

The Historical Context of Shinran's *Tannishō*

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The *Tannishō*,¹ a concise work on Pure Land Buddhism, emerged as a well-known and widely popular religious text during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though short in length, it contains some of the most famous sayings now attributed to Shinran (1173-1262), who was the founder of Shin Buddhism in Japan. Through this work Shinran's reputation as a major religious thinker grew not only in scholarly circles but also among the Japanese reading public. For all of its importance in the modern period, the *Tannishō* had a very murky history in premodern times. Its origins have long been shrouded in mystery, and it was hardly cited until Tokugawa times, and then primarily among Shin Buddhist clerics. It is this enigma that I would like to address in this paper. Why has the *Tannishō* become so popular in the present, but was so obscure in the past? I believe this has to do with the changed character and content of religion in modernity compared to medieval times.

The title *Tannishō* means something like “Notes Lamenting Deviations.” In structure the work consists of two main sections, plus a preface, an interim passage between the two sections, and an afterword. The first section contains ten sayings attributed to Shinran. Some of these are the most widely quoted words of Shinran in circulation today. Several of the sayings are very similar to Shinran's words found in other works,

¹ *Tannishō*, in Shinshū Shōgyō Zensho Hensanjo, ed., *Shinshū shōgyō zensho*, 5 vols. (Kyoto: Kōkyō Shoin, 1941-42), 2:773-95. Hereafter *Shinshū shōgyō zensho* is cited as SSZ. This essay on the *Tannishō* builds on ideas that I first published in James C. Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 69-78, 192-94; and James C. Dobbins, *Letters of the Nun Eshinni: Images of Pure Land Buddhism in Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 108-24, 130-32, 200-203.

but a few are unique to the *Tannishō*.² The second section contains eight brief parts in which “deviations” from Shinran’s teaching are elucidated and critiqued. The author of the work clearly felt that some people had misinterpreted Shinran’s ideas and sought to correct them by citing Shinran’s words—not only in the sayings of the first section, but also in additional quotations found in other parts of the text. Some of the other quotations are treasured today just as much as the ten sayings in the first half are.

It is impossible here to cover all the topics in the *Tannishō*, but I would like to mention a few that have emerged as archetypal ideas ascribed to Shinran. The first is the theme of *akunin shōki*—the belief that the evil person is the primary target of Amida Buddha’s vow to save all sentient beings. In the text Shinran is famously cited as saying, “Even the good person can be born in the Pure Land. How much more so the evil person!” (*Tannishō* 3).³ This view goes against the conventional belief that enlightenment is the result of individual effort and concentration. Shinran claims, instead, that one must relinquish one’s own efforts and rely on Amida’s great power to actualize enlightenment. The evil person, as his argument goes, is more likely to do so than the person who has amassed many good works. The upshot of this idea is that the process of enlightenment is not a matter of religious striving, but occurs in the form of an unpremeditated and unanticipated realization resulting in a transformed state. This is what Shinran considers to be the ideal state of faith.

Another theme in the *Tannishō* is that this religious realization is a one-to-one, private, and interior connection with Amida. It is not mediated through external events or outside agents. This idea is best reflected in another famous quotation from the *Tannishō*: “When I reflect

² For parallel or related passages in Shinran’s writings and other Shin Buddhist works, see Taya Raishun, *Tannishō shinchū* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1973), 41-42, 48-50, 55, 63-67, 75, 79-80, 82-90. One of the famous quotations that is found only in the *Tannishō* is: “[I] Shinran have never spoken the *nenbutsu* even once out of filial devotion to my [departed] father and mother” (*Tannishō*, SSZ 2:776).

