice. But he had to gamble because he had no other choice; incapable of any practice, he felt that he was "lost" and that hell was his "destiny" anyhow. The full implication of his decision and the new faith he found evolved only gradually over the long span of his life. But the one thing that was clear to him was that he had to give up his moral fight with himself and find a new way of liberation that was not contingent upon this endless and hopeless fight. Shinran found this new path in Hönen's message of the sole-practice of nenbutsu, which was rapidly gaining popularity in the capital.

What kind of religious life did Shinran have and what kind of practices did he follow on Mt Hiei? Amidst the general obscurity surrounding the twenty years of Shinran's career as a Tendai monk on Mt Hiei, one thing is now recognized as certain, thanks to the letter of Eshinni—that he was a *dōsō* 堂僧 on the mountain. On the basis of current scholarship, Alfred Bloom says the following about *dōsō* and its significance for Shinran:

The *Dōsō* were priests of fairly low status in the organization of Mt Hiei and probably served either in the Jōgyōzammaidō or the Hokkedō. Though they have been confused with the *Dōshū*, another type of servant priest, it now appears that they were especially concerned with the ceremonies of the Continuous Nenbutsu performed in the Jōgyōzammaidō. As such they were particularly important because of their intimate connection to the development of Pure Land doctrine and practice. Ryōnin, the founder of the Yūzunenbutsu teaching in 1103, is an outstanding example of *Dōsō*.¹¹

⁹ *Tannishō*, 23.

¹⁰ Quoted in James C. Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 25.

¹¹ Alfred Bloom, "The Life of Shinran Shōnin: The Journey to Self-Acceptance,"

The “Continuous Nenbutsu” (or Uninterrupted Nenbutsu, *fudan nenbutsu* 不断念佛) practiced in the Jōgyōzanmaidō was a variation of the *jōgyōzanmai* 常行三昧 or the Samādhi of Constant Walking, which was brought to Mt Hiei by Ennin when he returned from T’ang China in 847. The Samādhi of Constant Walking, one of the four *samādhis* practiced in the Tendai system of meditation established by Chih-i, is based upon the *Hanjuzanmai kyō* (*Pratyutpannasamādhi-sūtra*), which teaches constant circumambulation of the Buddha’s statue for ninety days, accompanied by the uninterrupted uttering of Amida Buddha’s name with a view to seeing the appearance of Buddhas before one’s eyes. The Continuous Nenbutsu also consisted in the constant recitation of the name of Amida Buddha, but it differed from the Samādhi of Constantly Walking in the length of the practice. That is, it was usually practiced from three to seven days instead of the original ninety days.¹² It was by no means an easy practice, and Shinran must have led a life of strenuous discipline in order to practice this hard path. Bloom continues:

The knowledge that Shinran was a *Dōsō* and intimately involved in Pure Land thought already during his stay on Mt Hiei provides a context for understanding the religious anxiety and dissatisfaction which he experienced. As a *Dōsō*, he was exposed to Pure Land concepts concerning the evil character of the age and human existence. He was probably confronted frequently with the transiency of life, because the Continuous Nenbutsu services were sponsored by individuals mainly to acquire merit which could be transferred to a relative to ensure his good destiny. In this way Pure Land teachings penetrated Shinran’s mind and contributed to the deepening of his religious sensitivity.¹³

This should not be taken, however, as a suggestion that the Continuous Nenbutsu was the only major activity occupying Shinran’s religious life on Mt Hiei. In view of the extensive knowledge of Buddhist scriptures that Shinran demonstrates in his writings, there can be little doubt that he applied himself very hard to scriptural studies, especially those in the Tendai and Pure Land tradition as transmitted on Mt Hiei.¹⁴

¹² *Numen*, 15 (1968): 6. See also Akamatsu, *Shinran*, 31–33.

¹³ Akamatsu, *Shinran*, 33–34.

¹⁴ Bloom, “The Life of Shinran,” 6.

¹⁴ Concerning the influence of Tendai tradition on Shinran while he was on Mt Hiei, see Matsuno Junkō, *Shinran—Sono kōdō to shisō* (Tokyo: Hyōronsha, 1971), 51–66.

It is also highly likely that Shinran engaged in various other forms of Buddhist practices and meditations to which he could have been exposed during his twenty years of life in this eclectic center of Buddhism. But none proved successful for him, as he confessed: “I am one for whom any practice is difficult to accomplish.” We may be able to find in the following words of the *Kyōgyōshinshō* an echo of his own experience:

But it is hard for the foolish and ignorant, who are ever sinking in birth-and-death, to perform acts with the mind of meditative practices, for this is to cease thinking and to concentrate the mind. It is also hard to perform acts with the mind of non-meditative practices, for this is to discard evil and practice good. Thus, since it is hard even to visualize forms and fix the mind on them, [Shan-tao] states:

One may dedicate a lifetime of a thousand years, but still the dharma-eye will not be opened.

How much harder indeed is it to realize formlessness and cessation of thought. Therefore he states:

The Tathāgata already knows that foolish beings of the latter age possessed of karmic evil and defilements are incapable of visualizing forms and fixing the mind on them. How much harder is it to seek realization without visualizing forms; it is like a person lacking transcendent powers building a house in the air.¹⁵

Tradition has it that Shinran visited various shrines on Mt Hiei in order to seek an escape from his spiritual impasse. One such visit turned out to have a decisive impact on his life. According to Eshinni’s letter, Shinran once left the mountain and went to the Hexagonal Hall (Rokkakudō) in Kyoto—which enshrined the bodhisattva Kannon and which was allegedly founded by Shōtoku Taishi—to spend a hundred days in vigil there, to pray concerning his afterlife. On the dawn of the ninety-fifth day, he received a vision in which Shōtoku Taishi appeared to him with a message. Deeply moved by this, Shinran left the hall early in the morning and went to Hōnen “in order to meet the Venerable one who can be of help for his afterlife.”¹⁶

If this can be any clue as to what kind of religious concern preoccupied Shinran on Mt Hiei, we can conclude he was above all anxious about his future destiny, an anxiety that was intimately connected with his deep

¹⁵ *True Teaching*, IV: 501–02.

¹⁶ Quoted in Akamatsu, *Shinran*, 43–44.

consciousness of sin. As Tamura Enchō points out, it was not so much the sense of the transitoriness of worldly things as the sense of karmic sinfulness and the resulting concern for afterlife that led Shinran (and Hōnen as well) to aspire after birth in the Pure Land.¹⁷ The sense of the impermanence of the world, which was not unusual even among the nobility of the late Heian, could be easily accommodated within the traditional piety of the day, but the sense of one's own ineradicable sinfulness was something that called for an entirely new solution—one that can only come from *outside* oneself, i.e., from Other Power (*tariki* 他力), the Transcendent.

Shinran's visit to the Hexagonal Hall practically signified his break with the Buddhism of Mt Hiei. Perhaps it was not merely his own predicament but also the general decay he found in the religious atmosphere of the Tendai Order on the mountain that led Shinran to leave. The influx of unqualified monks into this center of the socioreligious establishment, the violent behavior of the monks as they applied pressure and voiced threats to the government in order to secure material benefits, the constant conflict between the student monks (*gakushō* 学生) and the priests (*dōshū* 堂衆), and the routine performance of rituals dedicated to gain worldly benefits—all these must have deeply disturbed a sensitive religious mind seeking a fundamental solution to a pressing problem: liberation from the world of birth-and-death.

Why, then, did Shinran go to Hōnen in particular? What was the connection between the message he received from Shōtoku Taishi and his decision to go to Hōnen? What was the content of the message? According to the letter of Eshinni cited above, it had been enclosed on a separate sheet of paper in the same letter, addressed to her daughter Kakushinni. Unfortunately, this sheet is not extant today.¹⁸ Various theories have been proposed regarding the matter, but Akamatsu's view seems most persuasive.¹⁹ According to him, Shinran received the following verse from Shōtoku Taishi, who was considered a manifestation of the bodhisattva Kannon:

When the devotee finds himself bound by his past karma to come in contact with the female sex, I will incarnate myself as a most beautiful

¹⁷ Tamura Enchō, *Nihon bukkyō shisōshi kenkyū*, 10–14.

¹⁸ Akamatsu, *Shinran*, 46–47.

¹⁹ See his discussion of this extremely complicated matter in *Shinran*, 46–65.

woman and become his object of love; and throughout his life I will be his helpmeet for the sake of embellishing this world, and on his death I will become his guide to the Land of Bliss.²⁰

Then the *Shinran denne* [The illustrated biography of Shinran], upon which the story of this dream is based, continues:

“This,” continued the Bodhisattva, “is my vow. Thou, Zenshin, shalt announce the signification of this my vow to the world and make all sentient beings know of it.” At this time, Zenshin still in a state of trance looked eastward facing directly the Rokkakudō, and descried a range of high mountains, on the highest peak of which was found congregating an immense number of people. He addressed them as commanded by the Bodhisattva, and when he imagined that he had come to the end of his address, he awaked from the dream.²¹

Although this verse cannot directly explain why Shinran particularly chose to go to Hōnen—except for the allusion to the birth in Pure Land—it is significant at least in two respects. First, it throws light upon the kind of problem that was vexing the young monk Shinran at the age of twenty-nine. Secondly, it gives us an explanation for Shinran's marriage later on. The vow of celibacy that he took as a monk, irresistible sexual desire, and the resulting concern for his future destiny, are all indirectly revealed in the dream.

Most likely it was in order to solve this problem once and for all that Shinran surrendered himself to Hōnen's teaching. Even though Hōnen himself is said to have led a celibate life with strict adherence to the pre-

²⁰ Gesshō Sasaki and Daisetz T. Suzuki, trans., *The Life of Shinran Shōnin* (*Godenshō*), in *Collected Writings on Shin Buddhism* by Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki, The Eastern Buddhist Society, ed. (Kyoto: Shinshū Ōtaniha, 1973), 170; *Honganji Shōnin Shinran denne*, SSZ, III: 640.

²¹ Suzuki, *The Life of Shinran Shōnin*, 170; SSZ, III: 640. There are several editions of this *Shinran denne* (with different titles) or the *Godenshō* [Biography], which is the earliest Shinran biography; the one quoted here is that preserved in the Nishi Honganji Temple. There is an important difference between them concerning the year when this dream is supposed to have taken place; see Akamatsu's discussion in *Shinran*, 46–65; see also Matsuno Junkō, *Shinran—Sono kōdō to shisō*, 67–90. Matsuno agrees with Akamatsu in viewing the problem of sexual desire as the chief factor in Shinran's conversion to Hōnen's message, but he does not endorse the view that this particular dream provided the direct occasion for the conversion. This story of the dream in *Shinran denne* is based upon *Shinran muki* 親鸞夢記 [Record of Shinran's dream], of which there also are several versions, thus complicating matters further. See the above references in Akamatsu and Matsuno; see also Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū*, 23–24, for a brief discussion of this problem.

cepts, there was definitely a revolutionary spirit in his message of nenbutsu, which liberated people once and for all from the heavy burden of the monastic precepts. Note the following admonition of Hōnen, for instance:

When you live the present life, spend your life reciting nenbutsu; if anything impedes your nenbutsu, throw it away, whatever it may be. If you cannot say nenbutsu as a wandering monk (*hijiri* 聖), say it taking a wife; if you cannot do it with a wife, do it as a wandering monk.²²

For Hōnen, attaining birth in the Pure Land through nenbutsu was the sole purpose of life on earth; it was the *summum bonum* that all human beings have to pursue with their utmost power at any cost and compared with which all other matters become secondary. Hōnen's biography records the following dialogue:

"If we only put our trust in Amida's Primal Vow, there is no doubt whatever about our future destiny, but what are we to do with the present world?" "Well, the thing to do is to make the nenbutsu practice the chief thing in life, and to lay aside everything that you think may interfere with it. If you cannot stay in one spot and do it, then do it when you are walking. If you cannot do it as a priest, then do it as a layman. If you cannot do it alone, then do it in company with others. If you cannot do it and at the same time provide yourself with food and clothing, then accept the help of others and go on doing it. Or if you cannot get others to help you, then look after yourself but keep on doing it. Your wife and children and domestics are for this very purpose, of helping you to practice it, and if they prove an obstacle, you ought not to have any.... How tenderly should we care for our bodies, and how earnestly should we practice the nenbutsu, when we know that our destiny is birth in the Pure Land...."²³

Another dialogue is also very significant:

"Is there any difference in the *Ōjō* [Birth in the Pure Land] rank of those who keep the precepts and repeat the nenbutsu but a few times, and those who break them but say the nenbutsu very often?" Hōnen replying pointed to the mats on which they were sitting, and said, "It is because the mats exist that we can say of them that they are either worn out or not. If there were no mats how could they be worn out or otherwise? In like manner in these wicked days we may say that the precepts [them-

²² Quoted in Akamatsu, *Shinran*, 66; *Wago tōroku*, SSZ, IV: 683.

