

## Shinran's "Evolved Interiority" in Outline

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## Shinran's "Evolved Interiority" in Outline

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The foreign study of Japanese religions has greatly advanced in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and in accordance with this trend, as of the year 2008 we can see the gradual resolution of certain misconceptions which affect understanding of the Jōdoshinshū 浄土真宗 (Shin Buddhist) tradition. Some points:

1) Most of the Buddhist tradition in most of its history was not about formal (or ritual) meditation *per se*. In historical Buddhist traditions, only a few individuals could do, or did extensively do, meditation as conceived in the West as "brain technology." To a large extent, meditation in normal Asian Buddhist complexes was "myth," i.e. symbolic and narrative image around which Buddhist practices constellated in various ways. Robert Sharf 1998 has even argued that sutra texts which seem to have originated in meditative (or visionary, or altered state) conditions were—at least as ritually recycled by practitioners in later times—unlikely to have normally represented the actual experiences of the practitioners. Besides the observations in the anthropological literature on real Buddhist cultures, modern commentators such as for example Bielefeldt 2005 or Batchelor 1997 have discussed the ambiguities of Buddhist "practice" as many Westerners have come to know it.<sup>1</sup>

2) Historical Buddhist traditions were diffuse complexes of practices and heavily "devotional" in orientation (a term which, according to Charles Hallisey, like "meditation" itself needs much more critical evaluation and appreciation) and it is probably even true that the focus of Buddhist complexes on meditation actually declined over time in Asian history. Faith or devotionalism were much more sophisticated than has been assumed. Theravada scholar Charles Hallisey has argued for the *predominance* of lay ("faith-oriented") orientation even in that allegedly monk-centered tradition (1995).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Modern Buddhology has tended to define practice as habitual participation in an ideal program, especially meditation, but by this definition, "the great majority of Buddhists throughout history have never practiced their religion." (Bielefeldt, 230-231)

<sup>2</sup> Paralleling arguments made below about Shin, Hallisey is also suspicious of the idea that proto-modernizing developments in Theravada are the result of impact of Western culture and

- 3) Shin Buddhism was unquestionably a serious form of the Mahāyāna tradition. (Ueda/Hirota 1989).
  
- 4) Shin's notorious doctrine of "pure entrusting" was not based on Shinran's inexplicably making up his own understandings of the source Chinese texts. Rather, Shinran's approach to text readings was based on established practice in Tendai Buddhism called *kanjin* 観心 which allowed scholars to read creatively for supplementary meanings. (Nasu 2006 and Stone 1999)
  
- 5) Shin was a kind of reform tradition in Japanese Buddhism, even if it is now generally recognized (thanks to the *kenmitsu-taisei* thesis of historian Kuroda Toshio) that the main effect of this reform did not take place in the Kamakura period (Payne 1998, Dobbins 1998b, Stone 2006)
  
- 6) Shin has an old history of encounter with the West. It was involved in one of the oldest episodes of contact between any Buddhist culture and Europe, when missionaries and traders engaged Japan during its Christian Century, and points of structural similarity to Protestant Christianity have been consistently observed (even if not well explained). In this connection, and in Japanese premodern history generally, there are many hints that the country was as complex as premodern Europe and was proceeding on its evolutionary or developmental path at some comparable level of sophistication. (Amstutz 1997)
  
- 7) The Shin membership was closely involved with the development of Japanese economic history. Shin Buddhism included many merchants and entrepreneurs as well as many poor peasants. (Amstutz 2007)
  
- 8) Shin peaked in the Tokugawa period. There was abundant space for serious Buddhism in the system; Shin members were not simply oppressed and coerced. Shin was associated with high levels of literacy and cultural accomplishment. The conventional historiography of Japanese Buddhism has normally referred to the reform aspect of the innovative Kamakura movements, but has shown much less

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Christianity. Thai Buddhism had been undergoing change and reform beginning in the eighteenth century and continuing through the nineteenth on the independent basis of the "subtle revolution" led by King Rama I, which caused a shift in interpretation towards the rationalistic, critical, voluntaristic, individualistic, and psychological.

interest in the "long reformation," i.e. the long-run effects of the initial innovations. (Watt 2006) In other words, the implications of reform which actually had the major impact were only worked out and matured over an extended period of time.