³ *Tannishō*, SSZ 2:775.

deeply on Amida's vow, [which he framed] after five kalpas of profound contemplation, [I realize] it was solely for one person, [me] Shinran. Hence, I am grateful for his principal vow aimed at establishing [my] salvation even as a person so burdened with karma" (*Tannishō* Afterword).⁴ What is striking about this quotation is how subjectively and personally Shinran takes Amida's vow to be, which is actually aimed at saving all sentient beings universally. This same perspective is conveyed in another quotation in the text where he is asked by his disciples to convey his most profound understanding of the Pure Land teachings. After declaring himself to be a mere follower of the *nenbutsu* as taught by Hōnen (1143-1212), he says: "In short, the faith of this lowly person is like that. Over and above this, whether you take up the *nenbutsu* and put faith in it, or whether you reject it, is for each of you to decide" (*Tannishō* 2).⁵ The message conveyed by both of these quotations is that religion is a personal choice and that it is experienced on an individual basis.

Other famous sayings in the *Tannishō* suggest that Shinran understood faith and the *nenbutsu* to operate outside the framework of conventional religion. That is, in the public sphere Buddhism may have definite conventions and practices by which the teachings are imparted, but those conventions do not constitute true religion, which is found only in the private sphere directly between a person and Amida. This view is suggested in a well-known quotation in the text: "I, Shinran, do not have even one disciple" (*Tannishō* 6).⁶ This statement is, of course, at odds with historical fact. We know for certain that he had numerous disciples, and one of them, it seems, was the very author of the *Tannishō*. The point Shinran is trying to make with this statement is that what causes one to practice the *nenbutsu* is not the relationship between the master and the disciple, but rather the relationship between the disciple and Amida. Thus, it is when people connect directly with Amida and acquiesce to his power that religious

⁴ *Tannishō*, SSZ 2:792.

⁵ *Tannishō*, SSZ 2:775.

⁶ *Tannishō*, SSZ 2:776.

awareness and practice arise in them.

Another statement in the *Tannishō* reinforces the idea that religion operates in a private sphere apart from its social context. There Shinran is quoted as saying, “[I] Shinran have never spoken the *nenbutsu* even once out of filial devotion to my [departed] father and mother” (*Tannishō* 5).⁷ On the surface this statement seems to repudiate the tradition of venerating parents, which was woven into the social and religious fabric of Japan. It is true that Shinran proceeds to qualify this statement, indicating that, if only he goes on to attain enlightenment first, then he can help save all living beings instead of expending his efforts only on aiding his parents. Even with this qualification, however, it is clear that Shinran places a higher value on attaining enlightenment through the power of Amida’s vow than on saving his parents in the present.

My presentation of quotations from the *Tannishō* here is selective and somewhat superficial. There is in fact much more subtlety and nuance in the text that could be revealed in a more detailed historical analysis. But I present them in this fashion to accentuate the stereotype of Shinran today. These are the quotations that captured people’s imagination from the late nineteenth century onward. Among the early champions of the *Tannishō* was the great Shin Buddhist reformer Kiyozawa Manshi (1863-1903), who was a celebrated student of Western philosophy, but at the same time took the *Tannishō* as one of the three most influential books in his life.⁸ Also, the well-known popularizer of Buddhism in the West, D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966), held the *Tannishō* in high esteem, regarding it as the true essence of Shinran’s teaching, even more so than his magnum opus *Kyōgyōshinshō* (which Suzuki once dramatically said should not have been written).⁹ In addition to them, the playwright Kurata Hyakuzō (1891-1943) helped spread the *Tannishō*’s renown beyond Shin sectarian boundaries to secular audiences in Japan

⁷ *Tannishō*, SSZ 2:776.

⁸ Yasutomi Shin’ya and Yamamoto Nobuhiro, eds., *Kiyozawa Manshi shū*, “Iwanami Bunko” 33-127-2 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2012), 297-320.

⁹ Suzuki Daisetsu, *Shinshū zakkān* and *Nihon teki reisei*, in *Suzuki Daisetsu zenshū*, 40 vols. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1999-2003), 31:385-88 and 8:82-87.

with his wildly popular theatrical account of Shinran's life, *Shukke to sono deshi* ("The Priest and his Disciple"), which incorporates large portions of the *Tannishō*'s text and ideas into its story.¹⁰ All of these reflect the reception and popularization of the *Tannishō* at the turn of the twentieth century.

