

This is a draft. Please do not circulate without permission.

Tatyana Kostochka

Does Shinran's Doctrine License Evil?

No other school of Buddhism that sprang up during Japan's Kamakura period (1185-1333) was more affected by Mappō (末法) consciousness than Shinran's Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land, 浄土真宗) school. Mappō—the latter age of the Buddhist law—was taken to be a period of time when, through time and corruption, the true teachings of the Buddha would be particularly hard to come by or understand. Many in the Kamakura period believed that the world had finally entered this stage.

Taking this framework on board, Shinran (親鸞, 1173-1263) argued that in this degenerate age, people were full of blind passions and that attempts to achieve enlightenment through one's own discipline and practice were all but completely futile. So, he thought we ought to abandon attempts to achieve enlightenment through our own power and, instead, entrust ourselves to the salvific power of Amida's vow. By putting faith in Amida and chanting "*namu amida butsu*"—words of praise to the Buddha Amida that are typically referred to as *nenbutsu* (念仏) for short—one could guarantee rebirth in Amida's Pure Land. Once reborn in the Pure Land, a wonderful place where Amida himself resides, it would be very easy to achieve Buddhahood.

There was, however, popular disagreement about what this meant for how people ought to behave themselves. In the sixteenth letter of the *Mattoshō* (*Lamp for the Latter Age*, 末灯鈔), Shinran wrote, in response to Jōshin-bō:

It is deplorable that you have told people to abandon themselves to their hearts' desires and to do anything they want. One must seek to cast off the evil of this world and to cease doing wretched deeds; *this* is what it means to reject the world and to live the *nembutsu*.¹

This reproach was aimed at the increasing amount of people who thought that Shinran's teaching condoned going out and participating in all sorts of immoral conduct, that Shinran's doctrine allowed for licensed evil (*zoaku muge* 僧惡無碍). After all, the thought went, if the grace of Amida extended to all and—as Shinran repeatedly stressed—to evildoers in particular, then why should one bother following the state laws or care about following the prescriptions of morality?

This trend in his followers' understanding of his doctrine worried Shinran for two major reasons. One was purely practical: he wanted to avoid further suppression of the *nembutsu* movement. Naturally, people going out and causing upheaval while proclaiming themselves to be followers of Shinran did not ingratiate his movement with the political authorities.

The other reason was soteriological. Shinran argued that followers of the *nembutsu* are—soteriologically speaking—doing the wrong thing if they steal, murder, etc. And scholars of Shinran's work agree. Dennis Hirota and Yoshifumi Ueda call the licensed evil interpretation "an arbitrary and willful interpretation based on failure to perceive the deep-rooted arrogance of the false self which is the very concern of the Primal Vow."² James Dobbins thinks, similarly, that those who considered evil to be licensed were simply not subtle enough: "To arrive at this

¹ Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota, eds., *Letters of Shinran: A Translation of Mattōshō*, trans. Yoshifumi Ueda, Dennis Hirota, Michio Tokunaga, Taitetsu Unno, and Ryushin Uryuzu (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1978), 52.

² Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota, eds., *Letters of Shinran: A Translation of Mattōshō*, 7.

conclusion they reversed his logic, interpreting faith as the freedom to commit evil rather than evil as the impetus for faith to arise."³

While I agree that it is likely that the proponents of the licensed evil interpretation of Shinran's doctrine did not fully understand the subtleties of Shinran's view, that does not yet exculpate Shinran of licensing evil. In this paper, I will argue that there is an important sense in which Shinran's doctrine does, in fact, license evil. In his letters in *Mattōshō*, Shinran gives two arguments for why immoral conduct is wrong. I will call these two arguments the *Intentional Evil Argument* and the *Poison-drinker Argument*. I will proceed by first explaining why someone might think that Shinran's doctrine condones doing evil and then explaining Shinran's two arguments against this view. For each argument, I will examine what it does or does not rule out as permissible.

