

The Nembutsu as the Path of the Sudden Teaching

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The attainment of buddhahood through the *nembutsu*, this is Shin. This is called the store of awakening. . . . This is the sudden teaching within the sudden teaching.¹

In his writings, Shinran uses many different terms of art to express his understanding of the *nembutsu* path. Among them, the term “sudden” is one of the more recurrent, as he applies it over a dozen times in many different genres, including the philosophical exegesis of the *Kyogyoshinsho*, the letters of the *Mattosho*, and hymns, such as the *Shozomatsu wasan*. Occurring as it does numerous times across several genres, it has nevertheless gone relatively unexamined in the study of Shinran’s textual legacy.

Historical Context

Historically, the term for sudden (Jpn. *ton*; Ch. *tun*) came into prominence in the discourse of Ch’an Buddhism, in particular the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. Thereafter the sudden or subitist interpretation became preeminent in not only Ch’an but in East Asian Buddhism as a whole. In Japan virtually all schools by the Kamakura Period had adopted or incorporated the language of sudden awakening—including Tendai, Shingon, Kegon, Zen, and Pure Land. However, no one in Japan had gone into as much detail on the significance of the sudden teaching in the Pure Land tradition as Shinran. In considering the problem of sudden and gradual, Shinran in turn looked most often to the Chinese master Shan-tao as a source of understanding.

Shinran echoes Shan-tao in equating the sudden teaching with the bodhisattva path of the Mahayana and the one vehicle as attributed to the Pure Land sutras, especially the *Meditation Sutra*. Thus he states,

The master of Kuang-ming-ssu [Shan-tao] states that our bodhisattva-store, [the Mahayana,] depends upon the sudden teaching and the ocean of the one vehicle. . . . The exposition of the *Meditation Sutra*, the *Amida Sutra*, and the like is that of the sudden teaching, the store of awakening.²

Again he states,

Master Shan-tao explains,

The attainment of buddhahood through the *nembutsu*, this is Shin.

This is the ocean of the one vehicle.

This is the store of awakening.

This is the complete teaching within the complete teaching.

The sudden teaching within the sudden teaching.³

At the same time, Shinran relates the sudden teaching to such notions as other-power and the crosswise leap, notions that are absent in Shan-tao but are either elaborations of other Pure Land masters’ thought or his own formulations.⁴

These passages indicate not only the importance of the sudden teaching for Shinran but his attempts to find his own understanding in relation to past figures in the Pure Land tradition and the Mahayana in general by synthesizing his own expression of the sudden teaching. So far, however, they tell us nothing about what the sudden teaching actually meant to Shinran as a path of practice.

A Problem of Mahayana Thought

Although Shinran draws upon many standard Buddhist notions in order to formulate his understanding of the problem of being human, such as ego-attachment (*gasbu*), delusion (*mayoi*), and the like, he focuses heavily on blind passion (*bonno*) as the source of human suffering. In order to become free of blind passion, it was necessary to sunder desire based

on attachment, fixated on dualistic thinking. Any path out of dualistic thinking and blind passion could not itself depend on dualistic distinctions. Thus, it could not be incremental, be dependent on linear progress through relative time, or be defined in terms of a goal that lay in the future. If it were dependent upon any of these relative conditions, it would be impossible to reach the end of the path, since the reality of awakening was beyond the reach of finite calculations, and dualistic thinking could not lead to this boundless reality no matter how long it was applied. In this sense, Shinran's problem was no different from that posed by the *Platform Sutra*, and it is no surprise that he came to understand the significance of the Pure Land path in subitist terms.

If it could not be incremental, it had to come all at once. It is like opening one's eyes. Either they are open or not, however slightly. One either awakens to the reality of emptiness, the dharmakaya-as-suchness, the formless buddha, or one does not, since it is precisely the partial, incomplete grasp of reality based on dualistic thinking that is the source of endless suffering.

It could not depend upon linear progress through relative time; it had to be instantaneous. Although one might reach a finite destination through linear progress, no amount of finite progress could lead to a limitless goal. One might walk to the corner store one step at a time, but how long would it take to walk to the Pure Land?