9) Shin has continued to have major cultural importance in modern Japan. In the twentieth century it has come to be associated with a significant tradition of social thought and activism. (Porcu 2008 and Dessi 2007)

10) The modern Japanese perception of Shin Buddhism in Japanese history overall has, however, been greatly affected by the modern "invention of Japanese tradition" which excluded premodern Shin from the narrative of Japanese culture after the sixteenth century's *ikkō-ikki* events. (Vlastos 1998, Amstutz 1997; on the construction of Meiji Neo-Buddhism, see e.g. Mohr 2005, Ward 2005, Okada 2005, Staggs 1983, Nagahara 2003)

Overall it is a reasonable generalization to suggest that Shin Buddhism has been (at least through the twentieth century) the most successful of the traditional Buddhist institutions in the country which was to emerge, after the Meiji period, as the non-European civilization which displayed the most rapid and competitive ability to take up modernization. In other words, Shin was the largest traditional Buddhist denomination in the country with closest global parallels to Europe. Presumably this pattern is not an accident. However, in consideration of that reality, it seems that the dominant understanding of Shin Buddhism is missing something. What is it that links together facts such as Japan's civilizational history, Shin's large role, and Shinran's distinctive *tariki* emphasis which distinguished it from earlier Buddhist doctrines? Or was there somehow instead a disconnect between Shin Buddhism and the overall protomodern/modern character of Japanese culture? Or have historians, whether Japanese or non-Japanese, not quite succeeded in delivering a comprehensive theory about why Shinran emerged and why his ideas were as successful in Japan as they were? To address such questions, Shinran needs to be placed better in some broad picture involving both Buddhist history and (on an even larger scale) the development of mentalities in Asia and the world overall.



## Reevaluating Shinran's Historical Position: Continuous or Discontinuous as a "Pure Land" Thinker?

To start, one needs an adequate assessment of Shinran's relationship to the so-called "Pure Land tradition." Despite a long history of simplified presentations of his ideas, Shinran is not an easy thinker.<sup>3</sup> He was profoundly creative and autonomous, and built his teachings on a network of interpreted semantics that can often only be described as baroque. However, when one goes beyond the surface level of the language, the famous doctrines of "other-power" and self-critique, what was Shinran's story really about? A way to approach the question is to examine two kinds of explanatory conventions.

The first of these is Shin's own standard understanding of the alleged relationship which Shinran has with Pure Land traditions that existed before in continental Asia and Japan. The traditional Shin apologetic has been unproblematized; it maintains that Shinran was carrying forward, and raising to its acme, the development of a somehow logically unified line of Buddhism called "the" Pure Land tradition.<sup>4</sup> To nonsectarian observers, however, there have always been many problems with the continuities claimed by Shin (Payne 2007, Payne and Tanaka 2004, Dobbins 2006). Especially in the twentieth century, when there is much new Buddhological information not available in the past, it has become clear that Shinran's hermeneutical ideas about meanings in the texts are frequently at variance with what was historically the nature of prior interpretations. This is not a matter of skepticism about the quality of Shinran's religious insight; rather, the point is that Shinran was an independent twelfth-century creative figure.

When Chinese Pure Land teachers talked about "faith," or participation in the Pure Land strand of Buddhism, they were almost never talking about the same thing as the relatively elevated *shinjin* of Shinran (a level of altered-consciousness in this life similar to satori in Zen or the forty-first and higher stages of the bodhisattva

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<sup>3</sup> Some commonly used English introductions include Keel 1995, Ueda and Hirota 1989, Bloom 1965, and Unno 1996. Shin teaching is normally presented in terms of its characteristic idiomatic, coded language rooted in the earlier Pure Land texts. Unfortunately, excessive simplification has the effect of making Shin look exclusivist, simplistic, untransparent and polemical all at once.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Fujiwara 1974 for a standard sectarian Shin reading of *nembutsu* 念仏 thought history, or Tanaka 1990 for a summary of the view that there is a logical flow to its development.

path); rather they were talking about something much more like a conceptual or imaginative confidence in a "really existing" future Pure Land realm located not in this world but somewhere elsewhere in the Mahāyāna multiverse. This old vernacular or conventional interpretation became secondary in elite Shin.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Shinran was centrally focused on the *tariki* problem (the spontaneous transformative power attributed to Amida Buddha), in which the key insight was also not exactly the vocal nembutsu per se which tends to be stressed in the apologetics for Shinran's continuities with earlier tradition. Indeed, before Shinran, Shinran's radical *tariki* idea was simply not previously thematized as such, so clearly, in Buddhist history. From this psychological angle, then, there was limited continuity between Shinran's central perspectives and the earlier Pure Land tradition; the continuity can only be assigned on the basis of Shinran's selective appropriation of linguistic/textual, emotive, and rhetorical *elements*. In short, something seriously new was going on in Shinran.