I. Potential Evidence for Licensed Evil

In the *Ken jōdo shinjitsu kyōgyōshō monrui*, (*The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way*, 顯浄土真実教行証文類), Shinran makes it clear by quoting Shandao (善導) that whether one is good or evil, one can still be born in the Pure Land:

The Buddhas desire to bring all foolish beings, whether good or evil, to turn about at heart, express this in practice, and so attain birth. This is the witness to birth through the *nembutsu*, a manifestation of the decisive cause of birth in the Pure Land.⁴

So as long as someone has the required transformative moment, that they become a person with what Shinran later calls *shinjin* (an entrusting heart, 信心), it does not matter whether they are

³ James C. Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan*, (University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 54.

⁴ Shinran, *The Collected Works of Shinran*, trans. Dennis Hirota, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga, and Ryushin Uryuzu, vol. 1 (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997), 37.

good or evil. In fact, Shinran seems to think that there is no misdeed that would disqualify them from being able to devote themselves to Other Power and entrust their heart to Amida's vow. We see the thought expressed in the 79th *Jōdo Wasan (Hymns of the Pure Land, 浄土和讃)*:

All of them great sages--
By various means, brought the most foolish and lowest
Of evil people to enter the Vow
That does not neglect people of grave offenses and transgressions.⁵

No matter how bad one's conduct, this conduct does not make one less capable of devoting oneself to Amida. The question, then, is what kind of person--good or evil--is in the better position to have the moment of transformation required for later rebirth in the Pure Land. To this, Shinran responds that the evil man is the primary target of Amida's vow and is, thus, a first rate candidate for being reborn in the Pure Land. In fact, certain passages make it seem like the evil man is a better candidate than the good. Yuien quotes Shinran in the *Tannishō (Passages Deploring Deviations of Faith, 歎異抄)*:

It was solely to enable the wicked to attain Buddhahood that Amida took his Vows, out of Compassion for those like us who, defiled to the core, have no hope of liberating ourselves from the cycle of births and deaths through any other discipline. And so an evil man who dedicates himself to the Other Power is above all endowed with the right cause for Rebirth. Hence Shinran's saying: 'Even a virtuous man can attain Rebirth in the Pureland, how much more easily a wicked man.'⁶

And again in the 40th *Kōsō Wasan (Hymns of the Pure Land Masters, 高僧和讃)*, Shinran writes:

Obstructions of karmic evil turn into virtues;
It is like the relation of ice and water:
The more the ice, the more the water;

⁵ *ibid.*, 346.

⁶ Yuien, *Tannishō : Passages Deploring Deviations of Faith*, trans. Bandō Shōjun(Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1996). 5.

The more obstructions, the more virtues.⁷

What all of this shows, I believe, is that Shinran's doctrine supports the view that what places one in the best position with respect to coming to trust in Amida is having done evil. Now, evil here doesn't necessarily have to mean anything regarding moral evil. As Jacqueline Stone describes in "Seeking Enlightenment in the Last Age: *Mappō* Thought in Kamakura Buddhism," Shinran's whole philosophy depends on the idea that we are creatures of karmic evil, blown here and there by our blind passions.⁸ So, when he talks of "evil" people, he is referring to the great majority of us. It should also be noted that when he speaks of "good" people, he is referring to those who attempt to reach enlightenment through their own efforts rather than people who are good in the moral sense. What is important, however, is that the category of "evil" people does include those who break moral law and it seems that many of the transgressions that Shinran has in mind when labeling someone as "evil" are moral transgressions. So, if being "evil" puts one in the best position for having the transformative moment of entrusting oneself, that includes people who are "evil" in the moral sense.

What these passages certainly do not show is that anyone who has the transformative moment of acquiring *shinjin* would continue doing evil after having chanted the *nenbutsu* with an entrusting heart. All that we have evidence of so far is that no matter how evil, the evil person is in a good position to turn to Amida and have the transformative moment.

So, if it is this further claim is the claim that people who said that Shinran's teaching condones evil are making, then their beliefs are, at best, unfounded. And it does seem, at times,

⁷ Shinran, *The Collected Works of Shinran*, 371.