What these intellectuals drew from the *Tannishō* is an image of religion that is personal and inward, whereby people confront their own frailties and shortcomings and come to terms with forces in the universe that offer transcendence—in this case, Amida Buddha. All of this occurs as an individual experience without the necessity or intervention of social organizations. Shinran, in this reading of the *Tannishō*, presents an example of how a person should act in these circumstances. He functions as a role model for humans seeking meaning in a world fraught with misfortune. This portrayal of religion is, I would maintain, largely modern. It represents a reconstruction of religion in the light of modern science and in the wake of existentialism's rise as a humanistic response. This is not to say that the statements in the *Tannishō* are false or that Shinran did not have an existential way of looking at the world. Rather, it is to say that emphasizing this image of Shinran only—primarily through his famous quotations in the *Tannishō*—is to misrepresent the complex medieval world of religion in which Shinran operated.

At this point I would like to shift our attention to the problematic history of the *Tannishō* as a text. As I said earlier, its origins and transmission have been a thorny issue in scholarship. The earliest surviving manuscript copy was produced sometime around 1480 by Rennyō (1415-99),¹¹ the celebrated descendent of Shinran who parleyed Shin Buddhism and its main temple, Honganji, into a massive nationwide religious organization. His copy dates approximately two centuries after the *Tannishō* was supposedly written. No references to the work can be found prior to Rennyō's time, and only about a dozen other manuscripts are traceable even

¹⁰ Kurata Hyakuzō, *Shukke to sono deshi*, "Iwanami Bunko" 63-64 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1962), 225-30 ("Kaisetsu" by Tanikawa Tetsuzō).

¹¹ This is the version found in *Tannishō*, SSZ 2:773-95.

to the century after him.¹² In short, the *Tannishō* was an obscure work prior to the Tokugawa period. The reason for its obscurity is not clearly known. One speculation is that the text was suppressed because its powerful message was considered potentially subversive to the Shin Buddhist organization. That, at least, is how the postscript to Rennyō's manuscript is sometimes interpreted. It says: "This text is one of the important scriptures in our school, but it is not to be revealed capriciously to persons lacking karmic preparation for it" (*Tannishō*, Postscript).¹³ This seems to suggest that people will act independently of priests and temples if they believe that faith is the only thing necessary for salvation.¹⁴ I think, however, there may have been other reasons for *Tannishō*'s obscurity, which I will describe later.

The point at which the *Tannishō* did begin to attract more attention was the Tokugawa period.¹⁵ It first circulated primarily among scholar priests, and eventually was included in the woodblock printing of the two Shin Buddhist canons: *Shinshū hōyō*, vol. 8 (1765) and *Shinshū kana shōgyō*, vol. 2 (1811). Though no traces of the text survive prior to Rennyō's time, there has never been any suspicion that it is a fabricated or spurious work. Two learned priests of particular note who have had the greatest influence on modern *Tannishō* scholarship are Kōgatsuin Jinrei (1749-1817) and Myōon'in Ryōshō (1788-1842). They published important commentaries on the work, *Tannishō kōrinki*¹⁶ and *Tannishō monki*¹⁷ respectively, in the early nineteenth

¹² The earliest dated manuscript of the *Tannishō*, preserved at Otani University in Kyoto, bears the date 1519. Concerning the early manuscripts and editions of the text, see Kaneko Daiei, *Tannishō*, "Iwanami Bunko" 732 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1950), 35-40; and Taya Raishun, *Tannishō shinchū*, 11-24 ("Kaidai").

¹³ *Tannishō*, SSZ 2:795.

¹⁴ Fukushima Kazuto, *Kindai Nihon no Shinran: Sono shisōshi* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1973), 12-13.

¹⁵ Concerning the various commentaries on the *Tannishō* produced in the Tokugawa period, see Hayashi Tomoyasu et al., "Edo jidai ni okeru *Tannishō* kenkyū no tenkai," *Ryūkoku Daigaku Bukkyō Bunka Kenkyūjo kiyō* 46 (2007): 134-60.

¹⁶ Kōgatsuin Jinrei, *Tannishō kōrinki*, in *Shinshū taikai*, 37 vols. (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1974-76), vol. 23.