The second kind of convention concerns reasons for the Shinran's transcendence of the varieties of Buddhism available to him in his time. As is well known, Shinran's spiritual odyssey began with his departure from Mt. Hiei and its rich, multi-dimensional inherited traditions. Conventional answers for this departure include Shinran's sense of personal spiritual powerlessness, the *jiriki* emphasis of Tendai tradition, disgust with power politics, the strains of celibacy, *mappō*, a craving for social equality, and so on. Yet an even more interesting question is why Shinran was apparently also dissatisfied with the multiple other options available in the Kamakura Buddhist world *after* he left Hiei. Since medieval Japanese Buddhism was apparently as loose, multi-stranded, and multidimensional as the Buddhism in traditional Tibet (Dreyfus 2003, 38-41) why did Shinran have to make a radical break from almost *everything* around him? In the medieval Japanese context, with all of its seeming options for Buddhist practice both inside and outside existing

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<sup>5</sup> Chinese and Japanese Pure Land ideas before Shinran have been covered by e.g. Corless 1973, Chappell 1976, Pas 1995, Shigematsu 1996, Dobbins 1998a, Foard 1996, Ford 2006, Rhodes 2006, Andrews 2007, and Payne 2007. Pas's study of Shan-tao (Zendō 善導) addresses the pervasive distortive influence which Shin Buddhism had on the objective historical perception of Chinese Pure Land. The three masters selected by Shinran were marginal figures in the ordinary later Chinese understanding of the progress of Pure Land teachings in China, and even none of the ones selected by Shinran (though these were presumably the most suitable textual material Shinran could find) were focused on vocal nembutsu or any kind of minimalist nembutsu, but instead on more complex practices involving Pure Land visualization, a Buddhist version of a vision quest.

institutions, why does Shinran come up with a radical new substitutionary creative system? Perhaps standard explanations yield an *underestimation* of the extent to which, quite beyond sectarian apologetics, there really is an originality and unprecedented quality to Shinran, a quality even stronger than the sectarian tradition actually wants to admit. To merely say he radicalized Hōnen or brought Mahāyāna to its acme is insufficient.<sup>6</sup>

Such complaints of inadequacy, however, do not take us any further in achieving a stronger sort of synthetic, multidimensional understanding of Shinran. To really get at Shinran, perhaps it is necessary to explain him in some fashion that goes beyond Buddhist or Marxist study. It is somewhat of a truism that Japanese scholars of Buddhism have been too often hesitant, despite their erudition, to venture out of the hothouse and delve into multidisciplinary worlds.

### **Proposing an Alternative**

So, what might be a positive alternative for explaining Shinran? Moving through several preparatory steps, a suggestion follows which will finally focus on a heuristic concept of “evolved interiority.” The general idea is not unknown in the literature but has not been developed as much as possible.

First, let us take a look at the notion of the cognitive unconscious which has become normative in modern psychology. To take one example summarizing recent non-Freudian, non-Jungian thought about the unconscious (thought which in fact extends insights from the original psychological theories of William James), Wilson (2002) presents evidence that the overwhelming majority of brain activities occur autonomously and outside of normal conscious awareness. Wilson defines the unconscious as “mental processes that are inaccessible to consciousness but that influence judgements, feelings or behavior.” (Wilson 2002:23) This means that most of the time, and for almost all persons, the brain is functioning without any reflexive understandings of most of the brain’s contents (a fact which has enormous implications for matters such as bad habits and social prejudices). Evolutionary history suggests there are excellent reasons for why this sort of brain developed: survival in a complex environment required both intense selective filtering of

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<sup>6</sup> Tanabe 2004 has complained of the persistent habit of modern Japanese Buddhist apologists to repeat the same ideas in the same language over and over.

incoming information from that environment (see Wilson 2002:24-29) and the placing of the majority of relevant mental processing on automatic pilot (i.e. thus the term "adaptive" unconscious). However the side-effect of this automacity is that the larger part of mental activity is not normally recognized and furthermore – this is where questions about the nature of habit change come in – not even directly controllable by the rational decision-making which may take place in the slim conscious part of the brain. Wilson summarizes the adaptive unconscious as an multiple, on-line pattern detector, concerned with the here and now, automatic in nature (unintentional, effortless), rigid, precocious, and sensitive to negative information; on the other hand, rational, aware consciousness in a single-mode, after-the-fact check and balancer, capable of taking a long view, controlled in nature (intentional, effortful), flexible, slower to develop, and sensitive to positive information). (Wilson 2002:49) The cognitive unconscious then contains a whole other "self" which is relatively independent of the conscious self, an approach which emphasizes a different dimension of personality theory (Wilson 2002:67-91). The type of analysis exemplified by Wilson suggests there is a terrific challenge involved in any individual's attaining self-knowledge through observation.<sup>7</sup>

In the same line of psychology, Wegner (2002) argues that even the notion linking "conscious willing" to "voluntary actions" is a kind of illusion. Intention and action are caused by mental processes that are formed separately from "will;" will instead is a secondary interpretation which creates fictive "authorship" for intention and action. Of course although this authorship is in neurological sense illusory, pragmatically it supports the sense of achievement and the acceptance of moral responsibility which are required for being human in most cultures.