⁸ Jacqueline I. Stone, 1985, "Seeking enlightenment in the last age: mappō thought in Kamakura Buddhism," *The Eastern Buddhist* 18, no. 1: 28-56.

that this is the belief that Shinran is trying to reproach people for. In the nineteenth letter of the *Mattōshō*, Shinran writes:

But the person who purposely thinks and does what he should not, saying that it is permissible because of the Buddha's wondrous Vow to save the foolish being, does not truly desire to reject the world, nor does he consciously feel that he himself is a being of karmic evil. Hence he has no aspiration for the *nembutsu* nor for the Buddha's Vow; thus, however diligently he engages in *nembutsu* with such an attitude, it is difficult for him to attain birth in the next life.⁹

The intended audience of this reproach are people who think that just saying the *nembutsu*—calling Amida's name—is enough to be reborn in the Pure Land. These people, Shinran points out, are completely missing the telltale signs of someone who actually has the relevant transformative experience of truly entrusting their heart and mind to Amida. To think that someone who is evil can give full trust to Amida and continue on as they had before is not supported by Shinran's message. Moreover, Shinran argues that this idea is counter to his message and the first argument that Shinran gives against licensed evil is aimed to show precisely why that is.

II. The Intentional Evil Argument

The clearest statement of this first argument appears in the sixteenth letter of the *Mattōshō*. After reproaching Jōshin-bō, Shinran gives his first argument against licensed evil. He writes:

Maddened beyond control by blind passion, we do things we should not and say things we should not and think things we should not. But 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

⁹ Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota, eds., *Letters of Shinran: A Translation of Mattōshō*, 57.

maddened by passion. Since he purposely does these things, they are simply misdeeds which should never have been done.¹⁰

There are two parts to this argument. In the first, Shinran tells us that even though we are all beings of karmic evil, there is something worse about proponents of licensed evil. This part of the argument is necessary to show why he can reproach these people in particular. Otherwise, the proponent of licensed evil could come to Shinran and say: "You agree that all of us are foolish beings who do evil. Why should we be reproached more than anyone else?"

The way that Shinran justifies this distinction is the second part of the argument. The difference between the regular person and the proponent of licensed evil, Shinran says, is that the proponent of licensed evil does evil *purposely*. But we have to be very careful about how to interpret this. The first interpretation comes to mind is that what Shinran means is that it involves calculation.

On one hand, it is quite clear why Shinran should think that someone doing evil intentionally is bad. Intentionality is a mark of calculation and Shinran thinks that anyone engaged in calculation has not entrusted themselves to Amida. He writes, in the same letter:

In no way is birth accomplished through the calculating of foolish beings; neither can it be the object of the calculating of the eminently wise. Even holy masters of the Mahayana and the Hinayana entrust themselves utterly to the power of the Vow to attain birth, without calculating in any way.¹¹

Or again in the *Songō shinzō meimon* (Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls, 尊号真像銘文):

¹⁰ Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota, eds., *Letters of Shinran: A Translation of Mattōshō*, 52.

¹¹ Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota, eds., *Letters of Shinran: A Translation of Mattōshō*, 56.

Their attainment of nonretrogression coming about of itself: Of itself (*ji*) means that the calculation of sentient beings is not involved at all; it being made to become so, one is brought to attainment of the stage of nonretrogression.¹²

Not only does Shinran think that there is no entrusting with calculation, but he thinks that calculation is precisely what has been leading astray all the believers in *jiriki* (自力)--relying on oneself to achieve enlightenment. The reason that calculation is so bad, according to him, is that it is the major force that attaches one to the self. When one calculates, one necessarily thinks of oneself as a unit, acting on other things in the world.

If this is how we ought to interpret Shinran, then the first part of his argument fails. After all, people of blind passions who aren't proponents of licensed evil also typically engage in calculation. So, to accuse them of calculating would, once more, be a criticism to which these people could reply: "Sure, but so do most people." So, the fact that these people engage in calculation cannot differentiate them from people who have not truly committed themselves to the *nenbutsu*.

