

Article

Violence and Nonviolence in Shinran

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Abstract: This article examines the Pure Land Buddhist thinker Shinran (1173–1263), from whose teachings the Shin Buddhist tradition emerged. Shinran’s ideas provide an alternative model for considering moral judgments and issues related to violence. Since Shinran viewed violence as a mode of human action, the author asks how violence, whether inflicted or suffered, is to be understood by Shin Buddhists. This article further discusses how practitioners engaging the Pure Land path might deal with it, and the relevance of Shinran’s understanding here and now. This line of inquiry expands to consider how Shinran’s approach relates to norms used in modern discussions of violence. It scrutinizes the double structure of ethical awareness, discussing in particular how usual judgments of good and evil action can be contextualized and relativized. In the section dedicated to defusing the violence of ignorance, the author introduces Shinran’s nonviolent, nonconfrontational response, and analyzes how Shinran recasts the Buddhist stories of Ajātaśatru and Aṅgulimāla in relation to his understanding of the “five grave offenses”—specifically murder and near matricide—usually understood as excluding practitioners from the benefits of Amida Buddha’s Vows. The author shows that Shinran focuses on saving even the evil, not solely the worthy, thus rejecting the exclusion provision of the Eighteenth Vow.

Keywords: Pure Land Buddhism; Shinran; violence; nonviolence; Amida Buddha; ethical awareness; antinomianism; Ajātaśatru; Aṅgulimāla; five grave offenses; murder

1. Introduction

The Pure Land Buddhist thinker Shinran (1173–1263) lived in a time of widespread social turbulence and conflict. The incessant rivalries and armed clashes among various court, temple, and warrior factions during the Heian and Kamakura eras have been described in telling detail by Mikael Adolphson in his contribution to this special issue. Through his years of writing and disseminating Buddhist teachings, Shinran’s life was strictly circumscribed in scope and opportunity—a defrocked and formerly exiled priest, openly married even while wearing monk’s robes, living as a preacher in the countryside or with relatives in the capital as he transmitted a proscribed teaching. Despite such constraints, he articulated a mode of thinking that continues to influence social life in Japan and provides an alternative model for considering moral judgments and issues of violence today.

As an offspring of the Hino, a minor and waning branch of the Fujiwara clan, Shinran experienced how aristocratic privilege and ambition reached into the great monasteries during his twenty years as a Tendai monk of Enryakuji on Mount Hiei. Late in life, in hymns for laypeople, he decried the widespread degeneracy of the Buddhist orders:

A sign of the contempt for the Buddhist teaching [at present]
Is the use of “bhikṣu” and “bhikṣuni” as terms for [temple] serfs;
The revered titles of “Teacher of dharma” [*hōshi*] and “Monk” [*sō*]
Now designate the servants [of priests] . . .

[These] hymns are my reflections, expressing my anguish and sorrow. It is distressing to see the conduct of the monks of the major temples and monastic complexes at present, whether high-ranking prelates or “teachers of dharma.”¹

Shinran is among the “wandering monks” (*hijiri*) of the period who discarded their temple affiliations and monastic careers, some after achieving considerable rank, to seek a genuinely liberating path as “neither a monk nor one in worldly life” (*Collected Works of Shinran*, hereafter *CWS*, I: 289).² At twenty-nine, Shinran descended Mount Hiei to become a follower of Hōnen (1133–1212), who advocated the practice of saying the nembutsu (“Namu-amida-butsu,” the “name” of Amida Buddha), entrusting oneself to Amida’s Vow to bring all beings to awakening.

After six years with Hōnen, Shinran was banished from the capital together with his master and a number of other followers. Four others were executed. Persecution of the new Pure Land movement that was spreading among the general populace continued periodically throughout Shinran’s life, including by manor lords and ruling warriors in the countryside. In the postscript to his major work, *A Collection of Passages on the True and Real Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way* (hereafter *Teaching, Practice, and Realization*), Shinran denounces the violence instigated by a hostile ecclesiastical establishment and perpetrated by the court to suppress Hōnen’s Pure Land teaching:

The emperor and his ministers, acting against the dharma and violating human rectitude,³ became enraged and embittered. As a result, Master Genkū [Hōnen]—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 stripped of their ordinations . . . and consigned to distant banishment. I was among the latter. (*CWS* I: 289)

This chapter considers Shinran’s view of violence as a mode of human action. How is violence, whether inflicted or suffered, to be understood and managed by Shin Buddhists? And what does Shinran’s thought offer for our understanding of violence in the world today?

2. Violence and Codes of Conduct

Modern discussions of violence commonly pursue rules of conduct rooted in universal norms. As the philosopher Charles Taylor points out, “a great deal of effort in modern liberal society is invested in defining and applying codes of conduct.” (Taylor 2011). He further notes the widespread assumption that such codes “can be generated from a single source or principle,” such as a “mode of calculation of utility.” We seek a unitary standard that will enable a shared determination of appropriate action in specific situations, thus fostering a just society in which individuals enjoy both communal order and freedom, unfettered by either the threat of violence or undue constraint.

Religious traditions are often understood to have served in the past to provide such foundational principles. In most Buddhist traditions, an ethicized notion of karma and the various formulations of virtues and precepts for monastics and lay practitioners may be seen to have offered such support. Recent efforts by Buddhists to reinterpret such guidelines for practice as the six *paramitas* or the five

¹ (Hirota 1997) [hereafter *CWS*], translation modified. All passages from Shinran’s writings are taken from this work; translations modified.