"The unique human convenience of conscious thoughts that preview our actions gives us the privilege of feeling we willfully cause what we do. In fact, however, unconscious and inscrutable mechanisms create both conscious thought about action and the action, and also produce the sense of will we experience by perceiving the thought as cause of the action. So, while our thoughts may have deep, important, and unconscious causal connections to our actions, the

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<sup>7</sup> None of this means that change is impossible, only that it is difficult, and relies on the production of a new narrative about one's behavior which can be concretely put into practice by the conscious mind and only then lead, probably very gradually, to desired alterations in the subconscious. (Wilson 2002: 203-221)

experience of conscious will arises from a process that interprets these connections, not from the connections themselves.” (Wegner 2002:98)

To summarize the gist of such research: most brain activity is unconscious; influences on the subconscious from culture, individual experience and genetics are extremely diverse, complex, and untransparent; over a period of time (probably quite long) unconscious patterning can be tweaked (but rarely more than tweaked) by what can be provisionally and ambiguously interpreted as “conscious volition;” yet even the “volitional will” springs forth from the subconscious. (Other introductory presentations include Claxton 2005 and 1997, Norretranders 1991, and Tallis 2002)

Moving on to the next step, we note that conventional or classic Buddhist thought was surprisingly limited in its recognition of anything resembling the (inaccessible) cognitive subconscious. In the classic Pali texts, a small vocabulary of words referring to the subconscious can be found, mostly referring to motivations for action, an important issue of which Theravada commentators were well aware.<sup>8</sup> (Overall discussion of such terms is found in de Silva 1979, 72-79; see also Collins 1982 and Harvey 1995)

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<sup>8</sup> A *cetanā* is a “significant action,” either wholesome (*kusala*) or unwholesome (*akusala*). A *cetanā* is regarded as “intentional,” but in Theravada theory this means it can arise either consciously or subconsciously. *Anusaya* refers to proclivity or persistent tendency, often with the sense of a dormant or latent predisposition (this last aspect consistent with the idea of *anusaya* being rooted in the subconscious). Excited by stimuli, *anusaya* become the bases of greed, anger and pride. They are deeply embedded, or as de Silva puts it they “have eaten into one’s nature and found a habitat. People are not aware of their existence and power.” (de Silva 1979, 74) *Āsava* (meaning sometimes intoxicating extract, or sometimes discharges from a wound) are psychological states which may simmer in the deeper recesses of the mind in a manner comparable to the Freudian Id (“a cauldron of seething expectations”). These may include sense-pleasure, “becoming,” false views, and ignorance). *Sankhāra*, (in one of its meanings, usually translated dispositions [often in the compound *mano-sankhāra* or mental dispositions]) operate both at conscious and unconscious levels of the stream of consciousness in a way directly influencing the person’s karmic future and next birth. The ordinary person is usually not aware of his or her *mano-sankhāra*, which are often present at the subconscious level, a fact referred to by the set phrase *asampanjāna-mano-sankhāra* (mental dispositions of the mind of which we are not aware, as opposed to *sampanjāna-mano-sankhāra*, mental dispositions of which we are aware. *Cetanā* is a mental factor (*cetasika*) common to both conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind and referring to the coordinating, organizing and directing of the conjoined mental properties.

However, in general, the Buddhism of the standard Pali texts was not strongly interested in a distinction between conscious and subconscious dimensions of the mind. Apparently in its own context it found no definitive practical reason to emphasize the difference, perhaps because of the universal assumption that a person who meditates and achieves certain stage of practice will have direct perception of the subconscious mind. Theravada commentary reflects great confidence that the subconscious can be cleaned up by means of efforts in Theravada Buddhist teachings.

“In this process of mind development{by Shakyamuni}, the dark interior regions of the mind, the patterns of compulsive behaviour and the irrational biases had all to be laid bare and brought to the surface of clear consciousness, mindfulness and wakefulness.” (de Silva 1979:72)

Bringing the unconscious contents of the mind to a conscious level will not cure the deeper existential illness. Instead, the real effort must be focused on the conscious layers of the mind and the resolution of its ultimate problems by rational Buddhist analysis. (Nissanka 1993, 117-126)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> As elucidated in Gyatso 1992, it also appears that classical Buddhist traditions were little interested in memory, especially the notion that memory might be inaccessible or unreliable (that would suggest a lack of control over the stream of experience). Memory was never an *abhidharma* category.

There are several additional topics in classical Buddhism which misleadingly appear to be related to the concept of the cognitive subconscious.