If it could not depend on the passage of time, then it could not lay in the future; it had to be immediately present in the here-and-now. It is like asking when today is today. As long as one is thinking about it, it will never arrive. The fact must be grasped immediately in the here-and-now, for it is in the very nature of reality beyond distinctions that it cannot be grasped objectively, merely in terms of the *idea* that it comes instantaneously or is to be found in the present.

Thus the path of *nembutsu*, if it is to lead to the boundless reality of awakening, must be the sudden path in at least three senses: it must come all at once, all of a sudden, and in the here-and-now. Or stated in other terms, it must be complete, instantaneous, and immediate. In terms of these three basic senses, Shinran's understanding of sudden does not differ substantially from that of other Buddhist thinkers adopting the sudden teaching, going all the way back to the position attributed to Hui-neng, who negated the idea of the incremental cultivation of *prajña* wisdom, gradual progress towards the goal of awakening, and awakening as a reality not yet fully present.

As a problem of Mahayana thought, affirmation of the subitist standpoint in some form is necessary if one is to move beyond the confines of dualistic, conventional reality to awaken to the unfolding of the highest reality—a movement that must come all at once, instantaneously, and in the here and now—because there is a qualitative difference between the two levels of reality that cannot be traversed in terms of the calculations of the discursive mind.

Shinran, however, found that he was unable to realize such a sudden awakening due to the blind passions that burdened him. In fact, he found that he was “incapable of any practice whatsoever.”⁵ And yet, it was precisely at the point that his ego-centered self, or self-power, exhausted all possibility of awakening through dualistic thinking that Shinran encountered and entered into the realm of formless compassion, nonduality, other-power. He defines the moment at which dualistic self-power is dissolved and resolved into all-embracing, boundless other-power as the moment of the crosswise leap, the sudden teaching within the sudden teaching:

The crosswise leap, in which one embraces the primal vow and becomes free of the mind of self-power, is called the other-power of the crosswise leap. This is the sole practice within the sole practice, the sudden within the sudden, the truth within the truth, the one vehicle within [all] vehicles—this is Shin.⁶

In order to understand how this sudden crosswise leap enables the practitioner to dissolve the tension between the two levels of reality and resolve them in the light of the *samadhi* or oneness of boundless compassion, one may turn to Shinran's expressions of *nembutsu* as the sudden path of practice.

The Nembutsu as the Sudden Path of Practice

Shinran's emphasis on the sudden character of the nembutsu path and *shinjin* as the reality through which the significance of the Pure Land becomes manifest in the present is stated in a number of passages such as the following from his *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone'*:

[When it is stated in the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life*,] "Then they attain birth," it means that when a person realizes *shinjin*, he or she is born immediately. . . . This is also called the attainment of the equal of complete awakening. . . . "Then" means "immediately"; "immediately" means without any passage of time and without any passage of days.⁷

At the same time, he avoids saying that birth or awakening is directly attained in this life. There may seem to be a rather small semantic difference between saying that one is born immediately without the passage of time when *shinjin* is attained and saying that one is born in the Pure Land in the present life, but for Shinran there is an important difference. To say merely that one attains birth or awakening in the present life implies that one can become free of blind passions, something that Shinran found he could not do. In any case, what would it mean to the farmers and fishermen of thirteenth-century Japan, struggling from day to day, to say that everyone is already awakened? Nevertheless, the reality of birth and awakening does become fully, suddenly present through the working of the nembutsu and *shinjin*. In fact, it is precisely because one is burdened by blind passion that the boundless compassion of Amida and the Pure Land take on their significance. The unfolding of the Amida's compassion embraces and dissolves the distinction between samsara and the Pure Land, yet in the world of linguistic understanding it is precisely because the two levels of reality are in dynamic tension with one another that each carries the significance that it does. Without one the other has no reality; the unqualified assertion that one actually attains awakening in this life negates the reality of both.

The simultaneous awareness of what is appropriate in the world of distinctions and the sudden unfolding of reality beyond all distinctions can be seen in Section V of the *Tannisho*: I, Shinran, have never even once uttered the nembutsu for the sake of my father and mother. The reason is that all beings have been fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, in the timeless process of birth. When I attain buddhahood in the next birth, each and everyone will be saved.