² Shinran spoke of following the example of Kyōshin (d. 866), who had trained at a major Nara temple, becoming a respected scholar-monk. Moved by aspiration for the Pure Land, however, he abandoned the temple, traveled through the countryside, and eventually settled near a village named Kako. There he built a thatched hut, took a wife, and eked out a living by working in neighborhood fields and aiding travelers with their loads. A medieval text describes him: “In appearance not a monk nor yet worldly, he faced the west always, saying the nembutsu, and was like one to whom all else was forgotten” (Hirota 1989).

³ During World War II, government authorities found Shinran’s condemnation of the emperor so provocative as to require censure.

precepts in terms of contemporary social life reflect the modern demand for codes of conduct that Taylor identifies.⁴

The Pure Land tradition may also appear to embrace a clear prohibition of violence at its core. The crucial Eighteenth Vow of Amida Buddha, which has been understood in East Asia to provide the means for all to attain liberation through entry into the sphere of Amida's wisdom-compassion, at the same time specifies that grave offenders are omitted from the Vow:

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 grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma.*

(*Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, quoted in CWS I: 80; Shinran's interpretation; emphasis added)

In *Teaching, Practice, and Realization*, Shinran gives several different lists enumerating the "five grave offenses" (*gogyaku*)—acts so heinous they condemn one to the deepest hell—based on various Buddhist texts (CWS I: 149–50). He writes that in the *Abhidharma-kośa*, they are equivalent to intentional matricide, patricide, murder of an arhat, disruption of the sangha, and injury to a buddha. In the Mahayana tradition, they are broadly expanded to include destruction of stupas, sutras, and temples; slander of the Mahayana teaching and its practitioners; harassment of a monk; the offenses indicated in the earlier tradition; and commission of the ten transgressions (evil acts of speech, mind, and body) while rejecting the law of karmic recompense. In either case, even in Amida's broadly encompassing bodhisattva Vow there is a clear reaffirmation of fundamental Buddhist prohibitions against acts of violence and enmity.

3. Shinran's Interpretation of the Exclusion Clause

The Eighteenth Vow is the only one among Amida's forty-eight Vows to have an exclusion provision. Hōnen simply omits it when quoting the Vow, perhaps because it appears to restrict the efficacy of the vocal nembutsu practice that he expounds.⁵ Shinran, however, includes the clause as an integral part of the Vow, even when quoting the *Larger Sutra* passage in which Śākyamuni proclaims its fulfillment (CWS I: 80–81). This insistence on incorporating what appears to conflict with the spirit of Hōnen's teaching turns on Shinran's distinctive interpretation of the clause's significance.

In his only commentary in Japanese on the text of the Eighteenth Vow, Shinran states that the Buddha's intent in the exclusion provision is not to reject the gravest offenders and revilers of the dharma from the sphere of wisdom-compassion, but to indicate precisely that all beings are embraced by bringing them to awareness of, and reflection on, the depth of the karmic evil that permeates their existence:

Excluded [in the exclusion clause literally] means that those guilty of the five grave offenses are rejected. [Further,] it enables us to recognize the grave evil of slandering the dharma. By making the gravity of these two kinds of wrongdoing evident, the clause brings us to the realization that all the sentient beings throughout the ten quarters, without any exception, will attain birth [in the Pure Land]. (CWS I: 494; translation modified)

For Shinran, the exclusion provision and the phrase, "with sincere mind entrusting themselves," in the Vow express opposite aspects of the same insight: only the enlightened buddha-mind can be called genuinely "sincere"; humans "lack a mind true and real, a heart of purity, for they are possessed

⁴ The six paramitas: giving, discipline, forbearance, diligence, meditation, wisdom. The five precepts: to abstain from harming, mendacity, theft, sexual misconduct, intoxication.

⁵ See, for example, *Senchakushū*, chapter 3, where the clause is missing from both the Vow and the passage teaching its fulfillment. Pure Land tradition has also pondered the question of the clause's consistency with the *Contemplation Sutra*; see the passage from the Chinese Pure Land master Tanluan (476–542, CWS I: 144–46).

of defilements, evil, and wrong views" (CWS I: 493). Together, these clauses bespeak a unitary religious awakening in beings, not conditions they must satisfy. Shinran's thinking in inverting the literal sense of the text is concisely expressed in his characterization of the intent of the Vow as "the attainment of buddhahood by the person who is evil" (*akunin jōbutsu*). For Shinran, it is the person who has been brought to apprehension of the pervasive self-attachment that conditions their entire existence who is in accord with Amida's Vow, for it is precisely such awareness that enables the freedom from calculative thinking (*hakarai*) that characterizes a genuine encounter with the teaching. Such insight opens up an ameliorating distance and degree of perspective on the compulsive bonds of ignorance that ordinarily motivate one's thoughts and acts, even in religious life.

Two elements in Shinran's interpretations bear on the topic of violence. First, his concept of evil is not essentially one of violation of sacred dictates. Rather, evil characterizes any act that surfaces from the "afflicting passions" (*bonnō*) of ego-attachment and deepens one's entanglement in samsaric existence. Such acts arise from compulsive karmic energies out of one's past and obstruct any advance toward awakening. They are rooted in forms of violence directed toward self-magnification and division from others. By contrast, good in the Buddhist sense refers to acts that hold the power to move oneself and others toward awakening and the dissolution of the false reification of self.