The *ālaya* of the *ālayavijñāna* has often been identified with something like a subconscious, but the Buddhist theory was not about the sphere of largely inaccessible brain processing with which the modern cognitive subconscious is concerned; rather, it was a highly contextualized product of the idiosyncratic *abhidharma* analytical tradition (Jiang 2006, Waldron 2003)

Nor does the sudden gradual debate in China seem to involve a lucid conception of a cognitive subconscious on either side. Traditional Indian (and Indo-Tibetan) theory was staunchly gradualist, i.e. it understood enlightenment as a long, gradual process of growth, implicitly directed by the monastic establishment. In parts of Chinese Zen (and some maverick Tibetan schools) however, the emphasis was shifted to enlightenment as a simple, integral, “sudden” leap into another state of experience, whose parameters were far less predictable. This apparently simple distinction concealed behind it in fact, however, a number of confusingly entwined epistemological, ethical and ontological issues: what are the natures of nondualism, enlightenment, delusion, religious practice, religious language, and expedient teaching (*upāya*), and to what extent can practice really be “consciously” cultivated? Unfortunately, the historical discourse seems to have involved shifting contexts and usages of language, and as summarized by Luis Gomez, “...the sudden-gradual opposition only reflects a very general, sometimes vague, intuition of a tension or polarity between two approaches to knowledge and action.” (Gomez 1987:131) (See Gregory 1987, Ruegg 1992, Stone 1999, Hubbard 1997) The debate about gradualism and suddenism did not produce in Chinese Buddhism any sustained

Actual Theravada practice is full of devotional elements involving appeals to the Buddha, but there is no indication that the intellectual tradition produced a doctrine involving suggestions of conversion arising from the subconscious, and there is no evidence that such ideas were ever used to question the standard monastic institution and its mythos.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of apologetics for classical Buddhism, however, the proposition that through meditation the subconscious can be comprehensively and directly known is a huge claim which is not supported as such by the findings of modern cognitive science.

Continuing to another step, we note the above problems are related to an empirical skepticism that “meditation” might be more limited in its effects than Buddhist apologists (especially Western-oriented ones) have claimed, and that much more critical nuance is needed. As noted at the beginning of the article, there is a discrepancy between the way that traditional Buddhist cultures actually worked and the way a certain modern apologetic overrepresents the meditation aspect alone. In this context, Buddhist mental exercises are typically advertised as having considerable powers to achieve volitional mental modifications (significantly pushing neuroplasticity, including in the subconscious). (See e.g. Wallace 2007 and Austin 1998 and 2006)

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questioning of the monastic institution or any establishment of large-scale rival institutional forms.

The innate enlightenment theory (*hongakushisō* 本覚思想) of Japan is basically a philosophical monism. (See Stone 1999).

With rare exceptions Shin Buddhist doctrine is not associated by Japanese scholars with the above discourses.

<sup>10</sup> Agreeing that the concept of the subconscious as formulated in modern Western psychology, including the neurologically identified cognitive science version, does not appear in traditional Buddhism, Hallisey notes that at the same time (in other kinds of language, with other sorts of conceptual boundaries) a subconscious dimension is clearly experientially recognized regarding the karmic drives. Hallisey specifies that such recognition is not in early abhidharma literature; rather it is found *later*, in meditation manuals, for example, which mention meditators struggling with their own interiority, addressing the “self behind the curtain.” It is also found in commentaries. However Hallisey argues that even in the original canon, some texts, given some kinds of readings, suggest a *tariki* atmosphere, a psychology of spontaneous changes.

But besides the doubtfulness of putting meditation at the center of the traditional Buddhist religious complexes as a matter of objective anthropology, meditation on its own has problematic dimensions which are very briefly noted here.

Research on it is still in the process of development. Sharf 1998 has argued that modern vipassana practitioners do not agree on the meanings of the allegedly technical terms they use to describe the experiences they are cultivating. If this is true, vipassana is not about a uniform psychological system of discrete mental states, which raises general questions about seeing meditation as "technology."

It is not quite yet clear what existing research on meditation demonstrates. Undoubtedly some mental exercises bring about certain brain changes and emotional changes. However, applications of meditation in medicine or in the lab are not necessarily the same as the broader existential questions engaged by Buddhism as a whole.

The premises of any contemporary medical conception of mind must include assumptions that mind is extensively prestructured (as in cognitive and evolutionary psychology), that the subconscious realm of activity is dominant over the conscious realm, and that neuroplasticity operates in fairly limited realms (language acquisition and injury recovery). The notion of *extensive* neuroplasticity achievable by intentional effort is hard to explain in such terms.

