

UEDA Yoshifumi and Dennis HIROTA, *Shinran: An Introduction to His Thought* (with selections from the Shin Buddhist Translation Series). Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1989. 372 pages, appendices, Japanese texts of selections presented, indices. Paper. US\$16.95.

In his very brief foreword to this book, Bishop Seiha Watanabe, Director General of Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, states that “the path to awakening established by Shinran Shōnin is not yet widely known outside of Japan.” He also expresses the desire that this book “might serve as a stepping stone to the teachings of Shin Buddhism, and that readers approaching Shinran’s writings perhaps for the first time will find it of use in gaining an understanding of his works and thought” (p. 9).

What the Bishop says seems to correspond to my experience as a teacher here in France. Every year, as I begin to tell my students of the richness of Pure Land thought, after having spent months speaking of Theravāda Buddhism and the beginnings of Mahāyāna (usually well received), a good number of them make no effort to hide their skepticism. This is no doubt linked to the main current of European Buddhist studies, which for a very long time had either considered Amidism as an aberration of true Buddhism or simply ignored it altogether. Yet, when I continue presenting my account of the Pure Land tradition, students are usually astonished by its depth (and nuance), and especially by the remarkable coherence of Shinran’s thought. In anticipating my conclusions about the work of Ueda and Hirota, I would like to say very simply that I regret that their book is not in French. It would certainly be mandatory reading for my courses.

Leaving aside the problem that exists in Europe, there remain several important points that can make it difficult to accept Shinran’s teaching, especially if one wants to insist on emphasizing the continuity in the development of Buddhist thought. The authors are very aware of this problem and render a great service both to the Shin Buddhist tradition and to Buddhism in general by showing, firstly, the continuity in the evolution of Buddhist and of Pure Land thought and, secondly, the extraordinary innovation of Shinran – an innovation often hidden to those who discover him for the first time. Shinran never claims to do more than bring out the true meaning (*shinshū*) of the Masters who preceded him. In fact, in their “Note to the Reader,” Ueda and Hirota go right to the point and announce that there are three general sources of difficulty for contemporary readers of Shinran’s thought: “the literary forms in which he wrote, the general Mahāyāna Buddhist thought of which his path is an expression, and the terms and concepts of the Pure Land tradition in which his teaching is cast” (p. 11). In Part I of their book the authors tackle these problems by leading us through a treatment of Shinran’s life and his works (ch. 1), the Mahāyāna mode of thought (ch. 2), the emergence of the Pure Land path (ch. 3), and the structure of Shinran’s thought (ch. 4). This structured treatment of Shinran’s thought is followed by selections (with helpful notes) taken from

Shinran's letters and commentaries and from *Teaching, Practice, and Realization*. The whole leaves the reader with a solid basis for further studies in Shin Buddhism.

In the first chapter the background material necessary for a better understanding of Shinran's personal spiritual development is presented in a very readable manner. I found the section dealing with the characteristics of Shinran's writings (pp. 42–47) especially pertinent, because it shows how he roots his teachings in the Pure Land scriptural tradition. We discover Shinran's method of exposition, how he interprets Chinese texts in order to bring out their full meaning, etc. The presentation of Shinran's works (pp. 47–55) is also very helpful, especially for the beginners for whom the book is intended (even though, in my opinion, it has much to offer to those who have long studied Shinran). The authors give an explanation of each work, situating its literary genre and briefly presenting its content. These explanations all prepare the way for later sections where they present the structure of Shinran's thought, basing their discussion on works already introduced to the reader.