²³ Coates and Ishizuka, *Hōnen*, II: 737.

selves] are neither kept nor broken, for the monks themselves are such in name only, as Dengyō Daishi very clearly states in his *Mappō Tōmyōki* (Record of the light in the Latter Days of the Law). So there is nothing to be gained by discussing the question of the breaking or the keeping of the precepts. It is for just such common mortals as this, that the Primal Vow itself was made in the first place, and so we cannot be too eager and diligent in our calling upon the sacred name."²⁴

In short, according to Hōnen, the issues of whether or not to keep the precepts, whether or not to marry, are no longer primary in the world of Amida's Primal Vow. Salvation does not depend on them but on the whole-hearted practice of nenbutsu. Would this not be the kind of message that would liberate Shinran from the lonely struggle he was waging with himself on Mt Hiei?

Hōnen was already sixty-nine years old when Shinran took refuge in him, and twenty-six years had passed since he launched the movement of the sole-practice of nenbutsu (1175). Hōnen's masterpiece, the *Senjaku shū*, had already been completed, and the movement he had launched was rapidly spreading in the capital. It is highly likely that Shinran had already been aware of this movement and its message even before he joined it, but the actual decision to join it only came after the aforementioned religious experience at the Hexagonal Hall. It is said that Shinran visited Hōnen's residence in Yoshimizu for one hundred days without missing a single day to learn the new path to salvation,²⁵ and he was given a new Buddhist name, Shakkū 緯空, by Hōnen. The culmination of Shinran's contact with Hōnen, which was to last for six years until 1207, the year of their exile, came when Hōnen granted him permission in 1205 to make a copy of the *Senjaku shū*, which was being circulated rather secretly among a select group of disciples. Shinran recalls this event at the end of his *Kyōgyōshinshō*:

I, Gutoku Shinran, disciple of Sākyamuni, discarded sundry practices and took refuge in the Primal Vow in 1201. In 1205 Master Genkū [Hōnen], out of his benevolence, granted me permission to copy his *Passages on the Nenbutsu Selected in the Primal Vow*. In the same year, on the fourteenth day of the fourth month, the master inscribed [the copy] in his own hand with an inside title, "Passages on the Nenbutsu Selected

²⁴ Coates and Ishizuka, 736–37 (translation slightly adjusted).

²⁵ Akamatsu, *Shinran*, 43.

in the Primal Vow," with the words, "Namu-amida-butsu: as the act that leads to birth in the Pure Land, the nenbutsu is taken to be fundamental," and with [the name he had bestowed on me,] "Shakkū, disciple of Śākyamuni." That day, my request to borrow his portrait was granted, and I made a copy. During that same year, on the twenty-ninth day of the seventh intercalary month, the master inscribed my copy of the portrait with "Namu-amida-butsu" and with a passage expressing the true teaching:

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters say my Name as few as ten times and yet are not born, may I not attain supreme enlightenment. The Buddha has now actually attained Buddhahood. Know that the momentous Primal Vow is not in vain, and that when sentient beings say the Name, they unfailingly attain birth.

Further, since my name "Shakkū" had been changed in accord with a revelation in a dream, on the same day he wrote the characters of my new name [Zenshin 善信] in his own hand. At that time, the master was seventy-three years of age.... Thus, suppressing tears of both sorrow and joy, I record the circumstances that have resulted [in my compilation of this book].²⁶

It was probably in this same year of 1205 that Shinran received from Hōnen the permission to marry and was granted the name Zenshin, which was the name revealed to him in that dream in the Hexagonal Hall.²⁷ Even in 1204, when Shinran signed the *Shichikajō kishōmon* 七箇条起請文 [Seven-article pledge] drafted by Hōnen in order to curb the loose conduct of some of his disciples and avoid conflict with the established Buddhist order, Shinran attached the word "monk" (*sō* 僧) to his old name Shakkū.

In 1207, however, we find Shinran describing himself as "neither a monk nor a layman" (*sōni arazu zokuni arazu* 非僧非俗) and adopting the pejorative epithet *toku* 禿 (stubble-haired) for himself. This was when his new life with Hōnen came to an abrupt end as a result of the persecution of the nenbutsu movement. Shinran recalls this tragic event with indignation at the end of his *Kyōgyōshinshō*:

²⁶ *True Teaching*, IV: 614–16; SSZ, II: 202–203.

²⁷ Akamatsu, *Shinran*, 71–74. It is not known with certainty whom Shinran married at this time, but Akamatsu is inclined to think that Shinran married only once, and that thus it was Eshinni, the author of the famous letters; see 74–78.

The emperor and his ministers, acting against the dharma and violating human rectitude, became enraged and embittered. As a result, Master Genkū—the eminent founder who had enabled the true essence of the Pure Land way to spread vigorously [in Japan]—and a number of his followers, without receiving any deliberation of their [alleged] crimes, were summarily sentenced to death or were dispossessed of their monkhood, given [secular] names, and consigned to distant banishment. I was among the latter. Hence, I am now neither a monk nor one in worldly life. For this reason, I have taken the term *Toku* ["stubble-haired"] as my name. Master Genkū and his disciples, being banished to the provinces in different directions, passed a period of five years [in exile].²⁸

Even when one considers that imperial authority was not, in the late years of Shinran's life when the above statement was written, what it used to be, it was not a small act of courage on the part of Shinran to indict the emperor and his ministers of "acting against the dharma and violating human rectitude." If Shinran was still carrying a smoldering grudge in his late years over the unjust persecution he and his master had suffered from the authorities decades ago, how much more anger and frustration would the young Shinran have felt at the time of his actual exile? At any rate, here we see Shinran saying that he was deprived of monkhood and consequently became "neither a monk nor a layman." Does this suggest then that Shinran had not yet been married before the exile and that he adopted that designation for himself unwillingly?

The word *toku*, it has been pointed out, was used during Shinran's times to refer to those monks who were living a life of moral laxity unbefitting persons who had renounced secular life, monks who had "broken the precepts without any sense of remorse" (*hakai muzan* 破戒無慚).²⁹ Shinran added another word *gu* 愚 ("foolish") to it and made *gutoku* ("foolish and stubble-haired") his surname. In contrast to those to whom this ignominious designation was attached by other people, Shinran did not hesitate to use it of himself—not gladly, presumably, but with conviction and courage. Unlike others, Shinran broke the precepts literally "without any sense of remorse." In other words, he was a "criminal of conscience" who had broken without religious compunction the precept of celibacy. It is even possible that his openly married life, based

²⁸ *True Teaching*, IV: 613–14; SSZ, II: 201–202.

²⁹ Miyazaki Enjun, "Shinran Shōninden sobyō," in *Shinran no kenkyū*. Miyazaki Enjun *chosakushū*, I (Kyoto: Shimonaku Shuppan, 1986), 23; Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū*, 26–27.

upon a new type of religious conviction, was one of the reasons the authorities picked him out among the numerous disciples of Hōnen to be punished.³⁰ For him, being married and leading a religious life as a “monk” were not incompatible at all. For he believed that in the Last Dharma-age there is in the first place no precept to be broken, and no monk except in name only. Quoting the *Mappō tōmyōki*, Shinran boldly says:

Next, after the end of the semblance dharma-age, there are no precepts whatsoever. Recognizing the momentum of the times, the Buddha praises those who are monks in name only, declaring them to be the field of merits for the world, in order to save the people of the last dharma-age.³¹

Numerous monks, indeed, broke the precept of celibacy and led an illicit married life. As the *Shaseki shū* 沙石集 says, “One has rarely heard in past years of a religious man (*shōnin*) during this last age (*matsudai* 末代) who has not taken a wife.”³² Akamatsu points out that around the time of Shinran’s birth one who hid his marriage was considered a venerable one (*shōnin*), but that during the time of Shinran’s later years not only were there few *shōnin* who did not marry, there also were few who bothered to hide it.³³ Shinran did not hide it either. Illicit as Shinran’s marriage was, it was nevertheless based upon a clear religious conviction, acquired through Hōnen’s teaching, that, with precept or without, married or not, the sole purpose of life is to attain salvation through nenbutsu. The traditional path of “self-power” had already been given up and was no longer meaningful for Shinran. Calling himself “neither a monk nor a layman” and “foolish stubble-haired” was therefore an act of defiance or protest against the traditional Buddhist community—as well as against the authorities—who were, in his mind, holding on to the no longer workable Path of Sages, turning people into hypocrites. It signaled at the same time the emergence of a new type of religious identity that cut across the traditional bifurcation of the Buddhist community into the monks (*shukke*) and the laity (*zaike*).

³⁰ Akamatsu, *Shinran*, 115–16.

³¹ *True Teaching*, IV: 551; SSZ, II: 173.

³² Quoted in Dobbins, 26. The *Shasekishū* [Collection of sand and pebbles] is a collection of Buddhist stories composed around Shinran’s time. See Morrell’s translation, *Sand and Pebbles* (1985).

³³ Akamatsu, *Shinran*, 62–63.

Because of the persecution, the *Tannishō* records, “Hōnen Shōnin and seven disciples were banished, and four executed. The Shōnin was exiled to Hata in Tosa Province [the present-day Kōchi Prefecture on Shikoku] under the criminal’s name of Fujii Motohiko, male, aged seventy-six [or seventy-five?]. Shinran was exiled to Echigo Province [present-day Niigata Prefecture] under the criminal’s name Fujii Yoshizane, aged thirty-five.”³⁴ Why was Shinran, of all the many disciples of Hōnen, particularly included among the seven exiled? We have already mentioned his married life as a possible reason for this. Beside this, however, there must have been something in his thought, too, that distinguished him from other disciples of Hōnen.

It is well known that among Hōnen’s disciples opinions were divided among those who believed the practice of nenbutsu itself was more important (*kigyōha* 起行派), and those who held that faith, i.e., the mental attitude with which one should say the nenbutsu was more important (*anjinha* 安心派).³⁵ Concerning this problem of the relative priority of practice and faith, Dobbins points out the following significant fact:

Of the many interpretations of the nenbutsu in circulation, those emphasizing practice or the effort of the believer were closer to the position of the traditional schools of Buddhism and were therefore more likely to be tolerated. Those which rejected practice and highlighted faith were frequently blamed for social unrest and hence became perennial targets of suppression. Among the eight nenbutsu priests sentenced to exile in 1207 [seven, if we exclude Hōnen], Kōsai, Shōkū, Gyōkū, and Shinran are known to have stressed faith in their teachings.³⁶

In other words, Shinran may have become a special target because his teaching was considered to be more radical than others, in that it regarded the traditional Buddhist practices, including the observance of the precepts, as irrelevant for salvation, which is attainable only by the power of Amida’s Vow to save sentient beings laden with blind passions. And Shinran showed his belief in action by taking a wife.

³⁴ *The Tanni Shō: Notes Lamenting Differences* (Kyoto: Ryukoku University Translation Center; Ryukoku Translation Series II, 1962), 84.

³⁵ Mochizuki Shinkō, *Ryakujutsu Jōdo kyōrishi* (Tokyo: Nihon Tosho Center, 1977 [reprint]), 251–55.

³⁶ Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū*, 19 (brackets mine).

THE AWARENESS OF KARMIC EVIL

We have seen that it was above all Shinran's deep awareness of evil in himself that led him to break with the Buddhism of Mt Hiei and join Hōnen's nenbutsu group. Since this is such an important element in understanding Shinran's life and thought in general, we should devote more space here to his understanding of himself as a *bonpu* and his view of humanity.