While the volitional will can apparently create positive habit structures in consciousness, Buddhism is concerned with a particular softening or dehabitualization of structures (above all the ego); thus it would seem that (virtually by definition) the alteration with which Buddhism is concerned would have to be spontaneous, and to involve areas of mentation that are outside of any range of volitional will.

Finally, problems of causality arise in dealing with phenomena "produced" by meditation. For those who excel in the practice, effort plays a role, but—as opposed to "starting from zero"—virtuoso success probably heavily depends on, or works with, preexisting natural endowments and predispositions toward the types of experiences in question, as would be expected from the premises of cognitive psychology. Because success is rare, there is no major religion in which the abilities



of virtuosos constitute the ordinary practical core of the tradition. Perhaps it awaits to be seen to what extent modern research can turn Buddhist virtuoso mental exercises into a more powerful, widely applicable form of direct leverage over the mind than Asian Buddhist traditions concluded on the basis of two millennia of accumulated experience.<sup>11</sup>

The issues so far introduced—the weighty role of the cognitive subconscious, classical Buddhism’s weakness in dealing with that aspect of mentation, and the limits of meditation—highlight the subsequent broad observation (which goes beyond Buddhism specifically) about the role played by the quality of “surrender” in religious experience generally. Survey research has suggested that mystical/religious experiences arise spontaneously in a large proportion of the human population unsystematically (often in the presence of nature), without requiring highly structured religious practices as triggers. (Hardy 1979) This idea was clear to a famous set of early twentieth-century phenomenologists of religion including Pratt 1907 and 1921, Starbuck 1915, and most familiarly, James 1929. In religious studies, “grace” has been employed as a cross-traditional category for describing religions. (See e.g. Carter 1992) In this vein, the American intellectual tradition itself has long shown a deep interest in experience rooted in the subconscious mind. (Fuller 1986) Furthermore, despite the widespread emphasis on meditation, contemporary psychologists and therapists working in connection with Buddhism have repeatedly encountered how a role must be necessarily played to some extent by spontaneity and surrender. (Aronson 2004, Epstein 1995, Watson 2000, Magid 2005, Molino 1998, Pickering 1997, Safran 2003, Suler 1993, Welwood 2002, Young-Eisendrath 2002)

### **Evolved Interiority**

Assembling the above hints about the cognitive subconscious, the narrowness of classic Buddhist description of it, the limits of meditation, and the important role of surrender in religion generally, leads to the main proposals of this outline: first, a

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, there is a distinct cultural context for American interest in meditation: the idea of achieving strong powers of self-manipulation is coterminous with a long American history of metaphysical religion (neo-Calvinist motivations translated into mind cure) (See e.g. Albanese 2007 and Howe 1997). Recent Buddho-metaphysicalism is in effect an extension of the three main conventional streams of American religion (along with evangelicalism and denominationalism). Attempts to prove that Buddhist meditation has a medically scientific basis are parallel to a long history of attempts to rationalize mind cure scientifically.

synthetic experiential pattern can be referred to heuristically which will be called "evolved interiority," and second, such interiority has an actual progressive (or evolutionary) history in civilizations. Evolved interiority involves an increasingly rich human experience of consciousness linked to increasingly elaborated sociopolitical environments which yield more and more complexity "inside" the theater of individual minds (with less of the complexity expressed on the "outside.")

The kind of modeling that needs to be made about Japan and Japanese Buddhism has been suggested for European history by, for example, Whyte 1960. Whyte's argument is that European history was characterized by a rise in interiorized self-consciousness over the course of a long period of development. The intellectual discovery of the unconscious which we think of as modern *followed* that rise, as the self-awareness finally rose into conceptual view. The emergence of this self-consciousness can be charted: from around 1750 began a shift in emphasis from static toward process concepts of experience, probably due to growing intellectual influence of biology, and subsequently the notion of unconscious mental processes was conceivable by 1700, topical by 1800, and effective by 1900, becoming "an unavoidable inference from experience." (64) Along the way, from various perspectives the rising unconscious mind was interpreted with the various orientations and vocabulary: by mystics as the link with God, by romantics as the link between individual and universal powers, by early rationalists as factor operating in memory, perception, ideas, by post-Romantic thinkers as organic vitality, expressed in will, imagination, and creation, by dissociated "self-conscious man" as realm of darkness, violence, by physical scientists as product of unknown physiological factors, by monistic thinkers as prime mover, source of both order and novelty, by Freud as inhibited memories ruled by pleasure principle, usually forgotten or inaccessible, or by Jung as prerational realm of collective myth and religious symbolisms. In short, decades or even centuries before Freud, European thought was saturated with reflections and speculations on the nature and existence of subconscious mind.