In the second chapter the authors tell us that "the hallmark of the Mahāyāna way is that it does not teach abandonment of ordinary life in attaining authentic existence and genuine self-knowledge. The true transcendent realm also transcends any division between this world and the world of awakening, and is realized not through renouncing everyday life but through transforming it at its roots" (p. 56). They go on to point out that Shinran's fundamental contribution to the Buddhist tradition is the way he articulates the nature of this transformation as realized in the path of Pure Land Buddhism. It is here that we find both Shinran's continuity with the past and his creativity in the present. In this chapter Ueda and Hirota speak firstly of the Buddhist vision of ordinary life. Then they draw upon the writings of early Indian masters and focus on the themes and modes of thought that paved the way for the development of Pure Land Buddhism. The three themes treated in depth are the radically non-dualistic quality of true reality, the complex structure of transformed awareness and life (in which wisdom is also itself compassion), and the implications of such wisdom for the process of transformation. This chapter goes a long way towards explaining the Mahāyānic background for the development of the Pure Land tradition and offers some hints that might help readers to come to grips with the fundamental paradox of the bodhisattva ideal so well expressed by Edward CONZE: "A Bodhisattva is a being compounded of the two contradictory forces of wisdom and compassion. In his wisdom, he sees no persons; in his compassion he is resolved to save them. His ability to combine these contradictory attitudes is the source of his greatness, and of his ability to save himself and others" (1975, p. 130). It is this bodhisattva ideal that in fact is the fundamental link between Mahāyāna tradition and Pure Land Buddhism.

In chapter 3 there is a good presentation of the bodhisattva path, leading naturally to a treatment of Amida. What is said about the development of the concept of various buddha-bodies helps the reader to situate Amida within a

classic buddhological framework — or rather, to see how, as “dharma-body as compassionate means,” he stands apart from other buddhas. The authors treat also of the relation between Amida and Śākyamuni, the nature of the Pure Land, etc. Then they explain the meaning of the term “nenbutsu” and the place that this practice occupied at various stages in the development of the Pure Land tradition. In so doing, they pave the way for the last chapter, on the structure of Shinran’s thought.

In trying to show the inherent structure of Shinran’s thought (ch. 4), Ueda and Hirota first show how Shinran reformulated the Pure Land path by putting the emphasis exclusively on the Other-power practice of Amida, and by linking the whole process of salvation to the concept of *ekō* (transference of merit). This step taken, the nenbutsu practice is no longer the calling or invoking of Amida Buddha by beings, “but activity arising from enlightenment or reality itself” (p. 145). “It is the practitioner’s saying of the Name, but in essence it is Amida’s activity to awaken beings, to transform their existence so that it embodies the virtues of enlightenment, and to bring about their attainment of birth” (p. 145). In other words, the whole of salvation is nothing other than the natural fulfillment of Amida’s Vows. If this is true for the Practice, it is also true for *shinjin*, usually translated as “faith”; according to the authors, however, for Shinran it “signifies the central religious awakening or experience in the Pure Land path” (p. 146). For man does not produce *shinjin* by his own power; *shinjin* is, rather, Amida’s own mind as it manifests itself in the minds of beings. The authors’ treatment of the implications and ramifications of this fundamental concept of *shinjin* brings out the real coherence of Shinran’s thought and constitutes one of the most important sections of the book. All that comes before this section (as well as the passages from Shinran’s works that are cited after it) support the explanation given by Ueda and Hirota. In this sense their book is pedagogically well planned.

To conclude, I would like to stress the introductory nature of the book. Some might be tempted to criticize it for not going far enough into the details of Shin Buddhist thought. This would be simply to desire a completely different book. I would be tempted to say, rather, that it is sometimes too detailed for someone who has not already studied quite a bit of Buddhism. I would not insist on this too much, however, because my experience is based upon teaching Buddhism to those who, prior to the course, have read almost nothing on the subject and who know no Japanese.

If I were to imagine, instead, students who are more familiar with Buddhism and who have some notion of Japanese, I would make a slightly different critique, especially regarding the inconsistent manner in which Japanese equivalents of technical terms are presented in the text itself. I would have preferred that every technical term be systematically accompanied by its Japanese equivalent (character and *rōmaji*) the first time it appears in the book. This would give a beginner who knows a little Japanese a better chance to profit from the original Japanese texts upon which the translations presented in Part II are

based. In the Index it might also have been helpful to give Japanese equivalents for all terms listed.

These very minor technical points aside, I cannot but welcome the book of Ueda and Hirota and express the hope that in the future they will provide Westerners with other works that will allow them to advance in their knowledge of Shin Buddhism.

REFERENCE

CONZE, Edward

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