Shinran's deep awareness of the thorough depravity of his own being seems to have persisted throughout his entire life, hence not merely before he found the light of salvation in Hōnen's teaching but even after his discovery of Amida's world of grace. The *Tannishō* records the following significant dialogue between Shinran and his disciple:

I asked the Master, "Although utterance of the Name emerges from within me, I scarcely experience such joy that I leap and dance, and I have no aspiration to go to the Pure Land quickly. Why is this?"

He replied, "I, Shinran, have also had this question, and the same thought occurs to you, Yuien-bō!

"When I reflect deeply on my failure to rejoice that my birth in the Pure Land is settled—something for which a person should dance with joy in the air and on the earth—I realize all the more clearly, through this very absence of joy, that my birth is indeed settled. What suppresses the heart that ought to take joy and prevents me from rejoicing is the activity of my blind passions. But the Buddha, knowing this beforehand, said that he would save 'the foolish being full of blind passions'; such, then, is the compassionate Vow of Other Power. Realizing that it is precisely for the sake of such people as myself, I feel it all the more trustworthy."³⁷

Here we see Shinran turning the very sign of his sinfulness, "the absence of joy" (which does not disappear even after his encounter with Other Power), into an even greater reason to believe in the compassionate Vow of Amida.

Many important details about Shinran's life still remain in obscurity and are the subject of scholarly speculation,³⁸ but one thing seems cer-

³⁷ *Tannishō*, 27 (translation slightly amended; see p. 71 of the same translation).

³⁸ Some important items still unclear are: Shinran's mother; the motives behind his entering the priesthood; his religious life on Mt Hiei and the specific reason for leaving it and joining Hōnen's nenbutsu movement; how many times he married and when; the rea-

tain: that Shinran lived his entire life in constant awareness of his own sinfulness, so hard to uproot, and its converse, an infinite gratitude to Amida Buddha who had already achieved his salvation through the compassionate Primal Vow. The *Tannishō* records:

Shinran would often say,

When I consider deeply the Vow of Amida, which arose from five kalpas of profound thought, I realize that it was entirely for the sake of myself alone! Then how I am filled with gratitude for the Primal Vow, in which Amida settled on saving me, though I am burdened thus greatly with karma.³⁹

Shinran's awareness of evil in himself seems to have grown sharper with his discovery of the world of Amida's compassionate Vow. His own depravity came into greater relief when it was put alongside Amida's mind:

I know nothing of what is good or evil. For if I could know thoroughly, as is known in the mind of Amida, that an act was good, then I would know the meaning of "good." If I could know thoroughly, as Amida knows, that an act was evil, then I would know "evil." But for a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are lies and gibberish, totally without truth and sincerity. The nenbutsu alone is true and real.⁴⁰

When one is so evil that one does not truly know what evil is, all the distinction of good and evil on the level of common sense is blasted as "lies and gibberish." This was, paradoxically, what Shinran came to realize through his encounter with Amida's grace. His awareness of sin and evil, rather than disappearing or diminishing, gained depth and clarity, causing Shinran to cling all the more to the source of salvation coming from other than himself.

son he went to the Kantō area after his release from exile instead of returning to Kyoto; his activities in the Kantō area; and the reason he left the Kantō area in his later years. The present chapter is not intended to be a biographical study of Shinran in a strict sense but only sketches what I consider to be important aspects of his life, with a special focus on his awareness of evil as the leitmotif of his life and thought.

³⁹ *Tannishō*, 43.

⁴⁰ *Tannishō*, 44.

This sense of inexhaustible evil remained with Shinran to the last minute of his life and made him humble and “poor in spirit,” always looking up to Other Power, where alone he found the light. Nowhere else, perhaps, is this sense of ineradicable sinfulness more forcefully expressed by Shinran than in his *Gutoku hitan jukkai* 愚禿悲歎述懐 [Lamentation and confession of Gutoku Shinran], which was composed when he was eighty-six years old:

Although I have taken refuge in the true teaching of the Pure Land,
The mind of truth hardly exists in me;
Moreover, I am so falsehearted and untrue
That there cannot be any mind of purity.
Each of us shows an outward appearance
Of being wise, good, and diligent,
Possessing so much greed, anger, and wrong views,
We are filled with all kinds of deceit.
My evilness is truly difficult to renounce;
The mind is like a serpent or scorpion.
Even doing virtuous deeds is tainted with poison,
And so is called false practice.
How shameless and unrepentant a person am I
And without a heart of truth and sincerity;
But because the Name is transferred by Amida,
Its virtue pervades the ten directions.⁴¹

The fact that Shinran lived his life always deeply aware of his own sinfulness is best witnessed by the epithet he adopted for himself when he was exiled to Echigo: “Gutoku.” By thus calling himself “foolish and stubble-haired,” he indicated his view of himself as an ordinary man (*bonpu*) and his status as “neither a monk nor a layman,” his own description of himself after the exile.⁴² Shinran continued to use this epithet for the rest of his life, not in order to demonstrate his humility but as a sign that he had given up the attempt to be more than “a foolish being full of blind passions” (*bonnō gusoku bonpu* 煩惱具足凡夫) and a sign of his calm

⁴¹ *Shōzōmatsu Wasan: Shinran’s Hymns on the Last Age* (Kyoto: Ryukoku University Translation Center, 1980; Ryukoku Translation Series VII), 94–97 (translation altered); SSZ, II: 527. The concept of the Name “transferred” by Amida will be discussed below in Chapter Three.

⁴² *True Teaching*, IV: 613–14; SSZ, II: 201–202.

acceptance of himself as such an ordinary being in the light of the grace he had found in Amida’s “Vow Ocean.”

We should not misunderstand Shinran’s awareness of evil in himself as something merely based upon his moral self-reflection. Sin and evil, for Shinran, was of karmic origin and determination. They had the nature of a deep-rooted karmic hindrance that had been accumulated in him throughout innumerable past lives in the world of birth-and-death. Thus Shinran seems to have been possessed of a deterministic sense of human sinfulness:

Good thoughts arise in us through the beckoning of past good, and we come to think and do evil through the working of karmic evil. The late master [Shinran] said, “Know that every evil act done—even so slight as a particle caught on a strand of rabbit’s fur or sheep’s wool—has its cause in past karma.”⁴³

Although these words are quoted in the *Tannishō* in order to show that any moral merit or demerit we may have is completely of no account for our salvation (which is only possible through Amida’s compassionate Vow), it is a good indication of Shinran’s sense of the karmic determination of our moral acts. The implication is that there are really no good acts that we can claim as *our* acts. Whether good or evil, all of our acts, being under karmic influence beyond our control, merely demonstrate our moral helplessness and our ultimate sinfulness, which can only be overcome through Amida’s salvific work of grace—something that is beyond the law of cause and effect, or that is under an entirely different kind of karmic law, the karmic law of Other Power. For Shinran, therefore, good and evil are fundamentally of a religious dimension beyond moral judgment:

Shinran characterizes evil as “karmic” (in such terms as *akugō* and *zaigō*, literally “evil karma”)..... For Shinran, all our acts, whether good or evil by moral or ethical standards, are evil in a religious sense, being defiled by ignorance and passions. Moreover, this evil is karmic, meaning that it stretches back infinitely into the past. Since the beginningless past, all our acts have worked only to bind us to samsaric life. Because of aeons of repetition and habit, we harbor unknowable evil in the depths of our existence. Hence, to become aware of the roots of our existence is to know the basic nature of the self as pervaded by passions and ignorant

⁴³ *Tannishō*, 33.

clinging. This attachment traps us completely, and we cannot let go.⁴⁴

Thus, from the perspective of karmic human nature, our ordinary moral distinctions lose their meaning. To be sure, Shinran uses the terms “good” and “evil” in an ordinary relative sense as well. But, from the absolute point of view that he came to attain through his discovery of the world of Amida’s true goodness, all our human moral distinctions crumble; we are all sinners, laden with deep-rooted karmic evils. Hence, our actions, good or evil, cannot escape their karmic nature, which only causes us to sink deeper into the sea of suffering. It was this deep karmic sense of evil that made Shinran confess that he was incapable of any practice whatever. No matter what practice he tried, even the “easy practice” of nenbutsu, Shinran felt that he could not escape from what he was, “a foolish being full of blind passions.” This was the source of his sense of despair. Shinran says:

In all small and foolish beings, at all times, thoughts of greed and desire incessantly defile any goodness of heart; thoughts of anger and hatred constantly consume the Dharma-treasure. Even if one urgently acts and urgently practices as though sweeping fire from one’s head, all these acts must be called “poisoned and sundry good” and “false and deceitful practice.” They cannot be called “true and real action.” To seek to be born in the land of immeasurable light through such false and poisoned good is completely wrong.⁴⁵

Inseparably related to this deterministic sense of the karmic force of evil in Shinran was his keen awareness of the spiritual crisis of his time, which he understood as the period of *mappō*, the age of Last Dharma. The awareness of the time (*ji 時*) and the awareness of human capacity (*ki 機*) reinforced each other in Shinran; they went hand in hand, not merely as a general theory of *mappō* but also as his personal experience. How seriously Shinran took the idea of *mappō* is well shown by the Japanese hymns he composed on the three ages of dharma, the *Shōzōmatsu wasan*. They are introduced with the following lamentation:

For sentient beings of the Last Dharma-age with the five defilements practice and enlightenment are now beyond reach; and the teachings of Sakyamuni that had remained have all passed into the Dragon Palace.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ueda and Hirota, *Shinran*, 156–57.

⁴⁵ *True Teaching*, II: 234; SSZ, II: 62.

⁴⁶ SSZ, II: 516.

It is not only that people are unable to cultivate and achieve enlightenment, they even have no desire to achieve Buddhahood, no desire to save others. They have no faith to accept the true teaching of the Path of Pure Land, but, full of doubt, slander and persecute it. Devoid of the true and real mind (*shinjitsushin 真實心*), they have no desire to be born in the Pure Land and have no joy when they hear the message. While professing to practice the Buddhist path, people “inwardly revere and practice other teachings”; they worship heavenly gods and earthly deities and are absorbed in divinations and sacrificial rituals. The titles “monk” and “dharma-master” are misused. These are some of the signs of the *mappō* that Shinran deplores in his hymns.

Shinran also devoted a considerable amount of space to the theme of the Last Dharma-age in the sixth chapter of his *Kyōgyōshinshō*. In a passage that is almost like the conclusion to the whole book, Shinran declares:

Truly we know that the teachings of the Path of Sages were intended for the period when the Buddha was in the world and for the right dharma-age; they are altogether inappropriate for the times and beings of the semblance and last dharma-ages and the age when the dharma has become extinct. Already their time has passed; they are no longer in accord with beings.

The true essence of the Pure Land way compassionately draws all of the innumerable evil, defiled beings to enlightenment without discrimination, whether they be of the period when the Buddha was in the world, of the right, semblance, or last dharma-age, or of the time when the dharma has become extinct.⁴⁷

And in the postscript to the work, Shinran says:

Reflecting within myself, I see that in the various teachings of the Path of Sages, practice and enlightenment died out long ago, and that the true essence of the Pure Land way is the path to realization now vital and flourishing.⁴⁸

Thus, for Shinran, who was gripped by a sense of internal crisis (the inability to get rid of karmic evil and sinfulness) as well as of external crisis (the Last Dharma-age), the only way out was the Path of the Pure

⁴⁷ *True Teaching*, IV: 532; SSZ, II: 166.

⁴⁸ *True Teaching*, IV: 613; SSZ, II: 201.

Land. The teaching should be in agreement with the time and people's capacity, and therefore the Path of the Sages (*shōdōmon* 聖道門) is no longer practicable for people living in this age of *mappō*. One should carefully discern the time in which one lives and one's own spiritual capacity:

Thus, the multitudes of this evil, defiled world, ignorant of the distinctive characteristics of the latter age, revile the behavior and attitude of monks and nuns, but all people of the present, whether monk or lay, must take measure of their own capabilities.⁴⁹

Shinran sharply criticized the followers of the Path of Sages who, not realizing the time and the capacity, still held on to unworkable traditional notions and practices. Thus, in his preface to the chapter on faith in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, he says:

But the monks and laity of this latter age and the religious teachers of these times are floundering in concepts of "self-nature" and "mind-only," and they disparage the true realization of enlightenment in the Pure Land way. Or lost in the self-power attitude of meditative and non-meditative practices, they are ignorant of true faith, which is diamond-like.⁵⁰

Although all these words of Shinran concerning evil in human beings primarily date from the period in his life when he was firmly settled in Pure Land faith, probably long after his encounter with Hōnen, they must have their origin in the spiritual predicament that he experienced through twenty years of life as a Tendai monk on Mt Hiei and that ultimately led him to depart from that life forever. And this sense of the unbridgeable gap between what he was and what he wanted to be, between his own state of being and Buddhahood, afterwards never left him—to form, as we shall see, a major ingredient of his thought.