Against this background the author remarks: "...without a balanced conception of the unconscious it is hard to see how human dignity can be restored. For today *faith, if it bears any relation to the natural world, implied faith in the unconscious....* if there is a healing power, it must operate there." (Whyte 1960, 9)

What are the broad sociopolitical circumstances which led to this advancing interiority? The major themes are perhaps obvious: decentralized social and economic politics which favor individualization, differentiation and complexity in inner mental life. Such differentiation is a massive commonplace in the description of European history.

Literacy too is an aspect of such differentiation and complexification, and points made in the orality-literacy overview of Ong 2002 are suggestive. Noting that literacy was a late phenomenon of human history which reshaped consciousness in significant ways, Ong attempted to specify how it differed from the earlier history of human communication which had proceeded by strictly oral means. According to his famous thesis, writing restructures consciousness by inventing a new world of autonomous discourse, i.e. one detached from concrete social settings of oral communication, becoming “utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior human potentials.” (81) Writing starts by being regarded as an instrument of secret and magic power, but as it heightens consciousness and furthers interior transformation, eventually it abstracts and sharpens a kind of precision and analysis, so that “...writing makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world quite distinct from itself but also to the interior self against whom the objective world is set.” The reflectiveness of writing actually “encourages growth of consciousness out of the unconscious.” (145) “Writing and reading...are solo activities....They engage the psyche in strenuous, interiorized, individualized thought of a sort inaccessible to oral folk. In the private worlds they generate, the feeling for the ‘round’ human character is born—deeply interiorized in motivation, powered mysteriously, but consistently, from within.” (150) Writing allows intertextuality. (131) Human consciousness has evolved through writing and dependency on writing, making an “inward turn.” (174-176) (104) (See also Goody 1986, Goody 1977, Goody 1987·Stock 1983)

Indeed, writing made Buddhism possible. (Ong, 104)

Though primarily explored for Europe, how do such themes of sociopolitical differentiation and complexification which lead to an advancing interiority relate to Buddhism and to Japan? The idea of a decentralized social politics which favors differentiation and complexity in inner mental life (if not quite the same

individualism as in European tradition), is, I would argue, now close to being a commonplace in the evaluation of Japanese history. What then about evolving literacy (and associated shifts which are indirect expressions of a new interiority) in relation to Buddhist tradition and the arising of Shinran's ideas in Kamakura Japan?

First, the history of relations between Buddhism and writing was complex long before Japan. Early Indian Buddhism was the product of oral culture, but apparently almost the entire Buddhist tradition involved literacy. There is much textual evidence in later Theravada commentaries, for example, that literacy and books were presupposed in the environment. (Veidlinger 2006, Lopez 1995)

Second, in the background of Shinran's cultural experience in Kamakura-period Japan was a contemporary expansion of literacy. The revival of systematic communications with China during its Sung flourishing by the late Heian court under the influence of Taira interests, led to a renewed surge. Sung was an exceptional period for Chinese scholarship; many examples of Chinese book production made their way to Japan and stimulated Japanese printing and scholarship. Spread of literacy produced a proportionate spread of semi-literacy. (Varley 2000, 83-84, Bodiford 2006)

Third, it is obvious that the ideas of Hōnen and Shinran were intensely textual, in that both obtained their ideas about *nembutsu* largely from books, that is from their independent reading and appropriation of Buddhist literature, not from a received tradition of practice passed down from prior living teachers.

With Shinran, indeed, we seem to see a second stage in the process of evolving literacy. The early literate rationality (according to Ong's model) which overdraws and oversimplifies the complexity of experience, and perhaps even helps bring out the conscious self in the very initial stages, seems to give way to a later literacy which needs to go back towards and into an unconscious. This unconscious, however, is not the exterior, visionary one of the ancient shaman, but now one deepened and layered in a protomodern kind of interiority. The insight is that Shinran and the later Shin tradition, far from being "simplifications" of Buddhism, were products of literacy and all that is implied by literacy.

Of course, an argument from the burgeoning Japanese literacy of Kamakura does not alone offer a conclusive suggestion why or how Shinran's ideas should so much have stood out so distinctively in Buddhist history, because there was so much literacy coexisting all along the way in Buddhism's long history earlier. However, the argument for an evolved interiority in the case of Shin is reinforced by how it was associated with further, additional expressions of interiority which distinguished it to a meaningful extent in relation to other forms of Japanese Buddhism.