Someone may object, at this point, that despite failing to differentiate proponents of licensed evil from non-believers, Shinran had told us all he needs to tell us. He has shown that when these people go out and call themselves followers of the *nenbutsu*, there is an important sense in which they are lying. If being a follower of the *nenbutsu* means entrusting oneself to Amida, then these people could not be such followers since people who entrust themselves are free of calculation and these people are not. They, like those relying on self-power, are still calculating what is good and bad. It's just that those relying on self-power assume they can figure out what is good and then do that while those followers of licensed evil are assuming they can

¹² Shinran, *The Collected Works of Shinran*, 495.

figure out what's good and do the opposite. If this is the case, the objector could continue, Shinran has explained why what these people are doing is bad. They are assuming they have secured a birth in the Pure Land, while really they have done no such thing. And to spread the word to others that birth in the Pure Land can be so achieved is to plunge many more people into error.

I think this is partially correct. Shinran does successfully show that the further claim we discussed in the last section is an unjustified inference from Shinran's view. Someone who engages in evil will not continue doing so after being transformed through entrusting themselves to Amida.

However, I don't believe this gets at the greater issue of whether Shinran's doctrine licenses evil. The accusation that the proponents of licensed evil simply haven't had the moment of true entrusting yet does not tell us anything about why it is that what they're *doing* is wrong. If what Shinran wants to show is that his doctrine doesn't license evil, he should be able to tell us why--if he is right about how the world and salvation works--these people should not be doing what they are doing. And this is precisely what he has not yet told us. Why is it not the case, for example, that it's good for someone to do evil in order to put oneself in a good position to have the transformative moment of turning to Amida? If being evil makes it easier for someone to give up calculation and trust Amida, like Shinran thinks it does, why is it not good--soteriologically speaking--for people to attempt to put themselves in such a position? It appears that Shinran foresaw this objection. His second argument against licensed evil addresses this issue directly.

III. The Poison-drinker Argument

In the twentieth letter of the *Mattōshō*, Shinran once again grieves that people are misunderstanding his teaching. This time, however, his argument is quite different. He says:

In contrast, how lamentable that people who have not fully awakened from drunkenness are urged to more drunkenness and those still in the grips of poison encouraged to take yet more poison. It is indeed sorrowful to give way to impulses with the excuse that one is by nature possessed of blind passion--excusing acts that should not be committed, words that should not be said, and thoughts that should not be harbored--and to say that one may follow one's desires in any way whatever. It is like offering more wine before the person has become sober or urging him to take even more poison before the poison has abated. "Here's some medicine, so drink all the poison you like"--words like these should never be said.¹³

The idea here is simply that just because any person--however good or bad--may entrust themselves to Amida does not mean that it is permissible to be bad. The analogy is fairly compelling. Indeed, it seems nonsensical to make oneself sicker just because a cure is available. Nobody wishes more flu symptoms on themselves just because they know that with some medication and rest, they will get better. No one rationally chooses to break one's arm just because a doctor can reset it. Why would it then ever be rational to mire oneself further in delusion and evil just because there is a way to escape from this delusion? James Dobbins in particular seems to find this analogy quite powerful when he writes:

With this analogy Shinran sought to convey that the purpose of Amida's vow is not to free people so they can commit whatever wrongdoing they please but to free them from the cycle of wrongdoing into which they are locked. That is the meaning of Shinran's idealization of the evil person.¹⁴

¹³ Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota, eds., *Letters of Shinran: A Translation of Mattōshō*, 61.

¹⁴ James C. Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan*, (University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 56.

His optimistic response, however, is misplaced. The poison-drinker argument is misleading in three ways.

The case of doing evil when turning to Amida is available as an option and the case of drinking poison when a cure is available are importantly disanalogous in three ways. When the cases are made more analogous, however, the intuition that one ought not drink the poison becomes quite weak.

There are certain assumptions we make about the poison-drinking case that make it a powerful case against drinking the poison.