Second, Shinran finds that the Vow itself, as manifested in the exclusion clause, works to awaken beings to the karmic evil that comprises their very existence. To realize oneself identified in the exclusion clause is to find oneself already embraced within the nondiscriminative compass of the Vow. In Shinran's metaphor, the light of Amida's wisdom-compassion illumines and pervades human existence "unhindered" by blind passions. Further, Shinran emphasizes the transformative power in the Thirty-third Vow, which states that beings touched by Amida's light "become supple and gentle in body and mind" (CWS I: 117).

4. The Intransience of Violence in Human Existence

From Shinran's perspective, violence is not a particular category of acts characterized by objective traits like brutality or belligerence. Rather, the quality of violence as the assertion of ego-self in an encounter with the other pervades all action that arises from discriminative thinking and self-attachment. The root cause of violence lies in the false grasp of self as substantial and transcendent. At its core is the effort to erect and enforce barriers between oneself and others in order to enhance and safeguard the self. Shinran perceives aggressive self-assertion as the outcome of this fundamental ignorance rooted in discriminative thinking and perception. Thus, violence is a condition of human existence itself, driven by eons of karmic influence from the past that give rise to the afflicting passions of self-aggrandizement and hostility in the present. As Shinran states in a letter: "Human beings are such that, maddened by the passions of greed, we desire to possess; maddened by the passions of anger, we hate that which should not be hated, seeking to go against the law of cause and effect; led astray by the passions of ignorance, we do what should not even be thought" (CWS I: 550). Elsewhere he states: "Our desires are countless, and anger, wrath, jealousy, and envy are overwhelming, arising without pause; to the very last moment of life they do not cease, or disappear, or exhaust themselves" (CWS I: 488).

We see that for Shinran, mental acts are the primary form of violence. Objectively observable violence stands at the opposite end of a continuum that reaches from the various emotions of craving and resentment and extends to verbal or physical acts. Thus, "People who look down on teachers and who speak ill of the masters commit slander of the dharma. Those who speak ill of their parents are guilty of the five grave offenses (CWS I: 551). Because intention is critical from the Buddhist perspective, anger and hatred are not to be qualitatively distinguished from the most egregious violence of slander of the dharma or patricide.

Consequently, for Shinran, the resolution of issues of violence must lie in the arising of insight into the nature of the ego-self and can never be achieved through assertion and affirmation of self-will. In explaining the covert clinging to self ("self-power") that, even when directed to self-discipline obstructs religious awakening, he notes: "Self-power is the effort to attain birth . . . by endeavoring to

make yourself worthy through mending the confusion in your acts, words, and thoughts, confident of your own powers and guided by your own calculative thinking" (CWS I: 525).

The hallmark of Shinran's thought is his insight regarding religious praxis, that any endeavor to rectify one's emotions and behavior can never be effective in eradicating violence in its deepest sense of discriminative thinking and perception. Moreover, the self-conscious performance of virtuous conduct can only serve continuing self-validation.

Even saintly people who observe these various Mahayana and Hinayana precepts can attain birth in the true fulfilled land only after they realize the true and real *shinjin* [entrustment-mindedness] of Other Power. Know that it is impossible to be born in the true, fulfilled Pure Land by simply observing precepts, or by self-willed conviction, or by self-cultivated good. (CWS I: 458)

5. The Chimera of Autonomy

As we have seen, Shinran's vision of religious existence turns on the falling away of what he terms "calculative thinking," by which he means any instrumental intent or latent self-affirmation in one's engagement with the teaching. It is this relinquishment—not creedal assent or prescribed acts of praxis—that is, for him, the core significance of the rejection of "self-power" in the Pure Land path and the central characteristic of what he terms the realization of *shinjin*. Further, it is the Vow itself that works to bring beings to this realization. Thus, he explains the traditional term "Other Power," signifying the activity of Amida's wisdom-compassion: "[The term] *Other Power* means being free of any form of calculative thinking" (CWS I: 537). The motive force that Shinran identifies as "calculative thinking" is the emotional and intellectual energy in a person's effort to preserve the ego-self by either dominating or marginalizing others. In relation to moral judgments, this impulse easily evolves into the psychological seed of righteous violence.

Shinran expresses his stance as a Pure Land practitioner: "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!" (CWS I: 291, 303). He frequently uses the metaphor of the ocean to express the action of enlightened wisdom-compassion in a person's life. He explains, for example, the meaning of his metaphor, the "great treasure ocean" of the Vow: "the Buddha's nondiscriminating, unobstructed, and nonexclusive guidance of all sentient beings is likened to the all-embracing waters of the great ocean" (CWS I: 486). The neutralization of the practitioner's calculative thinking depends not on personal attainment—for example, by stilling the mind through contemplative praxis—but rather the permeation of ordinary consciousness by self-awareness of fundamental ignorance through the functioning of reality or wisdom. Even while persons continue their existence as beings of conditioned, egocentric consciousness, they become aware of their "thoughts and feeling flowing within the dharma-ocean" of nondiscriminative wisdom.