¹⁷ Myōon'in Ryōshō, *Tannishō monki*, in *Zoku Shinshū taikai*, 24 vols. (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1976-77), vol. 21.

century. Their scholarship has provided the most compelling hypotheses on the mysterious origins of the text.

One of the main questions that Tokugawa scholars sought to answer was who the author of the *Tannishō* was. The prevailing attribution early in the period was Kakunyo (1270-1351), Shinran's great-grandson who was the de facto founder of the Honganji temple. The reason is that there are several similar quotations found in the *Tannishō* and Kakunyo's writings—principally, his work *Kudenshō*, composed in 1331. It is also a collection of sayings and anecdotes attributed to Shinran. The parallel passages are well documented in Jinrei's commentary and also in subsequent scholarship of the twentieth century. Let me give a couple of examples. The *Tannishō* says: "No other good is necessary beyond having faith in [Amida's] principal vow. The reason is that there is nothing so good that it can surpass the *nenbutsu*. And likewise no evil should be feared, for there is nothing so evil that it can obstruct Amida's principal vow" (*Tannishō* 1).¹⁸ The *Kudenshō*'s version says: "One should not desire good, nor fear evil. The reason not to desire good is that there is no good that surpasses having faith in Amida's principal vow. And the reason not to fear evil is that there is no evil that can obstruct Amida's principal vow" (*Kudenshō* 4).¹⁹ A second example from the *Tannishō* is: "'Even the good person can be born in the Pure Land. How much more so the evil person!' But what people of the world always say is, 'Even the evil person can be born in the Pure Land. How much more so the good person!'" (*Tannishō* 3).²⁰ The *Kudenshō* for its part states: "What people of the world always think is, 'Even the evil person can be born in the Pure Land. How much more so the good person!' ... But they should say, 'Even the good person can be born in the Pure Land. How much more so the evil person!'" (*Kudenshō* 19).²¹ Such similarities—and several others—caused Tokugawa clerics to suspect that Kakunyo was the author of the *Tannishō*. But Jinrei

¹⁸ *Tannishō*, SSZ 2:773.

¹⁹ *Kudenshō*, SSZ 3:5-6.c

²⁰ *Tannishō*, 2:775.

²¹ *Kudenshō*, SSZ 3:31, 32.

and Ryōshō point out that Kakunyo was born eight years after Shinran died, whereas the *Tannishō* is written as if the author heard these words directly from Shinran. For that reason, they hypothesize that others wrote the work. Jinrei suspects Nyoshin (1239-1300), Shinran's grandson who had lived with him as a child and whom Kakunyo sought out for religious instruction.²² Ryōshō, on the other hand, identifies Yuienbō (1222-89?), a disciple of Shinran's who lived in eastern Japan and is mentioned twice in the *Tannishō*, and whom Kakunyo may have known.²³ Scholars today generally favor Ryōshō's thesis. The point, however, is that the *Tannishō*, though not cited in Kakunyo's time, is very similar in structure and content to the *Kudenshō* and the other collections of Shinran's sayings that Kakunyo composed. Hence, it is probably not a spurious work composed later.

In comparing the *Tannishō* to Kakunyo's writings, despite the parallel passages between them, there are certain differences in how they portray Shinran and his teachings. These differences, I believe, help explain the *Tannishō*'s obscurity in medieval times. Let me elucidate this point by citing a couple of passages in Kakunyo's *Kudenshō*. The first one recounts a dream of Shinran's wife Eshinni (1182-1268?) in which she sees two paintings of Buddhist figures. A person in the dream identifies the first one as the Bodhisattva Seishi appearing as Master Genkū (i.e., Hōnen), Shinran's teacher. In identifying the second one, the person says: "That is the great compassionate Bodhisattva Kannon, and he is none other than the Priest Zenshin (i.e., Shinran)" (*Kudenshō* 12).²⁴ This revelation shocks Eshinni and she wakes up from her dream. Seishi and Kannon were recognized of course as the two attendant Bodhisattvas of Amida Buddha who assist him in delivering sentient beings to enlightenment. The second passage from the *Kudenshō* relates another dream, this one by Shinran's close disciple Renni (d. 1278). In it he sees the revered Buddhist promulgator Shōtoku Taishi (574-622), who himself is considered a manifestation of Kannon,

²² Kōgatsuin Jinrei, *Tannishō kōrinki*, in *Shinshū taikai*, 23:1-2.