If it were a good accomplished by my own powers, then I could transfer the accumulated merits of nembutsu to save my father and mother. But since this is not the case, when we become free from self-power and quickly attain the awakening of the Pure Land, we will save those bound closest to us.⁸

In this passage a distinction is made between the relationship to one's parents based on one's "own powers" and that based on suddenly or "quickly attain[ing] the awakening of the Pure Land." It would seem that the desire to help one's parents is noble, and surely Shinran would not disagree. But from a Buddhist perspective, the desire to put one's own parents first is ultimately ego-centered and implies all of the suffering brought about by tribalism and anthropocentrism. Moreover, parents regarded in this limited, relative sense are not one's parents in the true sense of the word.

Rather, it is when one comes to see them as beings who have made it possible to encounter the dharma that one truly comes to see one's parents, those who have been instrumental in opening up for one the reality that "all beings have been fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, in the timeless process of birth." One's mother and father are buddhas and bodhisattvas by virtue of their simultaneous existence as limited beings and as windows out onto highest reality; it is this fact that is cause for the nembutsu to flow forth, not as a gradual practice in which one pursues the illusion of saving beings one by one, but as the complete, sudden, and present reality in which one is illuminated by and is enabled to embrace the whole universe of beings.

In this life [as long as it is approached dualistically] no matter how much pity and sympathy we may feel for others, it is impossible to help another as we truly wish; thus our compassion is inconsistent, [illusory], and limited. Only the saying of the nembutsu manifests the complete, [sudden] and never ending compassion which is true, real, and sincere.⁹

This saying of the nembutsu is also what fulfills the deepest desires of those “bound closest to us” and becomes the moment of their liberation.

The specifically instantaneous character of the nembutsu as a sudden path is significant for understanding the manner in which the dualistic realm of blind passions is dissolved and resolved in the unfolding of boundless compassion. “Instantaneous” is a temporal term denoting the passage of time, but it defines a unit of time so infinitesimal that it takes no time at all and is in this sense infinite, eternal. The instant of nembutsu occurs in time but is not of this world. This is known as the one thought-instant of shinjin (*ichinen no shinjin*). The span of human life is short, yet true human nature according to Shinran and much of East Asian Mahayana is eternal buddha-nature. In speaking of the nembutsu as the sudden path, we move in the relative world of time and space; in the living nembutsu we are one with the formless dharmakaya. In the instant of suddenly realizing the working of shinjin, the fact that our lives are both but a brief moment in eternity and eternity itself is illuminated in double exposure.

Passion and Compassion—Living Gradually in Light of the Sudden Path.

The working of shinjin brings the dualistic world of samsara and the nondual realm of the Pure Land into double exposure in the stage of the truly settled (*shojoju no kurai*), but as long as we live in this world it is impossible to avoid the shortcomings of our limited existence. Our efforts to live in harmony with other people and beings remain incomplete, gradual, and our attempts to do good are less than perfect. Taking the path of the nembutsu does not mean the negation of these efforts. It is necessary to strive to effect changes in one’s own life and the lives of others in order to be a responsible member of the community of sentient beings.

The passion to effect positive change is integral to human life; the recognition that this passion is flawed is precisely what opens the way to unconditional compassion. Arising spontaneously, unconditional compassion in turn informs our passion, making it fuller, more complete. In Shinran’s words,

Once shinjin is settled, we realize that since our birth [in the Pure Land] is due to the working of Amida, it is not due to our calculation. Even though we do evil, we should even more think of the power of the Vow. Then the thought of tenderness and forbearance will become manifest by virtue of “led to become so by itself.”¹⁰

That is to say, the passion to effect gradual change is illuminated and transformed by compassion that is sudden and complete: “Truly the teaching is sudden and the faculties [of human passion] gradual. [Amida’s] practice is singular but the mind is sundry. Thus it is called the sundry mind.”¹¹

Understood in this way, these statements suggest not that Shinran sought to eliminate passion but to see blind passion as the point of entry into the world of compassion, so that one “freely manifests spiritual power to play in the forest of blind passion,”¹² and to “attain nirvana without severing blind passion.”¹³