From this perspective, Shinran views his life in the historical context of Amida's Vow working its salvific action in the world, his existence harbored in a process that is "continuous, without end and without interruption, by which those who have been born [in the Pure Land] first guide those who come later, and those who are born later join those who were born before . . . so that the boundless ocean of birth-and-death be exhausted" (Daochuo, 562–645, quoted in CWS I: 291). This awareness enables him, for example, to speak of his banishment from the capital as an opportunity to bring the dharma to people of outlying regions.

Shinran's treatment of violence may be construed as running precisely counter to the presuppositions of the modern liberal discourse of moral principles and imperatives. It is an effort to deconstruct intuitive notions of the ego-self as the center of agency and judgments of good and evil. It thus seeks to nullify key assumptions that configure universally prescriptive codes of action. Most significantly, Shinran's views are at odds with modern humanistic confidence in the autonomy of individuals and their powers of disinterested moral discernment and action. The presupposition of the self as the center of a transcendent consciousness is, for Shinran, the fundamental ignorance and,

being grounded in the implacable breach of self and other, the seed of violent acts of self-will. Thus, based on the awareness attained in the Pure Land path, Shinran states:

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 nembutsu alone is true and real.⁶

Despite his utter disavowal of genuine knowledge of good and evil, Shinran is not resigned to a despondent rejection of the possibility of benign action in the world. Rather, he offers an alternative paradigm for perceiving ethical life based on his religious realization.

6. The Double Structure of Ethical Awareness

In his teaching, Shinran seeks to effect a transformation in the awareness of his followers by drawing them to the apprehension of the Vow as beyond our calculus of good and evil. His underlying concern is to pierce the consciousness of ego-self in its absolutization of moral judgments. At bottom, the problem turns on a person’s presupposition of autonomous agency and its primacy in determining good and evil in relation to religious attainment.

Charles Taylor, in analyzing ethical thinking in Western liberal society, states: “Christian faith . . . always places our actions in two dimensions, one of right action, and also an eschatological dimension.”⁷ This paradigm of two dimensions highlights the distinctiveness of Shinran’s thought. Taylor sees the tension between a “horizontal” dimension of social life and a “vertical” eschatology as having undergone historical changes in the West that have resulted in “a kind of [moral] code fetishism” in modern times. He traces this back to “a turn in Latin Christendom”: “The attempt was always to make people over as more perfect practicing Christians, through articulating codes and inculcating disciplines. Until the Christian life became more and more identified with these codes and disciplines.”⁸ Concomitantly, “Christianity was shorn of much of its ‘transcendent’ content” as the vertical dimension gradually collapsed into the horizontal. Finally, Taylor notes that modern “disbelief in God arises in close symbiosis with . . . belief in a moral order of rights-bearing individuals, who are destined (by God or Nature) to act for mutual benefit.”⁹

Whether or not the transition Taylor outlines is historically accurate, it provides a stark contrast against which Shinran’s thinking may be grasped, for the latter is a move in precisely the opposite direction. Shinran begins at Taylor’s endpoint, where the two vectors are interfused, but rather than a collapse into the horizontal, Shinran starts with the traditional Buddhist perspective, where the observance of precepts and performance of praxis lifts one toward the eschatological goal. He moves from this attitude, still present among some of Hōnen’s followers, toward the total disengagement of the horizontal vector from the eschatological.

Shinran denies to virtuous conduct, adherence to precepts, or religious discipline any significance for advancement along the eschatological axis. Practice, however, is not eliminated in favor of faith, but remains essential to the path. It ceases to be the deliberate undertaking of practitioners, and becomes rather the manifestation of the dynamism of the Buddha’s compassion.

Instead of defining a particular code of virtuous conduct by which to shape and assess one’s life in society, Shinran seeks to open up another, encompassing and pervasive dimension for gaining perspective on moral issues, one in which our usual judgments of good and evil action emerge radically

⁶ (Hirota 1982). Also CWS I: 679. All quotations from *Tannishō* are taken from this version; translations modified.

⁷ Taylor, “Perils of Moralism,” p. 350.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

contextualized and relativized. He speaks of self-power in terms of acting “in accordance with your own particular circumstances and opportunities” (CWS I: 525). Effort to abide by moral norms is inevitably dependent on one’s already inhabiting a particular social and historical world that has fostered and reinforces one’s notion of self. It is for this reason that Shinran rejects the efficacy of codes and personal discipline to bring about genuine attainment.

In this way, the vertical dimension emerges as utterly distinct from the coordinates of ethical conduct in ordinary life, which comprise the horizontal. The vertical eschatology in Shinran has two characteristics that mark it as a model with implications for our contemporary world. First, the goal transcends discriminative thinking. Thus, Shinran considered the traditional heavenly imagery of the Pure Land “provisional,” and finally to be abandoned. Further, ascent along the vertical vector itself, which occurs “spontaneously” or “of itself” (*jinen*), without the practitioner’s calculation—eludes even the horizons of directionality and termination: beings are “drawn” by the Pure Land or “given” its attainment, and “ascending to and attaining the supreme great nirvana is without limit” (CWS I: 497).

Second, the hallmark of the vertical is movement beyond the horizons of the present toward ever broader and more open apprehension. Shinran quotes Tanluan: “Concerning compassion, there are three kinds of objects. First, sentient beings as object; this is small compassion. Second, things as object; this is medium compassion. Third, nothing as object; this is great compassion . . . The Pure Land of happiness arises from this great compassion” (CWS I: 192).