SHINRAN IN EXILE

Whatever the specific charge under which Shinran was sentenced to exile, the four years in the Echigo region were another important turning point in his life. Away from the capital and his hometown, separated from his

⁴⁹ *True Teaching*, IV: 537; SSZ, II: 168.

⁵⁰ *True Teaching*, II: 201; SSZ, II: 47. "Faith" is the translation of *shinjin* 信心, which the translators of the Shin Buddhism Translation Series decided to leave untranslated; we will discuss this important matter in Chapter Three, on the concept of faith in Shinran. We will consistently replace *shinjin* with "faith" throughout this book.

revered teacher, and under the harsh living conditions of a strange place, Shinran now had to stand firmly on his own feet, not merely economically—no longer a monk but a responsible head of a household—but also in religious faith and thought. Yet, it was most likely through this experience of living among the uncultivated common people of the northern region that his thought world began to mature and assume a different tone from that of his master.

In the northern region of Hokuriku on the Japan Sea, Shinran was exposed to a new way of life that must have deepened his understanding of human existence. He witnessed the life of the common people who had to struggle for existence under adverse material circumstances, pursuing jobs such as hunting and fishing that automatically involved them in the sin of killing living beings; he met ignorant and uncultured people who could not even read a single character, not to mention the difficult Buddhist scriptures, poor people who could not afford to perform for themselves costly meritorious acts of donation to the sangha.

Although Shinran himself had already renounced the privileges and pretensions of a monk and considered himself no more than a common man in the spiritual sense, a *bonpu*, his actual contact with these "real" common people during his exile must have awakened in him a new awareness of the reality and problems of human existence, deepening his sense of identity with humble folk who, by their very lowliness and ignorance, were probably more open to the message of the Pure Land gospel than the learned and more sophisticated people in the capital. In his *Tuishinshō mon'i* (Notes on the "essentials of faith alone"), explanations of the Chinese passages quoted in the work of Seikaku 聖観 (a disciple of Hōnen), Shinran says:

"To abandon the mind of self-power" admonishes the various and diverse kinds of people—masters of Hinayāna or Mahāyāna, ignorant beings, good or evil—to abandon the conviction that one is good, to cease relying on the self, to stop reflecting knowingly on one's evil heart, and further to abandon the judging of people as good and bad. When such shackled foolish beings—the lowly who are hunters and peddlers—thus wholly entrust themselves to the Name embodying great wisdom, the inconceivable Vow of the Buddha of unhindered light, then while burdened as they are with blind passion, they attain the supreme nirvāṇa. "Shackled" describes us, who are bound by all our various blind passion. Blind passion refers to pains which torment the body and afflictions

which distress the heart and mind. The hunter is he who slaughters the many kinds of living things; this is the huntsman. The peddler is he who buys and sells things; this is the trader. They are called “low.” Such peddlers, hunters, and others are *none other than we, who are like stones and tiles and pebbles*.⁵¹

Worth noting here is the expression, “burdened as they are with blind passion, they attain the supreme *nirvāṇa*.” For the only form of salvation meaningful to the “hunters and peddlers” who had no other choice of livelihood was the one that can be attained despite the passions and sins that they were bound to commit by their karmic destiny. And they are, says Shinran, “none other than we, who are like stones and tiles and pebbles.” Shinran continues:

When we entrust ourselves to the Tathāgata’s Primal Vow, we, who are like bits of tile and pebbles, are turned into gold. Peddlers and hunters, who are like stones and tiles and pebbles, are grasped and never abandoned by the Tathāgata’s light.⁵²

Later on we will have a chance to examine the meaning of being “grasped and never abandoned by Tathāgata’s light.” It is a gift granted by Amida Buddha to the person who turns to him in faith for salvation. Although Shinran’s Pure Land thought may not yet have been fully developed in the period of exile, it was through his experience of life among the poor and ignorant that he must have deeply realized who the people are who really need the compassion of Amida and to whom the message of his grace should be addressed. Finding among them an image of himself as a “foolish being full of blind passions,” Shinran’s heart must have reached out to them in sympathy.

Although his *Ichinen-tanen mon’i* (Notes on once-calling and many-calling), a sort of commentary on the work by Ryūkan 隆寛, another disciple of Hōnen, was composed very late in his life, Shinran explains why he put them on paper:

That people of the countryside, who do not know the meanings of characters and who are painfully and hopelessly ignorant, may easily understand, I have repeatedly written the same things again and again. The

⁵¹ Notes on “Essentials of Faith Alone”: A Translation of Shinran’s *Yuishinshō-mon’i* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1979; Shin Buddhism Translation Series), 40 (italics mine); SSZ, II: 628–29. Hereafter, this translation will be referred to as *Faith Alone*.

⁵² *Faith Alone*, 40–41; SSZ, II: 629.

educated reader will probably find this writing peculiar and may ridicule it. But paying no heed to such criticism, I write only that foolish people may easily grasp the essential meaning.⁵³

For Shinran, it was precisely to these common people who had nothing to boast about—socially, morally, or religiously—and nothing to contribute to their afterlife that the unconditional boundless compassion of Amida’s Other Power was extended, just as it was to his own being, deeply “sinking in an immense ocean of desires and attachments,” that Amida’s grace had reached out through his master Hōnen. Would it be wrong to find in the following passage, recorded in the *Tannishō*, a reflection of his life with the poor and ignorant in the Hokuriku region?

“If it were only though observing precepts and upholding rules that one were able to entrust oneself to the Primal Vow, how could we [ever] become free of birth-and-death?” [Shinran said]. Even such wretched beings [as we], upon encountering the Primal Vow, in reality come to “presume” upon it. But even so, evil acts not possessed [karmically] in one’s existence can hardly be committed. Further, “Those who make their way in this world drawing nets in the seas and rivers and angling, and companions who carry on their lives hunting beasts in the moors and mountains and taking fowl, and people who pass [their lives] conducting trade or cultivating paddies and fields, are all the same” [Shinran said].⁵⁴

The inevitability of an “immoral life” of breaking the precepts, the karmic determination of evil acts, utter renunciation of all human efforts to contribute to one’s salvation, and the purely gratuitous character of the salvation made possible by Amida’s Vow Power, which requires us to meet no condition other than the simple act of entrusting ourselves—all these elements Shinran may already have learned under Hōnen; but they were deepened and crystallized into clearer consciousness in him through the praxis of the Pure Land teaching he had received from his master among the poor and the ignorant. Seen in this way, Shinran’s exile turned out to be a blessing in disguise. As Shinran himself is said to have confessed: “And again, if my Great Teacher, the Venerable Genkū, were not sent away into a remote province by the authorities, how should I ever

⁵³ Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling: A Translation of Shinran’s *Ichinen-tanen mon’i* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1980; Shin Buddhism Translation Series), 50; SSZ, II: 619–20. Hereafter, this translation will be referred to as *Once-calling*.

⁵⁴ *Tannishō*, 95–97.

live a life of banishment? And if I did not live a life of banishment, how could I hope to have the opportunity to convert the people living far away from the centre of culture? This too must be ascribed to the virtue of my Venerable Teacher.”⁵⁵

SHINRAN IN KANTŌ

Shinran’s evangelizing activity in the Echigo region, however, must have been rather limited, seeing that he was a “criminal” sentenced to exile. He seems to have occupied himself more with study and reflection on the meaning of the Pure Land teaching he had received from Hōnen. In a list, dating from the early fourteenth century, of his direct disciples, only one person from Echigo is mentioned, and most of them come from the Kantō area.⁵⁶

Shinran moved to the Kantō region with his family in 1214, about three years after the ban had been lifted. We do not know for certain why he chose to move to the Kantō region instead of returning to Kyoto. Perhaps the situation in Kyoto was perceived to be fraught with danger, the nenbutsu movement still being under prohibition there; perhaps he saw more opportunity, evangelically or economically, in the Kantō area, which was emerging as the new center of political power with Kamakura as the seat of the bakufu.⁵⁷ Or, perhaps, Shinran was simply unable for some reason to leave Echigo until 1214, and by this time Hōnen had already passed away (1212), so he found no reason to go back to Kyoto. At any rate, he seems to have been actively engaged in evangelizing work in the Kantō region and quite successful in gaining converts to the Pure Land faith.

The adherents of the new faith in the Kantō region met regularly in a place called a *dōjō* 道場, meaning a “place for [cultivating] enlightenment.” Kakunyo, the third-generation patriarch of the Shinshū, says of it:

Among all the disciples to whom Shinran personally imparted his teachings long ago, there were none who established temples. He suggested that they construct a *dōjō* simply by altering an ordinary dwelling place

⁵⁵ Suzuki, *The Life of Shinran Shōnin*, 171; SSZ, III: 641.

⁵⁶ Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū*, 27.

⁵⁷ See Matsuno’s brief discussion of the various reasons proposed for Shinran’s move to the Kantō: *Shinran*, 215–17.

slightly, perhaps by extending its roof.⁵⁸

Dobbins describes the religious life centering around *dōjō* during and after Shinran’s time:

Dōjō of this type were not unique to the Shinshū, but were prevalent throughout the Pure Land movement. The local congregation affiliated with the *dōjō* became known as nenbutsu members (*nenbutsushū*) or as religious companions (*montō*). In the formative years of the Shinshū, nenbutsu members met once a month for worship services, usually on the twenty-fifth to commemorate the day Hōnen had died. After Shinran’s death, most congregations changed to the twenty-eighth of each month, in memory of Shinran’s death day. The centerpiece of worship in the Shinshū *dōjō* was usually a large inscription of Amida’s name (*myōgō honzon*) hung over a simple altar. This kind of religious object was an innovation of Shinran’s. Up to that time the center of Buddhist worship had been artistic images of the Buddha, usually carved or painted. Such icons were available primarily to the upper classes, who had the wealth to commission artists to execute religious works of art. Shinran’s creation of the Amida inscription supplied the ordinary believer with a simple and accessible object of reverence for use in worship, thereby freeing religious objects from the artistic domain controlled by aristocratic society. The actual content of *dōjō* worship varied from place to place, but was dominated by nenbutsu chanting. In addition, simple sermons, the recitation of scriptures, and the singing of hymns such as Shinran’s *wasan* also became common features.

Dobbins concludes:

All these components—the *dōjō*, the religious inscription, and the elements of worship—provided lowborn believers with a ready outlet for their religious inclinations and with a degree of participation in religion denied them under Japan’s traditional system of temples. This fuller religious life, centering around the *dōjō*, was the reason for its popularity among peasants, and was the key to Shinshū growth during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁵⁹

In short, *dōjō* was not the traditional Buddhist monastery exclusively meant for the monks who had renounced the world. No such institution was now necessary for the new movement of faith, in which there was no

⁵⁸ Quoted in Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū*, 66.

⁵⁹ Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū*, 66.

UNDERSTANDING SHINRAN

distinction between monks and lay, men and women, high and low, young and old, and where the only requirement was sincere faith to give up one's self-power and rely on Amida's Other Power and say the nenbutsu in gratitude for the salvation made possible by Amida's Vow. *Dōjō* was in this sense a completely open place easily accessible to anybody regardless of religious, moral, social, or material conditions.