One of these expressions was Shin's turn to the relatively nonvisual (in the sense of non-imagistic) in Buddhist communications. Famously, the most preferred representation of the teaching (the *honzon* 本尊) in Shin was not a sculpture or a picture, but the verbal phrase composed of Chinese characters *Namoamitufo* (南無阿弥陀佛, take refuge in Amida Buddha). (Blum 2006) Thus, whatever the complex histories of literacy in other kinds of Buddhism, other traditions (at least in Mahāyāna) (Eckel 1992, McMahan 1998, McMahan 2002) were actually more concretely imagistic than Shin. This was, it may be hypothesized, related to the Shin sense that enlightenment would be an internal experience without specified external expression, i.e. without predetermined conceptions of what would be expressed in terms of the physical body. Shin's tendency then was to internalize and simplify ritual.<sup>12</sup> A third related aspect of interiorization was Shin's famous turning away from polytheistic animism and magic in the larger religious environment in favor of concentrating on its own inward "devotional" perspective. (For a probable European analogue here, see Thomas 1971)

### **Shinran as Pioneer of Evolved Interiority in Buddhist History**

It can be argued that the original experience of Shakyamuni under the bodhi tree is ambiguous regarding exactly how the transformation occurred. Does one understand that the founder caused himself to be enlightened? Or does one understand that some force beyond the range of Gautama's own intentions *per se* caused him to awaken? In Japanese categorical terms, is the final movement *jiriki* or *tariki*? Similarly, another primary metaphor for spiritual change in Buddhism – that

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<sup>12</sup> In contrast, for example, see Mrozik's 2007 study of an Indian Mahāyāna text which focuses on cultivating the physical shaping and appearance of the ideal bodhisattva; there, Buddhist virtue and enlightenment are supposed to have specific, concrete effects on actual bodies.

of the raft or ferry crossing to the other shore – is equally ambiguous: does the pilgrim ferry herself, or is she ferried by another? (Epstein 1995)

If consciousness has a developmental history in human civilization, then Buddhism too must be involved with it. Almost all study of Buddhism has been inattentive to the possibility that the normal "orthodox" Buddhist institutional claims about achieving enlightenment—claims stressing monastic and/or the (meditative) authority of certain kinds of virtuosi—may rest on a conventionalized religious mythos which belongs to an earlier phase of an evolutionary and evolving history.

If one were skeptically focused on the modern question of the cognitive subconscious and cynical in some way about the role of Buddhist monasticism, one might think that monastic Buddhist traditions historically have minimized the possible centrality of subconscious transformation simply because such an emphasis would compromise the authority of monastic authority claims. Utilization of the mythos of Shakyamuni as the prime symbology of Buddhism and sticking to the early versions of Buddhist psychology might be seen in part as ways to defend these claims. However, naturally a more reasonable argument would be not that classical monastic traditions displayed bad faith in their assumptions; rather, they *simply matched their own phase of evolution of consciousness, in which personal interiority was just less developed.*

In the same fashion (it might be argued) *tariki* Buddhism is matched to a later phase of interiorization and complexification. Shinran's contribution was to focus in a newly coherent manner on the unconscious principle in Buddhist transformation and to stimulate the formation of a whole Buddhist institution which logically aligned the psychology and the institutional claims. Put more specifically, Shinran's thought enabled a combination of "complexity" elements which was practically unique for some seven or eight hundred years:<sup>13</sup> the shift to (ultimate) involuntariness psychology; delegitimation of the conventional institutional model (based in vinaya); a template of spiritually egalitarian community; an increase in subjective selfhood and a certain "political" autonomy of the individual; rethinking of the traditional canon via literacy; internalization of orientation; and simplification and internalization of symbolic representation and communication

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<sup>13</sup> That is, until the current twentieth- and twenty-first century phase of Buddhist development, in which Shin-like ideas and institutions are being reinvented repeatedly.

-marginalization of experience “externalized” as dreams; marginalization of “supernormal” experience; and equalization of spiritual potential via understanding of a common, unmanipulable trans-self “power” or quasi-agent of change.

If the kind of socio-political and cognitive/mentalities arguments proposed here were taken seriously in the academic field, would they serve to rebalance the study of Buddhism in a new way? Does the longterm Shin experience with “grace,” the subconscious, mental complexity, and internalization mean anything for the modern world outside this Japanese sect? What if most of the modern project of adapting Buddhism to the West has involved trying to fit basically archaic religious material to a modern society?

The argument hints that the tariki orientation displayed in Shin might be the orientation which fits other modern societies as well. But this is not the way inherited Buddhist studies has been constructed, either in Asia or the West. To generalize crudely, the academic tradition has tended to give the oral culture or early-literate cultures of Buddhism the greatest importance, and the late-literate Buddhist culture of Japan the least importance. (Needless to say, a majority of modern Japanese Buddhists themselves, often enough led by Shin Buddhist scholarship in the modern Western vein, have also focused on a kind of upside-down history in their own search for modern legitimation.)

Is a Copernican revolution needed here, reversing what is at the center and what is at the margins?

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