Thus we see articulated in Shinran’s works a double structure of awareness, in which both his ordinary, self-centered mode of thought and perception “flows within” the “nondiscriminating, unobstructed, and nonexclusive” functioning of enlightened wisdom-compassion are constantly operating. Hence his expression: “My thoughts and feelings flow within the dharma-ocean.” Such thinking emerges together with the falling away of the need to affirm and magnify the ego-self. This disarming of the domination of self-attachment and the simultaneity of the two dimensions of awareness account for the depth of self-reflection in his writings.

On the one hand, in both his ongoing life and his writings, Shinran consistently expresses an awareness that he is already standing within the working of Amida’s Vow. As he states in a letter: “The heart and mind of the person of *shinjin* already and always resides in the Pure Land” (CWS I: 528). For Shinran, birth in the Pure Land at death means “return to the ocean of birth-and-death to save all sentient beings” (CWS I: 454). All of his most vital concerns—whether looking to the past, present, or future—lie interfused with compassionate action in this world of the samsaric existence of living beings, not in an impending afterlife.

On the other hand, although his “heart and mind are rooted in the Buddha-ground” (CWS I: 303), this attainment illumines the incessant clinging, moving him to shame and self-aborrence. At the close of a compendium of the Pure Land tradition in hymn form, he appends verses contrasting himself with his illiterate followers:

While persons ignorant of even the characters for “good” and “evil”
All possess a sincere mind,
I make a display of knowing the words “good” and “evil”;
This is an expression of complete falsity.

I am such that I do not know right and wrong
And cannot distinguish false and true;
I lack even small love and small compassion,
And yet, for fame and profit, enjoy teaching others. (CWS I: 429)

Again, Shinran's uncompromising self-reflection penetrates any self-interested judgments of "good and evil" or "right and wrong."¹⁰ Further, the awareness that enables his insight into self manifests itself also as the "sincere mind" of people of the countryside, who conduct their lives free of "calculative thinking" and any pretense to wisdom.

The emergence of "sincere mind" in a person's existence results in the double structure of awareness discussed earlier. While not affected by a person's will, it results from a process of engagement with the Pure Land path. Thus, Shinran states: "Signs of long years of saying the nembutsu and aspiring for birth into the Pure Land can be seen in the change in the heart that had been bad and in the deep warmth for friends and fellow-practitioners; this is the sign of rejecting the world" (CWS I: 551). Although the common Buddhist expression "rejecting the world" (*yo o itou*) may suggest world-denial and severe austerity, Shinran clarifies his usage in another letter: "That people seek to stop doing wrong as the heart moves them . . . is surely a sign of having rejected this world" (CWS I: 553–54). Realization of *shinjin* alters not only personal understanding but also interactions in society, though to degrees and in ways that cannot be codified. Yuien (1222?–1289?), a disciple of Shinran, states of this conversion (literally, "turning of the mind" *eshin*): "Even when our thoughts and deeds are evil, if we thereby turn all the more deeply to the power of the Vow, gentle-heartedness and forbearance will surely arise in us through its spontaneous working" (*Tannishō*, p. 40; CWS I: 676). How, then, does such awareness manifest itself in Shinran, given his historical situation?

7. Defusing the Violence of Ignorance

We have seen that while Shinran understands his life as manifesting the Buddha's wisdom-compassion—"already and always dwelling in the Pure Land"—he is aware of himself as "difficult to save," "lacking even small love and small compassion." These interfused but opposing dimensions emerge together in his thinking regarding practical questions of the conduct of Pure Land Buddhists. We see this in his response to antinomian distortions of Hōnen's nembutsu teaching. Understandings of the Vow as licensing pernicious behavior troubled Hōnen himself as his teaching spread among the populace and also emerged as an issue among Shinran's following. Some practitioners reasoned that, because their attainment of the Pure Land was already assured by Amida Buddha, acting in accord with any impulses they might have, whether greed or anger, would not obstruct their birth. Rather, effort to suppress their passions and amend their actions might in fact be regarded as a sign of weakness of faith in the power of Amida's Vow and reliance on their own goodness. Such self-indulgent rationalization threatened the nembutsu movement by raising concerns over social order among the regional authorities (See [Dobbins 2002](#)).

When in his seventies, after having already entrusted his following to disciples and returned to Kyoto, Shinran discovered that antinomian ideas were being spread in the Kanto region where he had taught. He wrote a series of letters in which he seeks to rectify the misunderstandings with his perception of the impact of the self-awareness that arises through engagement with Amida's Vow. He writes:

If a person, justifying himself by saying he is a foolish being, can do anything he wants, then is he also to steal or to murder? Even that person who has been inclined to steal will *naturally undergo a change of heart* if he comes to say the nembutsu aspiring for the land of bliss. Yet people who show no such sign are being told that it is permissible to do wrong; this should never occur under any circumstances . . . If a person is deceitful in his relations with others, doing what he should not and saying what he should not because he thinks it will not hinder his birth, then it is not an instance of being maddened by passion. Since he

¹⁰ Note also Shinran's confession: "I, Gutoku Shinran, am sinking in an immense ocean of desires and attachments and am lost in vast mountains of fame and advantage, so that I . . . feel no happiness at coming nearer the realization of true enlightenment. How ugly it is! How wretched!" (CWS I: 125).