Thus a thoroughly egalitarian community of believers came into being, a community of humble hearts who confessed their sinfulness and took refuge in the compassionate Vow of Amida to save such helpless beings. To be sure, there were leaders of the *dōjō* who had more knowledge about this new faith than others had, and there were some among them who made false authoritarian claims for themselves or resorted to coercive measures to put the believers, the *mono*, under their control.⁶⁰ But they deviated from Shinran's teaching, and Shinran did not approve of their behavior. For Shinran, nobody can make a special claim before Amida Buddha. Equally sinful beings who are equally in need of Amida's mercy, the leaders of the *dōjō* are by no means people of higher religious standing than others. Shinran himself set the example for this new type of humble leadership:

That there apparently are disputes over "my disciple," "somebody else's disciple" among companions in the singlehearted practice of the nenbutsu is a circumstance beyond comprehension. [I], Shinran, do not have even a single disciple. The reason [is]: if I brought a person to say the nenbutsu through my designs (*hakarai*), then he would probably be a disciple; [but] to call "my disciple" the person who says the nenbutsu through receiving the working of Amida is utterly preposterous.⁶¹

This is why Shinran called his "followers" "fellow companions" (*dōbō 同朋*) and "fellow practicers" (*dōgyō 同行*).⁶² Behind this utter humbleness and spiritual egalitarianism was Shinran's thorough awareness that no one has anything to boast of before Amida's mercy, an awareness based upon his profound sense of human sinfulness and its converse, that is, Amida's

⁶⁰ Akamatsu, *Shinran*, 237–40, 307–16.

⁶¹ *Tannishō*, 67.

⁶² This is often pointed out by scholars, and I follow it here; but a careful examination of the actual usage of these terms by Shinran seems to indicate that Shinran used them only when he was referring to the relationship between his disciples rather than to his own relationship with them; see the *Mattōshō*, SSZ, II: 688, 692, and the *Tannishō*, SSZ, II: 790.

grace as the sole ground for our salvation. Shinran, of course, learned this from his teacher Hōnen. No discipline of meditation, no observance of precepts, no accumulation of karmic merit through good acts, no learning and wisdom, no distinction in birth or social standing is worth anything before Amida's compassionate Vow. It was precisely for those who were unable to claim any of these merits for themselves that Amida uttered his Vow of compassion. All we need to do on our part, therefore, is to call upon his Name in sincere faith in accordance with what the Vow says. Shinran said:

Know that the Primal Vow of Amida makes no distinction between people young and old, good and evil; only the entrusting of yourself to it is essential. For it was made to save the person in whom karmic evil is deep-rooted and whose blind passions abound.⁶³

Or,

In reflecting on the ocean of great faith, I realize that there is no discrimination between noble and humble or black-robed monks and white-clothed laity, no differentiation between man and woman, old and young. The amount of evil one has committed is not considered, the duration of any performance of religious practices is of no concern. It is a matter of neither practice nor good acts, neither sudden attainment nor gradual attainment, neither meditative practice nor non-meditative practice, neither right contemplation nor wrong contemplation, neither thought nor no-thought, neither daily life nor the moment of death, neither many-calling nor once-calling. It is simply faith that is inconceivable, inexplicable, and indescribable.⁶⁴

All worldly values, moral merits, and even religious achievements are relativized and equalized before Amida's sheer goodness, which calls for nothing but our simple faith to respond to it. What is amazing, moreover, is that for Shinran even the faith of all people is essentially equal. The *Tannishō* reports the following significant dialogue between Shinran and fellow disciples of Hōnen:

Shinran remarked, "My faith and the Master's are the same."

Quite unexpectedly, Seikan-bō, Nenbutsu-bō, and others among his fellow practicers argued, "How can your faith equal the Master's?"

⁶³ *Tannishō*, 22.

⁶⁴ *True Teaching*, II: 249; SSZ, II: 68.

Shinran responded, "The Master possesses vast wisdom and learning, so I would be mistaken if I claimed to be the same in these respects, but in faith that is the attainment of birth, there is no difference whatever. The Master's faith and mine are one."

The others remained skeptical, however, sharply asking how that could be. So finally they all decided that the argument should be settled in front of Hōnen.

When they presented the matter, Hōnen said, "My faith has been imparted by Amida; so has Shinran's. Therefore they are one and the same. A person with a different faith will surely not be born in the Pure Land to which I will go."⁶⁵

SHINRAN ON NENBUTSU

Shinran, no doubt, would have been glad to see his "disciples" make the same assertion about their faith and his own. It is not that the faith of all people are the same in strength or weakness but that it is essentially of one kind or quality, it being "imparted by Amida" and not the result of our own efforts. And it is this sameness of faith that formed the basis of the egalitarian community of believers formed around the *dōjō*.

The idea that faith is imparted to us by Amida is attributed to Hōnen in the above dialogue. It was Shinran, however, more than anyone else among the Pure Land thinkers, who emphasized the sheer gratuitous character of Amida's grace and our salvation. Deeply aware of the thorough depravity of human nature, Shinran, as we shall see, realized that there is absolutely nothing that we can genuinely contribute to our salvation, including even the act of nenbutsu and faith. For Shinran, therefore, the practice of nenbutsu and the mind of faith should by no means be considered as "our" act and "our" mind. If they are, they can never be the cause for our birth in the Pure Land despite the fact that they are stipulated in Amida's Vow as requisites for that birth. Even the act of nenbutsu and faith are not ours but given to us by Amida Buddha himself. In other words, they are not to be counted as the last claim we can make before Amida's grace, the last contribution we can make to our salvation. For this reason Shinran says:

⁶⁵ *Tannishō*, 42.

For the practitioner who says it, the nenbutsu is not a practice, it is not a good deed. It is said not to be a practice because it is not performed out of one's own efforts and designs. It is not a good deed because it is not brought about through one's efforts and designs. Since it is totally Other Power and free of self-power, for the person who says it, the nenbutsu is "non-practice," it is "not-good."⁶⁶

Here we have probably the core of Shinran's soteriological thought; namely, his emphasis on the pure Other Power that excludes any form or vestige of self-power, even in the act of nenbutsu. And it is this aspect of Shinran's thought that differentiates it from that of Hōnen, despite the fact that Shinran had no intention of departing from his master's teaching. Simply put, for Shinran nenbutsu is not another form of practice we can perform for our salvation, or another form of good act that we can contribute to our birth in the Pure Land, however "easy" it may be as a practice.

For Hōnen, nenbutsu was clearly a practice—one chosen by Amida out of his compassion for those who are incapable of any other practice, the "easy practice" that anybody can perform and thereby attain birth in the Pure Land. But there was simply no "easy" practice for Shinran, who had a more thoroughgoing pessimistic view of human nature than Hōnen. No matter what we do, in so far as it is *our* act, it is overlaid with selfish motivation and sinful desires. Nenbutsu is no exception in this respect. Therefore, it has to come from none other than Amida himself who instituted it in his Vow in the first place, if it is going to be an act that leads us unfailingly to the Pure Land. If it is our act, then it is subject to the fluctuation that inevitably characterizes all our acts, i.e., the differences found among us in the amount of effort we put in as well as in the psychological state in which we perform it, making our birth in the Pure Land uncertain and insecure as well. In short, for Shinran, Amida not only chose nenbutsu in his Vow; he also makes it possible for every believer to perform nenbutsu as a genuine, "true and real" act.

The idea that the act of nenbutsu itself is given to us by Amida is certainly not found—at least, not literally—in the eighteenth Vow that both Hōnen and Shinran regard as embodying the highest truth concerning the true intention of Amida's salvific will. The eighteenth Vow simply states that Amida will not attain Buddhahood should the sentient beings

⁶⁶ *Tannishō*, 26.

of the ten quarters, with sincere mind of faith, call upon his Name up to ten times yet fail to be born in his land. Nor is that idea found (at least not explicitly) in Hōnen. To be sure, Hōnen is said to have remarked, “In nenbutsu no reasoning is [true] reasoning.” What he meant by this was that nenbutsu is to be practiced with a simple faith without thinking about or speculating on its reason or meaning (*gi* 義), because it was the practice selected by Amida’s sheer wisdom and compassion, which no human reasoning can fathom.

Shinran also said the same thing: “In nenbutsu no reasoning is [true] reasoning, for it is indescribable, inexplicable, and inconceivable.”⁶⁷ But Shinran takes “reasoning” (*gi*) here as meaning the “calculation” (*hakarai*) that we make with a view to obtaining salvation for ourselves. It means self-power for Shinran, nenbutsu being the Other Power. Hence, we see Shinran quoting Hōnen’s words in the following way with his explanation:

Since this is the Vow of Tathāgata, Hōnen said, “In Other Power, no reasoning is true reasoning.” “Reasoning” [*gi*] is a term which connotes calculation [*hakarai*]. Since the calculation of the person seeking birth is self-power, it is called reasoning. Other Power is entrusting ourselves to the Primal Vow and our birth becoming firmly settled; hence it is altogether without reasoning.⁶⁸

Thus, for Shinran, the nenbutsu is not to be practiced as an act of self-power, a subtle form of it, but purely as an act done by Other Power. To use the technical expression, Shinran says that it is “directed to us” (*ekō* 邸向) by Amida. This is why it is called by Shinran “Great Practice.”⁶⁹ Therefore the entire focus in Shinran shifts from nenbutsu as a practice to faith in Other Power.

Needless to say, Hōnen did not regard nenbutsu as a self-power act either, but not because he saw it as an act directed to us by Amida, as Shinran did, but because he saw it as chosen by Amida as the easy practice for everybody. For Hōnen, nenbutsu is “not our self-power act” in the sense that its efficacy is grounded upon Amida’s Primal Vow and its

⁶⁷ *Tannishō*, SSZ, II: 778.

⁶⁸ Letters of Shinran: A Translation of *Mattōshō* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1978; Shin Buddhism Translation Series), 23 (translation altered); SSZ, II: 658–59.

⁶⁹ *Kyōgyōshinshō*, SSZ, II: 5.

fulfillment. Following Shan-tao, Hōnen says: “Whether walking or standing, sitting or lying, only repeat the name of Amida with all your heart. Never cease the practice of it even for a moment. This is the very work which unfailingly issues in salvation, *for it is in accordance with the Primal Vow of that Buddha*.⁷⁰ Therefore, for Hōnen too, the Vow is ultimately more important than the nenbutsu, if we may put it this way. This is why Hōnen once said that there is no difference whatsoever between the nenbutsu recited in pure mind and the one done in deluded mind; the latter is not a bit inferior to the former. To a disciple of his who expressed doubt on this view, Hōnen said:

This doubt arises because you still do not understand the Primal Vow. It is in order to save sentient beings of evil karma that Amida Buddha launched the ship of the universal Vow in the great ocean of birth-and-death. Whether it is a heavy stone or a light hemp, all get aboard the ship and reach the other shore. Likewise, the Primal Vow being excellent, there is no other thing for any sentient being than simply calling upon the Name.⁷¹

This clearly shows that Hōnen did not regard the efficacy of nenbutsu as depending upon the subjective condition of our mental state or act, because nenbutsu is ultimately grounded upon Amida’s compassionate Vow. In this sense, Hōnen also held that nenbutsu should not be considered as our merit.

Yet this does not mean that he did not regard nenbutsu itself as our act, something we can perform. Hōnen did not go that far, and this is where Shinran further radicalized—or drew the final conclusion from, we might say—the Other Power-oriented soteriology of Hōnen.

Hōnen not only practiced nenbutsu diligently himself, he also strongly exhorted his followers to practice it as much as they could. The more we do it, the better, he taught, leading some people to think of it as a kind of meritorious act.⁷² In this respect, it has to be pointed out that there was a certain ambivalence in Hōnen’s attitude toward nenbutsu, and it was this ambivalence that gave rise to the disputes among his disciples concerning

⁷⁰ Coates and Ishizuka, *Hōnen*, I: 187 (italics mine).

⁷¹ Quoted in Fugen Daien, *Shinshū gairon* (Kyoto: Hyakkaen, 1950), 160.

⁷² See his words on nenbutsu cited in chapter one. Some of his typical teaching regarding the importance of continuous practice of nenbutsu is found in Coates and Ishizuka, *Hōnen*, I: 408; II: 441, 528.

the nature and method of nenbutsu practice, despite his warning that it has no reasoning as its reason. The dispute particularly focused on the issue of the so-called “once-calling” (*ichinen* 一念) and “many-calling” (*tanen* 多念). It is important to consider this debate briefly if we are to have an adequate understanding of why Shinran took the position he did with regard to nenbutsu.⁷³

If the efficacy of the Name is grounded upon the Vow and the practice by which Amida (as Bodhisatva Dharmākara) fulfilled the Vow, and not upon the nenbutsu itself, nor upon it as our act, then why should one repeatedly say the nenbutsu? Is the continuous practice necessary at all, especially in view of the fact that the Vow says that ten utterances, or even one, is enough to ensure our birth in the Pure Land? Insisting upon the continuous practice of nenbutsu is tantamount to doubting the power of the Vow itself. Thus ran the argument of those who opposed “many-calling” and said that a single utterance of nenbutsu based upon faith is enough.