²³ Myōon'in Ryōshō, *Tannishō monki*, in *Zoku Shinshū taikai*, 21:2-6.

²⁴ *Kudenshō*, SSZ 3:20.

worshipping Shinran and saying: “Reverence to the great compassionate Amida Buddha, who is reborn here to spread the sublime teachings so that those in this evil world and during this evil age with its five corruptions are certain to attain immediate highest enlightenment” (*Kudenshō* 13).²⁵ The work then elaborates by saying that Shinran is an earthly manifestation (*suijaku*) of Kannon and a worldly appearance (*raigen*) of Amida Buddha. This framing of Shinran and how his teachings are imparted to the world differs markedly from the modern interpretations of the *Tannishō*. The medieval or premodern religious outlook clearly recognizes miraculous manifestations of the Buddha, extraordinary dreams conveying revelations, and unseen spirits working in secret. Such things are dismissed nowadays as superstitions (a concept that gained its currency in modern times). But we should remember that this medieval religion created the culture out of which the *Tannishō*'s powerful message arose and within which people felt most persuaded of its truth. We should also remember that Shinran himself subscribed to these so-called superstitious beliefs and enunciated his ideas through them.

If we turn our attention back to the *Tannishō*, we can see that it does not have as strong a medieval flavor as the *Kudenshō* does, though it is not devoid of it. For instance, there is one saying attributed to Shinran that acknowledges the workings of unseen spirits: “*Kami* of heaven and spirits of earth show obeisance to practitioners of faith, and neither demons nor heretics can stand in their way” (*Tannishō* 7).²⁶ Here Shinran affirms the spirit world that was recognized in medieval times. It is noteworthy, though, that modern readers of the *Tannishō* virtually ignore this comment. On balance, however, the *Tannishō*, compared to the *Kudenshō* and other medieval texts, contains fewer references of this type that could be called distinctly premodern and prescientific.

Religion has in fact undergone a transmutation in modern times. There has been the attempt to purge from it any belief or practice that might

²⁵ *Kudenshō*, SSZ 3:21.

²⁶ *Tannishō*, SSZ 2:777.

be labeled superstitious. This is because of science's critique of religion, particularly of medieval beliefs in unseen spirits, revelatory dreams, and the mysterious workings of Amida. As a result, modern religion has been reconfigured as an inward, personal, existential experience that does not conflict with scientific cosmology and causal theory. There is no reason to think that this existential experience did not exist in medieval religion too. But there it coexisted felicitously with so-called superstitious beliefs and was actually reinforced and enhanced by them. Thus, medieval Shin Buddhists probably accepted the idea of the evil person's assurance of enlightenment in Amida's Pure Land not simply because Shinran experienced it personally, but also because Shinran was seen as a worldly manifestation of Kannon and even Amida who had come to impart this message. In modern times this sacred identity of Shinran has been stripped away, and we are left only with a humanized image of him—as a role model for personal religious searching. In the medieval context such a characterization of Shinran would probably be seen as a trivialization of his identity and message.

For whatever reason, the *Tannishō* has fewer characteristics of medieval religion than other contemporaneous texts have. Without originally intending it, the text has thus become especially accessible and enlightening to modern readers. By contrast, to medieval readers the work probably seemed superficial and lacking in insight. That, I believe, is the main reason for the *Tannishō*'s obscure origins. It is not because it was a spurious text composed in later times, nor because it was a suppressed text with a revolutionary message. Rather, it is because the *Tannishō* was an uninspiring text in the eyes of most medieval believers. It would have to wait till modern times—after religion had gone through the crucible of scientific criticism—before its message could be savored and appreciated.