Conclusion—Beyond Sudden and Gradual

Through his own thinking reflected in the light of other-power compassion, Shinran came to understand the significance of the sudden character of the nembutsu path. Filled with blind passion, unable to perfect any kind of practice based on gradual progress, the gradual unfolding of his own life took on a boundless significance through sudden illumination. Thus he came to extol this path in numerous passages such as the following:

The one vehicle of the primal vow is the teaching of the sudden ultimate, the sudden instantaneous, the whole and complete; it is the teaching of nonduality, the path of the singularly real suchness. It is the sole practice within the sole practice, the sudden within the sudden, the truth within the truth, the complete within the complete.¹⁴

But it would also go against the spirit of the sudden teaching if he did not understand that all distinctions including that between sudden and gradual operated only in the realm of conventional thinking and did not represent fixed ideas in a philosophical system. Rather, the notion of sudden points beyond itself, and one must see this to become aware of its true significance. As Shinran states,

When one contemplates the great ocean of entrusting, it chooses not between the rich and the poor, has nothing to do with being male or female, old or young, makes nothing of karmic evil great or little, does not weigh the length of practice, is not to be found in [the distinctions of] relative practices or goods, sudden or gradual, meditative or non-meditative, orthodox or heterodox . . . but [is found] just in this shinjin inconceivable, inexplicable, ineffable.¹⁵

We cannot really learn about Shinran merely by seeking to emulate him at the level of his conventional self, for he like everyone else was limited and set apart by his particular circumstances in time and place, but we can nevertheless be intimately illuminated by his life and thought. For at the deepest level of reality his life is the unending expression of the limited self as it unfolds in the light of formless reality. In this sense, we learn not his doctrine but his manner of learning, of learning to return to one's foolish self which, embraced by boundless compassion, forgets all distinctions.

This is the world in which gentle breezes blow, flower petals fall freely showing both sides,¹⁶ where no special meaning is needed to reveal the significance of life, and uttering the nembutsu is as natural as breathing in and out. Thus, "the master Shinran said, in the nembutsu no meaning is the meaning; it is beyond description, explanation, and conceivability."¹⁷

Notes

¹ Gutoku Shinran, *Nyushutsu nimon geju*, in *Shinran chosaku zenshu*, ed. by Kaneko Daiei (Kyoto: Hozokan, 1964), 399-400.

² Shinran, "Gyo kan," *Kyogyoshinbo*, SCZ, 76.

³ Shinran, "Nyushutsu nimon ge," SCZ, 399-400.

⁴ See, for example, Shinran, *Kyogyoshinbo* and *Gutoku sho*, SCZ, 262, 364.

⁵ *Tannisbo*, Section II, SCZ, 673.

⁶ Shinran, "Keshindo kan," *Kyogyoshinbo*, SCZ, 262.

⁷ Shinran, *Yuishinbo mon'i*, SCZ, 541-542. Translation adapted from: Yoshifumi Ueda, ed., *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone'—A Translation of Shinran's Yuishinbo-mon'i* (Kyoto: Honganji International Center, 1979), 34-35.

⁸ *Tannisbo*, Section V, SCZ, 676-677. Translation adapted from: Taitetsu Unno, *Tannisbo—A Shin Buddhist Classic* (Honolulu: Buddhist Study Center Press, 1984), 10.

⁹ *Tannisbo*, Section V, SCZ, 676. Translation from: Taitetsu Unno, *Tannisbo*, 9.

¹⁰ *Tannisbo*, Section XVI, SCZ, 691. Translation adapted from: Taitetsu Unno, *Tannisbo*, 31.

¹¹ Shinran, "Keshindo kan," *Kyogyoshinbo*, SCZ, 266.

¹² Shinran, "Gyo kan," *Kyogyoshinbo*, SCZ, 82.

¹³ Shinran, "Gyo kan," *Kyogyoshinbo*, SCZ, 81.

¹⁴ Shinran, *Gutoku sho*, SCZ, 368.

¹⁵ Shinran, "Shin kan," *Kyogyoshinbo*, SCZ, 119-120.

¹⁶ This is an allusion to Ryokan's poem: *Ura o mise/omote o misete/chiru momiji*.

¹⁷ *Tannisbo*, Section X, SCZ, 691. Translation adapted from: Taitetsu Unno, *Tannisbo*, 16.