Those who favored the diligent practice of nenbutsu, on the other hand, based their argument on the Pure Land scriptures and writings, especially Shan-tao’s, which emphasize the continuous practice of nenbutsu. For them, nenbutsu is still a form of practice, albeit an easy practice selected by Amida Buddha for us so that everybody can be saved. Although the ground of the efficacy of nenbutsu lies entirely in Amida’s Vow and practice, saying the nenbutsu is nonetheless incumbent upon us, and the more we do it, the better. Neglecting even this easy practice results in Buddhism with no practice and leads to the danger of antinomianism, the temptation of the “licensed evil” (*zōaku muge* 造惡無礙) that presumes upon the power of the Vow and is not afraid to commit evil acts without regard for moral restraint. Moreover, the proponents of the “many-calling” believed that nenbutsu expiates our past evil karma. We should therefore continuously utter the nenbutsu in order to expiate whatever sins we may have committed up to the last moment of life and make sure that Amida appears with his holy host to welcome us at our deathbed. Since we do not know when we will meet our death, we should do our best to say the nenbutsu whenever we have the opportunity.

⁷³ *Once-calling*, 4–8 (Introduction) gives a good account of this debate; the following discussion of mine is indebted to it.

We have already mentioned that there is a certain ambivalence inherent in Hōnen’s position on the matter. Hōnen said: “As to entrusting, you should believe that birth is settled with a single utterance; as to practice, you should continue throughout your life.”⁷⁴ Although Hōnen meant by this that faith and practice should not hinder each other, it was precisely this discrepancy between faith (entrusting) and practice, that gave rise to the above disputes. One thing that is certain is that Hōnen was a diligent practitioner of nenbutsu throughout his life and taught others to do so. One interpretation takes this as a possible concession to pressure from traditional Buddhism:

Resolution of this controversy from Hōnen’s position lay in maintaining the delicate balance between emphasis on continual recitation, which could easily lead to nenbutsu as an act of self-power, and emphasis on complete entrusting to Other Power, which, pursued doctrinally, seemed to deny any need for continued attention to the Name at all. But as a revolutionary thinker, Hōnen had to defend his new-found path against attack from older schools by reiterating that the nenbutsu was indeed a practice in the Buddhist tradition, although it originated from an entirely different source. By doing so, he exposed himself to the same criticism he had leveled against the traditional forms of practice—dependence on self-power.⁷⁵

Be that as it may, for Shinran the whole debate of once-calling and many-calling is essentially based upon a misunderstanding of the nature of nenbutsu. For him, nenbutsu is never to be regarded as another way of piling up merit for oneself so that one can enter the Pure Land, an easy method to attain the difficult goal. There is no easy practice for Shinran, who found himself incapable of a single practice. It is for this reason that, as we have seen, he calls nenbutsu “non-practice” and “non-good.” If it is going to be a practice that brings about our birth in the Pure Land, it has to be a Great Practice made possible only through Amida’s directing (*ekō*) to us his own true and real act.

Traditionally, nenbutsu was considered an act by which we can easily accumulate merit and transfer (*ekō*) it toward our (and others’) birth in the Pure Land. But Shinran changed this notion completely. *Ekō* is not

⁷⁴ Quoted in *Once-calling*, 6 (Introduction); see Coates and Ishizuka, 395, for the context in which Hōnen said this.

⁷⁵ *Once-calling*, 7–8 (Introduction).

our act but Amida's, for we really have nothing to "transfer." Thus he declares at the outset of his chapter on practice in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*:

Reverently contemplating Amida's directing of virtue for our going forth to the Pure Land, I find that there is great practice, there is great faith.⁷⁶

And this is why Shinran calls nenbutsu "not directing virtue (merit)":

The nenbutsu is not a self-power practice performed by foolish beings or sages; it is therefore called the practice of "not-directing virtue [on the part of beings]."⁷⁷

For Shinran, salvation, if it comes at all, comes only from Other Power. Practice, if it is really possible, should therefore come from Other Power, so. Ultimately, therefore, salvation as he understands it is not a matter of practice but of faith that renounces self-power and relies solely on Amida's Vow, which does everything for you—not merely selecting the enbutsu as *the* practice but also enabling you to practice it as the Great practice. Shinran says:

This practice arises from the Vow of great compassion, which is known as "the Vow that all Buddhas extol the Name," "the Vow that all Buddhas say the Name," and "the Vow that all Buddhas praise the Name." It might also be called "the Vow of directing virtue for our going forth" and "the Vow in which the saying of the Name is selected."⁷⁸

In short, Shinran sees nenbutsu, based upon the fulfillment of the above Vow, as ultimately the cosmic activity of the Buddhas that, through faith, becomes expressed as our practice. This is the nenbutsu as Great practice.

We have dwelt upon Shinran's conception of nenbutsu at some length because it constitutes the core and the most innovative aspect of his Pure Land soteriology vis-a-vis the tradition he had inherited, including perhaps Hōnen's teaching. He did not arrive at this view immediately after his conversion to Hōnen's nenbutsu movement. It was the product of a long process of reflection on the meaning of the message he had received from Hōnen. Shinran himself describes in three steps the process through which he came to have this final paradoxical understanding of enbutsu as "non-practice."

⁷⁶ *True Teaching*, I: 71; SSZ, II: 5.

⁷⁷ *True Teaching*, I: 136; SSZ, II: 33.

⁷⁸ *True Teaching*, I: 71; SSZ, II: 5.

Thus I, Gutoku Shinran, disciple of Sākyamuni, through reverently accepting the exposition of [Vasubandhu] the author of the *Treatise*, and depending on the guidance of Master [Shan-tao], departed everlasting-ly from the temporary gate of the myriad practices and various good acts and left forever the birth attained beneath the twin sāla trees. Turning about, I entered the "true" gate of the root of good and the root of virtue, and wholeheartedly awakened the mind leading to the birth that is non-comprehensible.

Nevertheless, I have now decisively departed from the "true" gate of provisional means and, [my self-power] overturned, have entered the ocean of the selected Vow. Having swiftly become free of the mind leading to the birth that is non-comprehensible, I am assured of attaining the birth that is inconceivable. How truly profound in intent is the Vow that beings ultimately attain birth!⁷⁹

This is the famous passage in his *Kyōgyōshinshō* on the so-called "three Vows conversions" (or turning about; *sangan tennyū* 三願轉入). It is a carefully worded passage full of allusions, and the full understanding of it requires a knowledge of the total doctrinal system of Shinran's thought. Essentially, Shinran talks about how he went through three different approaches to the Pure Land truth as represented by the three Vows—the nineteenth, twentieth, and the eighteenth among the forty-eight uttered by Amida—according to his highly idiosyncratic interpretation.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *True Teaching*, IV: 531; SSZ, II: 166.

⁸⁰ These three vows, as found in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* translation (Shin Buddhism Translation Series), are as follows:

19: If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters—awakening the mind of enlightenment and performing meritorious acts—should aspire with sincere mind and desire to be born in my land, and yet I should not appear before them at the moment of death, surrounded by a host of sages, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment (vol. IV, pp. 476-77).

20: If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, on hearing my Name, should place their thoughts on my land, cultivate the root of all virtues, and direct their merits with sincere mind, desiring to be born in my land, and yet not ultimately attain it, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment (vol. IV, p. 512).

18: If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, with sincere mind entrusting themselves, aspiring to be born in my land, and saying my Name perhaps even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. Excluded are those who commit the five great offenses and those who slander the right dharma (vol. II, p. 205).

First, Shinran followed the temporary gate (*kemon* 假門) which seeks birth in the Pure Land by producing merit for it through the practice of “myriad practices and various good acts [meditative and nonmeditative]”; but this only leads to an imperfect expedient realm, not the true realm of the Pure Land as realized by the fulfillment of Amida’s Vow. This path probably refers to what Shinran was practicing as a Tendai nenbutsu monk on Mt Hiei. Then Shinran had recourse to the true gate (*shinmon* 真門), which relies on nenbutsu as “the root of good and the root of virtue,” but this, too, leads to a provisional form of birth in the Pure Land because it also lacks faith in Other Power and regards nenbutsu as another form of meritorious act of self-power. This was probably how Shinran initially understood Hōnen’s message of nenbutsu when he left the practice on Mt Hiei and went to Hōnen. But, partly through his own deep reflection on the meaning of Amida’s Vow and nenbutsu, and partly through the influence of other disciples of Hōnen, especially those who favored “once-calling” and emphasized faith more than practice, Shinran completely discarded the conception of nenbutsu as another form of practice and entered into “the ocean of the selected Vow.” Now it is not the nenbutsu as such that is crucial, but the power of the Vow as the expression of Amida’s compassion, and hence our complete trust and faith in it.

The crucial mistake of the first two paths is that, while they claim to follow the Pure Land way, they in fact lack true faith in Other Power; thus the one tries to transfer his or her own meritorious deeds toward one’s birth in the Pure Land, while the other tries to turn nenbutsu into another form of one’s own merit and hence mix the pure Other Power with self-power. They spoil the pure grace of Other Power and transform it into “self-power within Other Power.”⁸¹ Shinran deplores this stubborn

According to Shinran’s interpretation, the nineteenth Vow represents the gist of the *Smaller Sūtra of Immeasurable Life* (*Amida kyō*), the twentieth Vow represents the gist of the *Sūtra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life* (*Kanmuryōju kyō*), and the eighteenth Vow represents the gist of the *Larger Sūtra of Immeasurable Life* (*Daimuryōju kyō*), which is the highest truth. These three texts constitute the basic threefold scriptures (*Jōdo sanbu kyō*) of the Pure Land tradition.

⁸¹ *True Teaching*, II: 250; SSZ, II: 69. In other technical doctrinal terms, these two paths, respectively corresponding to the path of salvation taught in the nineteenth and the twentieth Vow, belong to the path of Crosswise Departing (*ōshutsu* 橫出), in contrast to the path of Crosswise Transcendence (*ōchō* 橫超) represented by the eighteenth Vow, which was the third and final position Shinran arrived at; see also *True Teaching*, II: 261–62; SSZ, II: 73. In his *Mattōshō*, Shinran defines “self-power within Other Power” as follows: “That there is self-power within Other Power means that there are people who seek to attain birth

wilfulness of self-power, which turns even the most gracious gift of Amida into a subtle form of one’s own merit and thus makes us fail to benefit from genuine Other Power:

Sages of the Mahāyāna and Hinayāna and all good people make the auspicious Name of the Primal Vow their own root of good; hence, they cannot give rise to faith and do not apprehend the Buddha’s wisdom. Because they cannot comprehend [the Buddha’s intent in] establishing the cause [of birth], they do not enter the fulfilled land.⁸²

It is hard to tell when Shinran arrived at his final position, which even lets go of nenbutsu as one’s act and lets Amida’s Vow be everything. The following story, however, is interesting and may throw some light upon the development of Shinran’s puristic Other Power-oriented soteriology. On his way from Echigo to Kantō he is said to have made a resolve to recite “one thousand copies of the three Pure Land sūtras” in order to “benefit sentient beings.” By the time he had done it for four or five days, however, it occurred to him that the best way to repay his debt to Amida Buddha was through teaching others to have faith like his own (*jishin kyōninshin* 自信教人信), so that they could also say nenbutsu and partake of the same joy and peace he was experiencing. Thus he stopped reciting the sūtras.⁸³

This story is significant in many ways.⁸⁴ First of all, reciting the Pure Land scriptures is one of the five “right practices” (*shōgyō* 正行) recommended by Shan-tao, but rejected by Hōnen in favor of the sole-practice of nenbutsu. Even though it was meant to benefit other beings by generating merit for them, Shinran was still found practicing it. It may be considered a vestige of the old practice of “continuous nenbutsu” that he used to perform as a monk on Mt Hiei, and it shows that his break with the merit-oriented Pure Land practices was still not complete at this point

through sundry practices and disciplines and through meditative and non-meditative nenbutsu; such people are people of self-power within Other Power.” *Letters of Shinran: A Translation of Mattōshō*, 53. Hereafter, this will be referred to as *Letters*.