purposely does these things, they are simply misdeeds that should never have been done.
(CWS I: 547, emphasis added)

Elsewhere, Shinran rejects a complacent understanding of the Pure Land path and emphasizes the difficulty of realizing entrustment-mindedness and its concomitant self-reflection: “Realization of *shinjin* . . . is among all difficulties even more difficult” (CWS I: 410).¹¹

In relation to both active propagation and the proper response to sectarian attack and persecution, Shinran states, from within his own historical context, that the teaching itself counteracts any impulse toward a righteous triumphalism or an aggressive proselytization among other religious practitioners. Speaking of the objects of worship of the other traditions, he states: “It should never happen under any circumstances that the Buddhas and bodhisattvas be thought of lightly or that the gods and deities be despised and neglected” (CWS I: 563). He is seeking here to prevent actions by followers in the Kanto region that might incur the suspicion or wrath of the religious or civil authorities and result in renewed efforts to suppress the Pure Land teaching among the populace, but his acknowledgment of other forms of Buddhist tradition and indigenous beliefs is not merely expedient.

Shinran emphasizes that human beings in samsaric existence always stand within horizons of understanding shaped by their particular conditions and circumstances. Liberation is possible only when they are continually drawn beyond their constricted horizons and brought to recognize their limitations. In this way, the reification of an egocentric stance is constantly challenged through apprehension of its situatedness, partiality, and fluidity. Shinran views this as a dynamic toward ever broadening one’s outlook. This in turn leads to a disarming of the emotional energy of the afflicting passions in general, but it also had concrete manifestations in Shinran’s historical setting. He states of relations with other Buddhists:

Through [receiving] the encouragement of the buddhas and bodhisattvas for countless kalpas and innumerable lifetimes, we now encounter Amida’s Vow . . . To speak slightly of the buddhas and bodhisattvas . . . is to be totally lacking in gratitude for their profound benevolence. (CWS I: 563)

Similarly, regarding the native religious sensibility: “Those who deeply entrust themselves to the Buddha’s teaching are protected by all the gods of the heavens and earth . . . ; hence, people who have entrusted themselves to the nembutsu should never think of neglecting them” (CWS I: 563).

In response to political repression, ecclesiastic persecution, and factional bickering, Shinran articulates an attitude neither confrontational nor accommodating, but rather grounded in the double structure of his awareness. Seeking to circumvent any incitement of ego-centered emotion that might generate needless conflict, he reminds his followers that Śākyamuni Buddha and the masters of the tradition have already diagnosed the social and historical situation; hence, there is no reason for confusion or alarm should nembutsu practitioners encounter obstruction. In a letter he quotes the Chinese master Shandao (613–81): “Those who doubt and revile [Amida’s Vow] are numerous; /Both monks and laypeople despise [the nembutsu] . . . /When they see those who practice it, the poison of anger arises in them; /Hindering others in every way, they vie in causing harm” (CWS I: 563, 566). Shinran goes on to state that one should be prepared to encounter people who “act out of malice toward people of the nembutsu.” Nevertheless: “Without bearing any ill will . . . keep in mind the thought that, saying the nembutsu, you are to help them” (CWS I: 566).

Based on Shinran’s attitude of responding with composure and compassion to displays of animosity, Yuien advises:

¹¹ The doctrinal roots of opposing antinomian and moralistic understandings of the Pure Land teaching run deep in Hōnen’s teaching and developed into debate among his disciples over the relative importance of trust in Amida’s Vow (faith) and recitation of the nembutsu (practice). See CWS II: 121–31.

Suppose all other schools declared, “The nembutsu is for worthless people . . . Without the slightest argument, one should reply . . . though other teachings may be excellent, since they are beyond our capacities . . . The fundamental intent of the buddhas is freedom from birth-and-death for all, . . . so you should not obstruct our practice of the nembutsu.” If one responds without rancor thus, what person will do one harm? An authoritative passage states, “Where disputation takes place, blind passions arise. The wise keep their distance.” (*Tannishō*, 31; CWS I: 669)

We see here the nonviolent, nonconfrontational response that Shinran speaks of, acting out of the egalitarian thrust of the Pure Land path to dissolve barriers and neutralize enmity rather than establishing division between self and other. He advises: “The people who are trying to obstruct the nembutsu are the manor lords, bailiffs, and landowners . . . Practicers of the nembutsu should act with compassion for those who commit such obstruction . . . and earnestly say the nembutsu, thereby helping those who seek to hinder them” (CWS I: 563–64).

Although Shinran speaks of compassionate action, the role of the person of nembutsu lies in manifesting the path, becoming the means by which encounter with the dharma may be realized. It is not implanting it in the lives of others. Genuine communication of the path occurs solely through the Vow’s working (or “the encouragement of the buddhas and bodhisattvas”), not any human design. Thus, at the end of *Teaching, Practice, and Realization*, he reflects on his endeavor:

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 doubt and slander of it—to manifest *shinjin* within the power of the Vow. (CWS I: 291)

8. Violence in Narratives of Religious Transformation

As we have seen, Shinran’s Buddhist path turns on the arising of the transformed mode of existence that he terms “realization of *shinjin*.” Strikingly, in ensuring a grasp of his teaching, he draws on two ancient Buddhist tales of acute violence—one through extensive quotation at a crucial point in his major exposition of the teaching, and the other glancingly but tellingly, in dialogue with a close disciple. These are the narratives of Ajātaśatru and Aṅgulimāla.