One reason that it strikes us as bad to drink more poison when a cure is available is that we worry that drinking more poison would do irreversible damage even though the cure saves us. That is, that overall, our condition after taking the cure will be better had we drank less poison. This is why we do not prolong the symptoms of a flu just because we know we can cure it with adequate rest. The flu may be gone but other ill effects may yet come about. This is not the case with entrusting oneself to Amida. The point that Shinran stresses over and over again--the point I tried to bring out in the first section of this paper--is that an evil person who entrusts themselves to Amida achieves the same result as a good person who does so. Both these people are reborn in Amida's Pure Land. Neither is better off. So, this cannot support our intuition that one should not drink the poison.

Another reason that we may think it bad to drink the poison is that poison makes us feel sick and miserable. When poison or illness or any such thing hurts us, we feel it and it feels awful. This is why we don't go around breaking our own bones for fun even though they can be reset. But the case of doing evil instead of devoting oneself to Amida is not like that. It may well

be that doing evil would feel pretty good--even very good--despite the fact that it ultimately hurts us in a soteriological sense. The closer analogy here then is a poison that hurts us even though we feel fine or even good when taking it.

Having made the two amendments to the poison analogy, the poison-drinking case looks very different. The claim that Shinran would need to make his argument strong is that even in the case where drinking a poison would feel good and its bad effects could be completely negated at any time, we ought not to drink the poison. But that seems to be a highly questionable and largely counterintuitive claim. Even if it is not beneficial, drinking the poison does not seem bad.

The poison-drinking analogy is also a bad analogy in a slightly different way. The analogy assumes that drinking more poison makes it no easier to take the cure. But this is not the case with entrusting oneself to Amida. In the *Tannishō*, Shinran is famously quoted as saying: "Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will."¹⁵ There is an important sense, then, in which being evil makes it easier to entrust oneself to Amida. To make the analogy better, then, the poison also has to make it more likely that one takes the cure. And indeed, this is not uncommon to our experience. It is frequently psychologically easier for someone to start reversing their bad habits after taking them to an extreme where the habit's bad effects come out.

So to put all the pieces together, the poison drinking analogy is only analogous to the case of doing evil when the poison does not make one feel unpleasant, when its effects are reversed upon taking the cure, and when it becomes easier to accept the cure if one drinks more poison. Given all these qualifications, it seems that Shinran's argument has little left to rest on. We are in

¹⁵ Shinran, *The Collected Works of Shinran*, 663.

exactly the same place that we ended on in the last section. We still do not have a compelling answer to the question of why is it not good for someone to do evil in order to put oneself in a good position to have the transformative moment of turning to Amida.

IV. Conclusion

Having looked at both of Shinran's arguments against licensed evil, we have not found a satisfactory answer. Of course, as I have said, the first argument does help Shinran show that proponents of licensed evil have not yet entrusted themselves to Amida's Vow and are, thus, not yet guaranteed rebirth in the Pure Land. However, as I hope to have showed through the discussion of his second argument, there is a deeper doctrinal problem here that has not been resolved.

To say that Shinran's responses to the problem of licensed evil are not satisfactory is, of course, not to say that such satisfactory responses do not exist. There has certainly been no shortage of scholarly work in the Jōdo Shinshū tradition. Nevertheless, it does serve to point out that whatever the solution is, it is not found in the passages that are frequently taken to provide it.

References

Dobbins, James C. *Jōdo Shinshū: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002.

Shinran. *The Collected Works of Shinran*. Translated by Dennis Hirota, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga, and Ryushin Uryuzu. Vol. 1. Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997.

Stone, Jacqueline I. 1985. "Seeking enlightenment in the last age: mappō thought in Kamakura Buddhism." *The Eastern Buddhist* 18, no. 1: 28-56.

Ueda, Yoshifumi, and Dennis Hirota, eds. *Letters of Shinran: A Translation of Mattōshō*. Translated by Yoshifumi Ueda, Dennis Hirota, Michio Tokunaga, Taitetsu Unno, and Ryushin Uryuzu. Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1978.

Yuiyen. *Tannishō : Passages Deploring Deviations of Faith*. Translated by Bandō Shōjun. Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1996.