⁸² *True Teaching*, IV: 530; SSZ, II: 165–66. “Fulfilled land (*bōdo* 報土) refers to the true realm of the Pure Land as realized by the fulfillment of Amida’s Vow. Attaining it is called “inconceivable birth,” as contrasted with the other two provisional forms of birth, “the birth attained beneath the twin śāla trees,” and “the non-comprehensible birth.”

⁸³ Akamatsu, *Shinran*, 137–48.

⁸⁴ I follow Akamatsu’s interpretation of this event.

In his life and that this experience itself may have marked a crucial turning point in his complete break with the merit-oriented practice of self-power. We may further interpret this experience of Shinran as something that made him completely renounce the idea of nenbutsu as a merit-producing practice as well and concentrate on faith as being the most essential. What people need, he concluded, is the same experience of faith and the joy it brings, not the merit that *they* can generate and that, however great it may be, can only tie them to this world of birth-and-death. We would not be far from the truth if we see Shinran here fighting off the temptation of self-power and this-worldly attachment at the same time.⁸⁵ Thus shinran acquired through this experience a renewed commitment to the authentic mission he would have to carry out in the new region to which he was moving.

That Shinran definitely rejected the idea of merit-producing practice of nenbutsu for himself as well as for others is clearly indicated by the following words:

I have never said the Name even once for the repose of my departed father and mother. For all living things have been my parents and brothers and sisters in the course of countless lives in many states of existence. Upon attaining Buddhahood in the next life, I must save every one of them.

Were saying the Name indeed a good act in which a person strove through his own powers, then he might direct the merit thus gained toward saving his father and mother. But this is not the case. If, however, he simply abandons such self-power and quickly attains enlightenment in the Pure Land, he will be able to save all beings with transcendent powers and compassionate means, whatever karmic suffering they may be sinking into in the six realms and the four modes of birth, beginning with those with whom his life is deeply bound.⁸⁶

For Shinran, it is presumptuous to think about the transference of merit because there is simply no merit we can produce in the first place, not even through nenbutsu. Thus if we are going to help others, we had better

⁸⁵ Kasahara Kazuo stresses the latter aspect only when he interprets this event as betraying the temptation for Shinran to compromise the pure other-worldly orientation of his message with the worldly concerns of the Kantō people as he would face them in the commission. See *Shinshū ni okeru itan no keifu* (Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 1962), 4–28.

⁸⁶ *Tannishō*, 25.

ter attain enlightenment first before we can perform altruistic activities. One's birth in the Pure Land, therefore, is the supreme value each individual can pursue here on earth.

The rejection of all forms of merit-oriented practices and devotion solely to Amida's Other Power led Shinran to renounce magical practices and beliefs, fortune-telling, and praying to various deities for the sake of securing worldly benefits. He clearly condemns those who practice such things as non-Buddhist:

"Other teachings" applies to those who incline toward the Path of Sages or non-Buddhist ways, endeavor in other practices, think on other Buddhas, observe lucky days and auspicious occasions, and depend on fortune-telling and ritual purification. Such people belong to non-Buddhist ways; they rely wholly on self-power.⁸⁷

Shinran deplores those who follow these non-Buddhist ways as a sign of *mappō*:

Lamentable it is that people, whether of the Way or of the world,
Choose auspicious times and lucky dates,
Worship heavenly gods and earthly deities,
And are absorbed in divinations and rituals.⁸⁸

Or,

Lamentable it is that these days
All in Japan, whether of the Way or of the world,
While performing the rites and rituals of Buddhism
Worship the spirits and ghosts of heaven and earth.⁸⁹

We would be inclined to think that Shinran's puristic approach to Buddhism, which rejects the mundane benefits of faith and solely emphasizes supramundane salvation, may have made his message less attractive to people in the Kantō region, where he seems to have carried out active evangelizing work. In fact, this was to remain one of the major problems facing the Shinshū community throughout its history. Yet it may have been precisely this puristic message of supramundane salvation available to all believers that appealed all the more strongly to the lay people who

⁸⁷ *Once-calling*, 43.

⁸⁸ *Shōzōmatsu Wasan*, 101; SSZ, II: 528.

⁸⁹ *Shōzōmatsu Wasan*, 104 (translation altered); SSZ, II: 528.

were being awakened to a deeper religious need, especially the Kantō merchant class that was enjoying greater socioeconomic power, just as happened in the days of the Sākyamuni Buddha.⁹⁰ As far as the prospect of future salvation was concerned, at any rate, there was complete equality among the believers, no matter what their social background was.

Moreover, the prohibition of non-Buddhist practices was not merely a negative teaching. Behind it was the positive conviction that there was no other being, Buddha or god, who excels Amida Buddha, and no other practice that surpassed nenbutsu, which embraces within it all the virtues that can come from other deities and Buddhas. Consider the following remark in the *Tannishō*:

The person of the nenbutsu treads the great path free of all obstacles. For the gods of heaven and the deities of earth bow in homage to a practitioner of faith, and those of the world of demons or of non-Buddhist ways never hinder him; moreover, the evil he does cannot bring forth its karmic results, nor can any good act equal in virtue his saying of the Name.⁹¹

Thus Shinran instilled in the hearts of the believers a strong sense of fearlessness and freedom from anxiety over any evil that might occur to them in this world as a result of capricious supernatural forces—a sense of ultimate confidence in life based upon faith in Other Power. For this reason, we may even be able to say that Shinran “desacralized” the world to a certain degree by purging it of the supernatural activities of unseen forces—at least, purging it as a psychological force in the lives of the believers.

We must note in this context that Shinran included in his teaching the so-called “ten benefits in the present life” that come from faith, among which are found “the benefit of being protected and sustained by unseen powers,” “the benefit of our karmic evil being transformed into good,” and “the benefit of being protected and cared for by all the Buddhas.”⁹² From this, it is clear that he did not deny the existence of

⁹⁰ See Akamatsu’s discussion of this problem, *Shinran*, 173–84.

⁹¹ *Tannishō*, 26; see also Akamatsu Toshihide and Kasahara Kazuo, eds., *Shinshūshi gaisetsu* (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1963), 56–57.

⁹² *True Teaching*, II: 257; SSZ, II: 72. Shinran also composed *Genze riyaku wasan* 現世利益和讃 (Hymns on the benefits in the present life), which includes more materialistic benefits such as ending misfortunes and lengthening life; see *Jōdo Wasan: The Hymns on the Pure Land* (Kyoto: Ryukoku University Translation Center, 1965; Ryukoku Translation Series IV), 130–44.

unseen forces and deities in the universe—in this sense, he was neither a monotheist nor a complete desacralizer—but he taught that they cannot obstruct the practitioner of nenbutsu and that all the benefits they may bring are already included in the nenbutsu itself. Worshipping them is a sign of doubting and betraying Amida’s all-sufficient Vow Power, and hence should be prohibited. At the same time, though, it is clear that Shinran could not ignore the this-worldly concerns of the believers completely; to a certain degree he had to accommodate them in his message.

At any rate, in view of the fact that Buddhism had been thoroughly amalgamated with this-worldly Shinto faith ever since its coming to Japan, the significance of Shinran’s prohibition of such mixed faith and practices can hardly be exaggerated. We could even assert, perhaps, that for the first time in the history of Buddhism, an authentic message of supramundane liberation was addressed to the lay believer without a major compromise, although it was a message vastly different from that of Sākyamuni Buddha some 1700 years before.

Shinran’s thought matured and took a definite shape during his stay in the Kantō area. This is demonstrated by his composition during this period of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, his most important and systematic work. Although the exact time at which he composed the work is still subject to debate, one thing remains certain—that he composed an early draft of it at Inada (Hitachi Province) in 1224, when he was fifty-two, if not earlier. And it is very likely that “the ideas contained in [it] were very much a part of his message to Kantō believers.”⁹³ Something of the spirit in which Shinran composed it is revealed in the following words of the preface:

This, then, is the true teaching easy to practice for small, foolish beings; it is the straight way easy to traverse for the dull and ignorant. Among all the teachings the Great Sage preached in his lifetime, none surpasses this ocean of virtues. Let the one who seeks to abandon the defiled and aspire for the pure; who is confused in practice and vacillating in faith; whose mind is dark and whose understanding deficient; whose evils are heavy and whose karmic obstructions manifold—let this person embrace above all the Tathāgata’s exhortations, take refuge without fail in the most excellent direct path, devote himself solely to this practice, and revere only this faith.⁹⁴

⁹³ Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū*, 31; see also his discussion of the composition, structure, and main content of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, 31–38.

⁹⁴ *True Teaching*, I: 58; SSZ, II: 1.

Then, in the postscript to the work, Shinran expresses his overflowing joy and gratitude:

How joyous I am, my heart and mind being rooted in the Buddha-ground of the universal Vow, and my thoughts and feelings flowing within the dharma-ocean, which is beyond comprehension! I am deeply aware of the Tathāgata's immense compassion, and I sincerely revere the benevolent care behind the masters' teaching activity. My joy grows ever fuller, my gratitude and indebtedness ever more compelling. Therefore, I have selected [passages expressing] the core of the Pure Land way and gathered here its essentials. Mindful solely of the profundity of the Buddha's benevolence, I pay no heed to the derision of others. May those who see and hear this work be brought—either through the cause of reverently embracing the teaching or through the condition of [others'] doubt and slander of it—to manifest faith within the power of the Vow and reveal the incomparable fruit of enlightenment in the land of peace.⁹⁵

Shinran continued to work on his text after its first draft had been made. It took basically the present form in 1247 at least, if not earlier, when he allowed a disciple of his to make a copy of it. He was then seventy-five years old, so it was well after he had left Kantō and returned to Kyoto. Despite the exuberant joy and gratitude in which he wrote his work, we cannot overlook the fact that it is permeated by a continuing sense of his own sinfulness and the despair arising from it. The following passage that occurs toward the end of his exposition of faith is typical:

I know truly how grievous it is that I, Goutoku Shinran, am sinking in an immense ocean of desires and attachments and am lost in vast mountains of fame and advantage; so that I rejoice not at all at entering the stage of the truly settled and feel no happiness at coming nearer the realization of true enlightenment. How ugly it is! How wretched!⁹⁶

The sense of joy and the sense of despair were inseparable in Shinran. The more he became aware of the boundless grace of Amida, the more keenly he realized the unfathomable depth of his sinfulness; the more he despaired over the ineradicable presence of evil in his own being, the more he exulted over the infinite compassion of the Vow. He seems to have lived his entire life with these two opposite feelings closely interlocked, either experiencing them simultaneously or oscillating between

⁹⁵ *True Teaching*, IV: 616–17; SSZ, II: 203.

⁹⁶ *True Teaching*, II: 279; SSZ, II: 80.

the two. As we shall see later, for Shinran, salvation, as far as it is experienced here in this defiled world, comes only in the form of a paradoxical experience, joy in the midst of sorrow, hope in the midst of despair. This is what he meant when he said that the person of faith “realizes *nirvāna* without severing blind passions.”

SHINRAN RETURNS TO KYOTO

Shinran returned to Kyoto around 1235, the year in which the Kamakura bakufu took severe actions against the nenbutsu practitioners, charging them with engaging in immoral behavior such as inviting women to their places and forming groups in which people ate meat and drank wine.⁹⁷ The bakufu ordered them to be banned from Kamakura and their houses destroyed. The charge was not totally groundless, for among Shinran's communities there were actually some believers who deliberately committed immoral acts on the pretext that no evil act whatsoever was strong enough to obstruct the power of the Primal Vow that resolved to save evil persons. This was the so-called “licensed evil” that was based on a “presumption upon the Primal Vow” (*hongan bokori* 本願誇り). It is hard to deny that Shinran's teaching had in it an element that was open to such an antinomian distortion. For example,

Thus, in the entrusting of oneself to the Primal Vow, other good [acts] are not essential; for there is no good [act] that can be better than the nenbutsu. And one should not fear evil; for there is no evil [act] so [great] that it obstructs Amida's Primal Vow.⁹⁸

There were, however, deeper reasons for the persecution of the nenbutsu group than their alleged moral laxity. The more fundamental reason seems to be that Shinran's communities for the first time offered to the peasants an opportunity to organize themselves and emerge as a potential threat to the local authorities, including the established Buddhist and Shinto temples in the area. With their newly found religious freedom and the confidence instilled by the highly egalitarian gospel of Amida's grace, they were no longer blindly subservient to the authorities,

⁹⁷ I follow the view of Akamatsu and Kasahara on the time and reason of Shinran's return to Kyoto; see Akamatsu's discussion, *Shinran*, 251–54; See also Kasahara Kazuo, *Shinshū ni okeru itan no keifu*, 34–36.