The legend of Ajātaśatru is often referred to in East Asian Pure Land tradition, for it provides the frame story of the *Sutra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*, one of the three central sutras of the school as determined by Hōnen. By generating the context for Śākyamuni’s exposition of Pure Land practice, it is understood to provide the hermeneutical lens for interpreting the teaching. Prince of the kingdom of Magadha, Ajātaśatru imprisons and murders his father and threatens his mother Vaidehī in order to usurp the throne. It is in response to the queen’s entreaty from prison that the Buddha imparts to her—and thus later generations—nembutsu as the means for attaining a world free of suffering. For Shinran, however, it is Ajātaśatru who becomes central. Near the close of “Chapter on *Shinjin*,” he quotes Ajātaśatru’s story at length from the *Nirvana Sutra* to communicate the nature of the realization of *shinjin* (CWS I: 125–43). It may be said, therefore, that such acts of violence as patricide and threatened matricide stand as archetypal examples of conduct emerging from ignorance, and Ajātaśatru’s eventual repentance and conversion indicate for Shinran vital elements of the realization of *shinjin*.

In a brief dialogue recorded in *Tannishō*, Shinran alludes to the tale of Aṅgulimāla, a diligent and capable youth devoted to religious study. Through the machinations of jealous fellow students, he comes to be ordered by his master to produce an offering of fingers from one thousand people to complete his training. Out of obedience to his teacher, Aṅgulimāla (“necklace of fingers”) undertakes the task of killing and taking a finger from a thousand people, keeping the trophies on a cord around his neck. Gradually he becomes intoxicated with the gruesome work, and at the very point where he

seeks his final victim, he sees his mother coming to deter him from further carnage. Crazed, he resolves to kill her, when the Buddha miraculously intervenes.

The narratives Shinran draws from Buddhist tradition both involve murder and near matricide, decisively among the “five grave offenses.” Thus, although Shinran reflects profoundly in his writings on his own personal failings of pride, ambition, jealousy, and attachment to the deference shown him as a religious leader, he turns to stories of the extreme violence of parricide and mass killing as representative of human evil. In this, he manifests his Buddhist perception of unenlightened human existence as ineluctably possessed of afflicting passions and of the quality of human action as primarily determined by acts of mind. Violence lies at the heart of human ignorance, for it is the objectification and appropriation of what is other from the stance of the ego-self. Above all important for Shinran in his use of these stories is their nature as narratives of religious transformation. Both Ajātaśatru and Aṅgulimāla experience awakenings from the intoxication of violence through encounters with Śākyamuni Buddha.

9. Ajātaśatru’s Self-Awareness

Shinran closes his “Chapter on *Shinjin*” with a section on “three kinds of people in the world who are hard to cure: those who slander the Great Vehicle, those who commit the five grave offenses, and those who lack the seed of buddhahood” (CWS I: 125). The topic again concerns the beings specified in the exclusion clause of the Eighteenth Vow. As we have seen, for Shinran, it is precisely such people who are guided to liberation by the Buddha’s wisdom-compassion. Shinran begins the section with a passage from the *Nirvana Sutra*, which he interprets: “Good sons, suppose a person is stricken with a disease that is certain to be fatal and is without cure, but treatment is given and there is appropriate medicine” (CWS I: 125). The contradiction is apparent but reflects his understanding that it is none other than the self-aware person of evil who attains awakening through the Vow.

Shinran’s expression, “the attainment of buddhahood by the person who is evil,” is an explicit rejection of the notion that the Vow achieves all-inclusiveness through saving even the evil, not solely the worthy. Rather, for one to reach awakening, the violence one harbors as one’s thoughts and feelings of aggressive self-affirmation must itself afford the point of nexus with the path to liberation. Ajātaśatru provides a model of the person who is genuinely engaged with Amida’s Vow, one who has been wakened to the depths of karmic evil woven into the very fabric of his existence, and thereby has become freed of the bonds of egocentric calculative thinking.¹² The decisive moment in his narrative comes when, plunged into remorse for his crimes, he reaches the point at which genuine encounter with the dharma becomes possible. He speaks to Jīvaka, his physician and counselor:

“A wise man said, ‘If a person’s acts in body, speech, and mind are not pure, know that he is certain to fall into hell.’ I am indeed like this . . . ”

Jīvaka replied, “Oh, excellent, excellent! Though the King [Ajātaśatru] has committed a crime, profound remorse has been stirred in his heart and he is filled with shame and self-reproach. . . . All buddhas urge: There are two good means by which sentient beings can be saved: one is shame and the other is self-reproach.” (CWS I: 131)

The deepening self-awareness of profound evil unfolds as genuine encounter with the teaching. From such an encounter, Shinran states of himself that “hell is to be my home” and that even if he falls into hell, he will have no regrets. Both sentiments are also expressed by Ajātaśatru, who speaks of manifesting the dharma for beings in suffering: “If I can clearly destroy all the evil-mindedness of sentient beings, even if I were to dwell in Avīci hell . . . undergoing pain and suffering for the sake of sentient beings, it would not be painful” (CWS I: 138). Further, Shinran explains to followers:

¹² In Ajātaśatru’s case, the “past karmic conditions” of his patricide are suggested by the circumstances of his birth, related in the *Nirvana Sutra*. His father murdered a holy man, who was then reborn as his son. Quoted by Shinran in CWS I: 135.

