THE LAMENTATION AND SELF-REFLECTION OF GUTOKU SHINRAN

Keenly aware of the personal flaws that make it impossible to save himself through the accumulation of merit, Shinran called himself Gutoku, the "Foolish Bald-headed One." This self-awareness of imperfection is at the heart of Shinran's religion of salvation by Amida's compassionate vow, and is understood to be part of the human condition shared by monks and commoners alike, who are criticized by Shinran not only for their moral failings but for worshipping Shinto deities as well.

Although I have entered the Pure Land path,
I remain incapable of true and genuine thoughts and feelings.
My very existence is pervaded by vanity and falsehood;
There is nothing at all of any purity of mind.

Towards others we each may seek to conduct ourselves
With the appearance of wisdom, virtue, and steadfastness,
But within us desire, rage, and deviousness are rife,
So that deceit in myriad forms permeates our existence.

We cannot put a stop to our evil nature;
Our own minds are like vipers and scorpions.
Even the good we may do is poisoned;
As practice, it must be called hollow and vain.

Being unrepentant and lacking in shame,
I have no mind of truth and sincerity.
And yet, because the Name has been given by Amida Buddha,
The universe is suffused with its virtues.

As one lacking even small love and small compassion,
I give not a thought to the good of others.
If not for the ship of Amida's Vow,
How could such a person cross beyond this ocean of pain?

With minds of malicious deceit, minds like vipers and scorpions,
There is no accomplishing good acts through self-power.
Unless we entrust ourselves to Amida's giving of virtue,
We will die having never known true shame or repentance.

As a sign of the deepening of the five defilements,
All the monks and laity of our times
In externals, display the manner of Buddhists,
While in their hearts, they embrace non-Buddhist teachings.

Deeply saddening is it that in these times
Both the monks and laity in Japan,
While seeking to conform with Buddhist manner and deportment,
Worship gods and spirits of the heavens and earth.

[Translated by Dennis Hirota from Shōzōmitsu wasan in Shinshū shōgyō zensho, vol. 2 (Kyoto: Ōyagi Kōbundō, 1941), pp. 527–529]

SHINRAN: A RECORD IN LAMENT OF DIVERGENCIES (TANNISHŌ)

This collection of sayings by Shinran is attributed to his disciple Yuenbō, who was concerned about the confusion and divergent understandings developing among Shinran's followers. Stating that rebirth in the Pure Land takes place "immediately" at the moment of faith in Amida's vow rather than after death, Shinran reiterates the possibility of salvation in this life for the evil as well as the good.

"Saved by the inconceivable working of Amida's Vow, I shall realize birth in the Pure Land": the moment you entrust yourself thus to the Vow, so that the mind set upon saying the Name (nembutsu) arises within you, you are brought to share in the benefit of being grasped by Amida, never to be abandoned.

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

Thus, entrusting yourself to the Primal Vow requires no performance for good, for no act can hold greater virtue than saying the Name. Nor is there need to despair of the evil you commit, for no act is so evil that it obstructs the working of Amida's Primal Vow.
Thus were his words.

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 established through the Primal Vow. This is because a person who relies on the good that he does through 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.”

[From Hirota, trans., Tannishō, pp. 22–24]

RENNYO: RENNYO’S RULES

As the True Pure Land (Shinshū) movement spread through the creation of local congregations, each group developed rules of conduct to define proper belief and behavior. In 1473, Renryo composed the following rules, which became the standard for all Shinshū communities to follow in their relationships with the rest of society. Whereas his predecessors framed their teachings in somewhat exclusive terms, Renryo is noteworthy for his tolerant and compromising attitude, especially in regard to the Shinto deities and practices.

ITEMS TO BE PROHIBITED AMONG TRUE PURE LAND ADHERENTS

1. Do not denigrate the various kami or the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.
2. Never slander the various teachings or the various schools.
3. Do not attack other schools by comparing them to the practices of our own school.
4. Though taboos (monoimi) are not something to be adhered to by Buddhists, observe them scrupulously before public officials and [members of] other schools.

NEMBUTSU AS GRATITUDE

In his many letters to his followers, Renryo repeated the theme of the nembutsu as an expression of gratitude to Amida. Since salvation, which is affirmed through faith, is a gift of Amida, the only necessary response is thankfulness.

If we have deep faith in the principal vow of the Tathāgata Amida, if we rely with single and undivided heart on the compassionate vow of the one Buddha Amida, and if our faith is true at the very moment that we think of him to please save us, then we will definitely be received into the salvation of the Tathāgata. Over and above this, what should we take to be the meaning of reciting the nembutsu? It is a response coming from one’s indebtedness to the Buddha (goon hōsha), thanking him that one is saved through birth in the Pure Land by the power of faith in the present. As long as we have life in us, we should say the nembutsu, thinking of it as a response of thankfulness. It should be said by the person of faith (shinjin) who is established in the faith (anjin) of our tradition.

IPPEN: SELECTIONS FROM A HUNDRED SAYINGS

Despite his conviction that Amida’s compassion and the power of the nembutsu made religious practices and even faith unnecessary, Ippen was a prolific writer of aphorisms, sayings, and precepts that defined proper conduct for ordinary people. The tension