⁹⁸ *Tannishō*, 53.

as can be seen from the lifestyle of a few nenbutsu followers who were not afraid to defy the moral restraints traditionally imposed upon them.⁹⁹

If indeed Shinran's decision to leave Kantō was related to the persecution, it was not based so much on his fear of the persecutions as on his concern over some of his followers, who persisted in the perverse interpretation of his doctrine and continued lives addicted to immoral conduct. Shinran was in his early sixties, and his move to Kyoto may well have been a sort of retirement, in that he withdrew from active leadership of the rather flourishing community of faith with all its problems and potentialities. This does not mean that he had nothing to do afterwards with the Kantō community. On the contrary, the disciples from the Kantō region continued to visit him in order to consult with him on important matters of faith. For instance, Shinran said of the visit of his followers:

Each of you has crossed the borders of more than ten provinces to come to see me, undeterred by concern for your bodily safety, solely to inquire about the way to birth in the land of bliss. But if you imagine in me some special knowledge of a way to birth other than the nenbutsu or a familiarity with writings that teach it, you are greatly mistaken. If that is the case, you would do better to visit the many eminent scholars in Nara or on Mt Hiei and inquire fully of them about the essentials for birth. I simply accept and entrust myself to what a good teacher [Hōnen] told me, "Just say the Name and be saved by Amida"; nothing else is involved.¹⁰⁰

The Kantō disciples also communicated with Shinran through letters in which they showed their abiding affection for and loyalty to their revered master and sought his authoritative guidance on important doctrinal points. Shinran also wrote responses to them, in which his warm concern for them as well as his resolute position on doctrinal matters are clearly expressed. These extant letters of his, amounting to about forty-three, constitute an important source of our knowledge not only of Shinran the person and his faith, but also of the life of faith of his disciples. Akamatsu discusses the significance of the letters:

The later thirty-seven letters were given to all the disciples. The leaders of the "place of practice" (*Dōjō*) who stood between Shinran and the disci-

⁹⁹ *Shinshūshi gaisetsu*, 60–63.

¹⁰⁰ *Tannishō*, 22–23.

ples inquired of him about unclear points of doctrine or reported the tense social relations. Shinran responded to their requests for instruction and taught them gently. These letters relate, clearly and concretely, the fundamental thought of Shinran's religion. Through them the nature of the faith of the leaders and the disciples was clarified as they desired. It is well to study the *Kyōgyōshinshō* in order to know Shinran's religion as doctrine or as a system and tradition. To get it in just a word, we can repeatedly read the *Tannishō*. However, in order to know what kind of counter-influences the gospel of absolute Tariki [Other Power] brought about in those who accepted it, and how that influenced Shinran's action and thought, in other words, when we try to make clear the constitution of Shinran's religion historically and socially, we must, above all, study his letters.¹⁰¹

Shinran's letters reveal some of the difficulty, and yet the remarkable success, his disciples, who had no training in Buddhist doctrines, had in understanding some of the key points in Shinran's teaching, which were often not merely subtle and profound but also bold and novel. For instance, Shinran taught that when their faith and birth (in the Pure Land) is settled—we will examine more closely this important concept later on—they are equal to none other than Maitreya Buddha himself in that they are certain to attain enlightenment in the next life. It is no wonder that this incredibly bold message caused a great deal of confusion in the minds of Shinran's followers, as can be seen by the fact that it is one of the most often discussed topics in the letters exchanged between them and him. The letters demonstrate to us that his message of salvation through faith in Amida's Vow was to a considerable degree successful in breaking the traditional barrier between monks and lay people, despite the fact that it also gave rise to serious misunderstandings and problems that he had not foreseen.

Shinran seems to have depended for a substantial portion of his livelihood upon whatever occasional donations of money his disciples in the Kantō area sent to him, and this must have been a practical reason for him to maintain a constant concern for the communities he had left behind. He was not only kept informed of the situation within the Kantō communities of faith; he also had to take concrete action when necessary. The most famous and the most tragic case of such action was the series of

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Bloom, "The Life of Shinran," 39.

events that led to Shinran's disowning of his son Zenran in 1256.¹⁰² This sad incident, which occurred during the very late years of his life, has to be understood in the light of several problems that were ailing the communities of faith in Kantō even while he was there. These problems seem to have grown more serious after he left—to the degree that the Kamakura bakufu had to intervene and hold a trial.

Two problems in particular troubled the communities: the antinomian tendency, and the defamation of traditional Shinto deities and other Buddhas by some of Shinran's followers. The former, as we have already seen, was based upon the theory that since one is saved through Amida's compassionate Vow regardless of one's moral effort and state, one can commit evil and yet be sure of salvation. Through his letters, Shinran warned against this perverse interpretation of the Pure Land gospel. He said that no one who genuinely aspires for the Pure Land would harbour the thought of indulging in immoral acts for sensual gratification, and that one does not take a poison simply because there is an antidote.

The defamation of traditional deities, also attributable to a certain degree to the exclusivistic faith and practice taught by Shinran, caused a serious conflict between the traditional religious bodies, which were closely allied with local authorities, and the new communities of faith. The "antisocial" tendencies among some of Shinran's followers grew serious enough to bring the Kamakura bakufu to intervene and hold a trial. According to Shinran's letters, one of Shinran's disciples, named Shōshin, had to defend the nenbutsu practitioners with the argument that the nenbutsu was recited "for the sake of the court and for the sake of the people." Shinran praised Shōshin for this, saying that it is good to say nenbutsu "for the peace of society and for the spread of the Buddha-dharma" as a way of repaying one's gratitude to the Buddha.¹⁰³

Although the trial ended in favor of Shinran's communities, the problems did not disappear and continued to hound them. This seems to have been what led Shinran to dispatch his son Zenran to Kantō, even though we do not know exactly when and how Zenran came to be there. Unfortunately, however, Zenran did not prove himself to be worthy of this important mission. Instead, he further aggravated the situation by the

¹⁰² The following account of the event surrounding Zenran is largely based upon Akamatsu, *Shinran*, 281–306.

¹⁰³ Akamatsu, *Shinran*, 286–88.

high-handed manner in which he dealt with the problems and by his personal ambition to control the communities.¹⁰⁴ When Shinran discovered through the letters sent to him by other disciples in Kantō that Zenran had betrayed his mission, he sent letters to Zenran and Shōshin notifying them that he was disowning his son. Given his age of eighty-four at the time, it is not difficult to imagine the mental anguish he must have gone through before and after he took this drastic action. Such was the intensity and seriousness with which Shinran approached the problem of faith, and such was the zeal with which he cared for the communities of faith he had established. Once the storm was over, the Kantō communities seem to have enjoyed a degree of peace and prosperity, as the later letters of Shinran show.¹⁰⁵

The antisocial behavior among Shinran's followers and the consequent intervention by the government raised a very sensitive and difficult issue for Shinran. On the whole, while critical of unjust charges by the authorities against the nenbutsu group, he was of the view that just punishment should be accepted by individuals responsible for wrongdoings. Even in the case of unjust persecution, he taught believers not to criticize the authorities but to have sympathy and to recite nenbutsu for them as a means to bring them to salvation.¹⁰⁶ He was also of the view that persecution was natural to expect in the age of *mappō* and thus to be endured, and that in case of severe persecution too hard to endure the believers should leave the place and go somewhere else.¹⁰⁷

What occupied Shinran's time most after his return to Kyoto, however, was not so much his pastoral care for those left behind in the Kantō area as his tireless writing activity. Most of his writings, including the *Kyōgyōshinshō* in its present form, were composed during this period.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Kasahara Kazuo suggests that Zenran, in order to take charge of the communities, joined hands with the local authorities who, representing the interest of the established Buddhism and Shinto, used the "licensed evil" found among some of the followers of nenbutsu as an excuse to suppress the movement as a whole; *Shinshū ni okeru itan no keifu*, 34–36.

¹⁰⁵ Bloom, "The Life of Shinran," 53.

¹⁰⁶ *Shinshūshi gaisetsu*, 63–65; Bloom, 57.

¹⁰⁷ *Shinshūshi gaisetsu*, 65.

¹⁰⁸ The following list of Shinran's writings and their dates is from Ueda and Hirota, *Shinran*, 322–24.

- 1248 *Hymns on the Pure Land (Jōdo wasan)*
Hymns on the Masters (Kōsō wasan)
- 1250 *Notes on "Essentials of Faith Alone" (Yuushinshō mon'i)*
- 1251 Earliest letter in *Letters of Shinran* (Lamp for the Latter Age, *Mattōshō*, compiled in 1333)
- 1252 *Passages on the Pure Land Way (Jōdo monrui jushō)*
- 1255 *Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls (Songō shinzō meimon)*
Passages on the Modes of Birth in the Three Pure Land Sūtras (Jōdo sangyō ōjō monrui)
Gutoku's Notes (Gutokushō)
Hymns in Praise of Prince Shōtoku (Kōtaishi Shōtoku hōsan)
- 1256 *Hymn on the Two Gates of Entrance and Emergence (Nyūshutsu nimon geju)*
- 1257 *Collection Showing the Way to the West (Words of Hōnen, Saihō shinan shō)*
Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling (Ichinen-tanen mon'i)
Hymns to Prince Shōtoku, Monarch of the Millet-Scattered Islands of Japan (Dai Nihon koku zokusan ō Shōtoku taishi hōsan)
Passages on the Two Aspects of Amida's Directing of Virtue (Nyorai nishu ekō mon)
- 1258 *Hymns on the Right, Semblance, and Last Dharma-Ages (Shōzōmatsu wasan)*
On Jinen hōni (Jinen hōni shō)
- 1260 *On the Virtues of Amida Tathāgata's Name (Mida nyorai myōgō toku)¹⁰⁹*

Shinran spent the last days of his life in the home of his brother Kaneari, who was a Tendai monk. He was attended by his widowed daughter Kakushinni. He showed a great deal of concern before his death for this daughter, who was poor, and left letters in which he asked his disciples to take care of her after his death.¹¹⁰ Eshinni, his wife, who for some reason was living at this time in Echigo (the old place of Shinran's exile and Eshinni's home area), was informed of Shinran's death by Kakushinni. After the cremation, his ashes were preserved in a tomb in the Ōtani area in the Higashiyama section of Kyoto, which belonged to

Kakushinni. It was eventually through Kakushinni's lineage that the Honganji sect was established to become the mainstay of Shinshū orthodoxy down to the present day. The *Shinran denne*, the illustrated biography of Shinran composed by Kakushinni's grandson Kakunyo in 1295, describes the last days of Shinran as follows:

Towards the latter part of mid-winter in the second year of Kōchō (1262), the Shōnin showed the symptoms of a slight indisposition, and after that, his talk never referred to earthly things, dwelling only on how deeply grateful he was to the Buddha; he uttered nothing but the name of Amida, which he constantly repeated. On the twenty-eighth of the same month, at noon, he laid himself on his right side with his head toward the north and his face towards the west; and when at last recitation of the name of Amida was heard no more, he expired. He was then just completing his ninetieth year.¹¹¹

Thus ended the life of a man who agonized throughout his life over his inability to be more than an ordinary being (*bonpu*) but, out of this despair, found a new way of salvation that accepted him as he was, i.e., as a "foolish being full of blind passions."

¹⁰⁹ At this time Shinran was 88 years old.

¹¹⁰ See Akamatsu's discussion of this matter, 328–45.

¹¹¹ D. T. Suzuki, trans., *The Life of Shinran Shōnin*, 181.