When people first begin to hear the Buddha's Vow, they wonder, having become thoroughly aware of the karmic evil in their hearts and minds, how they will ever attain birth [in the Pure Land] as they are. To such people we teach that since we are possessed of afflicting passions, the Buddha receives us without judging whether our hearts are good or bad. When, upon hearing this, a person's trust in the Buddha has grown deep, he or she comes to abhor such a self and to lament continued existence in birth-and-death. (CWS I: 553)

In this way, Shinran traces the contours of realization born from the evil of violence, the encounter with the teaching, and the birth of self-awareness. As Śākyamuni states to Ajātaśatru: "It is like a person who, in a drunken fit, slays his own mother, but when he has become sober again, is overcome by remorse" (CWS I: 136).

10. Shinran's Use of Aṅgulimāla's Challenge

Shinran finds the tales of Ajātaśatru and Aṅgulimāla to be effective vehicles for directly engaging practitioners by challenging the foundations of their ordinary judgments and assumptions of moral life. Thus he regards Ajātaśatru, Vaidehī, and the others involved in the "tragedy of Rājagriha" as bodhisattvas enacting the drama in order to occasion the Pure Land teaching and to demonstrate the appropriate stance of its reception. Shinran's sole reference to the story of Aṅgulimāla is brief and oblique, but he employs it to focus sharply on his view of the central issue of religious praxis for those who practice the nembutsu.

The outline of Aṅgulimāla's narrative is alluded to in *Tannishō*. Yuien records a conversation in which Shinran presents him with a demand similar to that of Aṅgulimāla's teacher:

The Master [Shinran] once asked, "Yuien-bō, do you firmly accept all that I say?"

"Yes, that is so."

"Then will you adhere to whatever I tell you?" he repeated.

I humbly affirmed this, whereupon he said, "Now, I want you to kill a thousand people.

If you do, you will definitely attain birth."

I responded, "Though you instruct me thus, I'm afraid it is not in me to kill even one person."

(*Tannishō*, 33; CWS I: 670–71)

All of Shinran's words in *Tannishō* may be seen as dynamic responses to the misapprehensions and uncertainties of interlocutors. His invocation of Aṅgulimāla's story probably arises in reaction to anxieties about performing good acts and refraining from evil, as either prerequisite for or manifestation of entrusting of oneself to the Vow. It is intended to precipitate a shift in awareness of self. Thus Shinran explains:

If we could always act as we wished, then when I told you to kill a thousand people . . . you should have immediately gone out to kill. But since you lack the karmic cause enabling you to accomplish this with even a single person, you do no harm. It is not that you keep from killing because your heart is good. In the same way, a person may wish not to harm anyone and yet end up killing a hundred or a thousand people. (*Tannishō*, 33, modified; CWS I: 671)

Yuien's visceral recoiling from the thought of Aṅgulimāla's wanton slaughter is a reaction we easily share. Shinran's use of the story, however, is directed toward revealing the complacency that may be harbored in such a reaction and dismantling our presuppositions of autonomous will and judgment. He brings Yuien to recognize both the situatedness of conscious intentions ("How can you insist you won't deviate from what I tell you?") and the emptiness of self-righteousness (one does not know the evil that one is capable of).

11. Coda: The Nembutsu as a Prayer for Peace

We have considered Shinran's treatment of violence in terms of the structure of religious realization, his response to violence in historical context, and his use of tales of violence to convey

his teaching. Together, these suggest the contours of a moral anthropology that may aid us in our own times of heightened social divisiveness and cultural hubris. All forms of life are sustained by other life, but the violence of human existence is compounded by the incitements of discriminative thought. Although we may assume the autonomy of agency and the freedom of will, Shinran reminds us that in fact our thinking is conditioned culturally, socially, historically, and karmically. Above all, our immersion in samsaric existence means that our karmically conditioned actions work to bind us further to samsara. In Shinran's somber reflection, "If the karmic cause so prompts us, we will commit any kind of act."

As we have seen, Shinran shows us what the way forward requires. The brutal violence of the contemporary world stems from the inability to recognize and value the other. In Taylor's modern idiom: "Humanitarian action hits a ceiling, to the extent that we aren't yet capable of loving human beings as they are; to the extent that we need idealizations; or that with the collapse of our ideal images, we can feel only disdain, contempt, or hatred."¹³ These passions burgeon precisely where we imagine our own good. Taylor notes: "The slogan of [Dostoyevsky's] heroes is "we are all to blame"; the recognition that we are all complicit in sin is the gateway to grace, and hence the transformation which can take us out of the structures of evil. We are at the antipodes to self-righteous anger."¹⁴

For Shinran, saying the nembutsu is both an evocation and a manifestation of the double reality or awareness we have considered. Thus: "To say Namu-amida-butsu is to repent all the karmic evil one has committed since the beginningless past . . . to give this virtue to all sentient beings . . . to adorn the Pure Land" (CWS I: 504). Further, practitioners should "hold the nembutsu in their hearts and say it to respond in gratitude to [the Buddha's] benevolence, with the wish, 'May there be peace in the world, and may the Buddha's teaching spread!'" (CWS I: 560).

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¹³ Taylor, "Perils of Moralism," p. 365.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 364.