

Jōdo Shinshū's Doctrinal Reflection on
the Possibility of Children Attaining Birth
in the Pure Land (*shōni ōjō*)

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The possibility of children attaining birth in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha (*shōni ōjō* 小兒往生) raised a doctrinal controversy within the Jōdo Shinshū tradition in the mid-Edo period (eighteenth century). The controversy originated with scholars' debates over the validity of a popular ritual called *myōdai danomi* 名代頼² (entrusting *per procuracionem*), performed by the parents of children to receive confirmation of *shinjin* (faith-mind) to ensure the children's salvation in case they died young and could not grow up to become persons of *shinjin*, because, according to Shinran (1173-1262), the founder of the Jōdo Shinshū tradition, the true cause of attaining nirvana by birth in Amida's Pure Land is "shinjin alone."³

Traditional doctrinal interpretation, however, rejects the possibility that parents, no matter how devout or caring, can receive confirmation on behalf of their children simply by performing the *myōdai danomi* ritual, because the parents are merely ordinary humans filled with blind passions. On the other hand, scholars did not want to be seen to disparage the working of Amida Buddha, who extends a helping hand even to "insects that fly, crawl, or creep"⁴ by suggesting that children are not welcomed into the Pure Land.⁵ The most challenging part of this doctrinal problem for the Jōdo Shinshū scholars was that they could find no clear answer in

the scriptures of the tradition.

In this presentation, I will review two short texts written by Honwanji scholars during the eighteenth century discussing doctrine related to the possibility of children attaining birth in the Pure Land, one, *Nikkei enchō kōshu shōni ōjō setsu* 日溪演暢講主小兒往生説, by Nikkei Hōrin 日溪法霖 (1693-1741), the fourth headmaster of the Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha seminary,⁶ and the other, *Chinzen'in hōgo* 陳善院法語, by Chinzen'in Sōboku 陳善院僧樸 (1719-1762), an intellectual heir to Hōrin at the seminary.

Hōrin, in the *Nikkei enchō kōshu shōni ōjō setsu*, admits that he cannot find any clear answer in the Pure Land scriptures and, instead, lays out an alternative solution to prove the possibility of children's birth by adopting the general Mahayana theory of human nature and karmic retribution. At the same time, he also states that priests cannot know whether children can attain birth in the Pure Land through the ritual of *myōdai danomi*.

Sōboku, in the *Chinzen'in hōgo*, presents a proof of children's birth not by relying on scriptural authority but by citing the case of the death of a nine-year-old boy that he himself witnessed. He then concludes that it is wasted effort to search for an intellectual solution to the problem, which by its nature is inconceivable by unenlightened humans.

Although the approaches of the two scholars are different, both show the limits of the utility of doctrinal study. The scholars' efforts to find intellectual solutions to understand the death of infants, which was a part of everyday life experience of people living in eighteenth century Japan, clearly failed. Instead, they themselves recognized the possibility of children's birth through their engagement with the everyday practices of devout Shin followers.

1. Background of the Debates over the Possibility of Children Attaining Birth in the Pure Land

Although exactly when the practice of *myōdai danomi* developed in the Jōdo Shinshū tradition is not known, the practice in which parents receive a ritual confirmation of *shinjin* as proxy of newborn babies developed in order to fulfill parents' spiritual concern for their children. The ritual itself seems to be very simple. Parents would visit an affiliated Jōdo Shinshū temple with their newborn baby and recite the passages of *Ryōgemon* 領解文 (On Understanding of Shinjin), attested to the eighth abbot of Hongwanji, Rennyo (1415-1499), for their baby with the temple priest.⁷

The ritual of *myōdai danomi* became a subject of doctrinal inquest at the Hongwanji, the head temple, around the late seventeenth century. Although Hongwanji scholars approved, the practice of *myōdai danomi* ritual as a wonderful manifestation of devout parents' faith-mind, they showed some reservations about the ritual and added notes that parents should not be considered as a proxy to transmit *shinjin* to their children. Their roles must be limited to providers of a spiritual environment for their children to nurture their own *shinjin*.

The Hongwanji's approval of the *myōdai danomi* as a wonderful ritual practice, however, did not settle the problem. Instead, it raised a new doctrinal question: Could parents tell if children who died prematurely has attained birth in the Pure Land? This question led scholars into the uncharted waters of doctrinal discussion over the possibility of children attaining birth in the Pure Land, which had never been considered a significant doctrinal problem since the time of the founder Shinran.

The root cause of the controversy over the interpretation of the possibility of children's birth in the Pure Land is in Shinran's writings in which he underscores the significance of becoming individually "awakened" to true and real *shinjin* as the true cause for birth in the Pure

Land.

In his writings, Shinran demonstrates the possibility of salvation for all living beings, by citing the Eighteenth Vow of the Larger *Sukhāvativyūha Sutra*, in which Amida Buddha vowed to save all living beings through awakening of true and real *shinjin*.

Eighteenth Vow: If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, with sincere mind entrusting themselves, aspiring to be born in my land, and saying my Name perhaps even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma.⁸

Fulfillment of the Eighteenth Vow: All sentient beings, as they hear the Name, realize even one thought-moment of *shinjin* and joy, which is directed to them from Amida's sincere mind, and aspiring to be born in that land, they then attain birth and dwell in the stage of nonretrogression. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses⁹ and those who slander the right dharma.¹⁰

Concerning those who are excluded in the passage of the Vow, Shinran ensures their possibility of attaining enlightenment through awakening of faith-mind by citing the passages of Chinese Pure Land Master Shandao's 善導 (613-681) *Hymns of the Nembutsu Liturgy* (Hōjisan 法事讚).

Through the power of the Buddha's Vows, the karmic evil of the five grave offenses and the ten transgressions is eradicated and all are brought to attainment of birth. When those who slander the dharma or abandon the seed of Buddhahood turn about at heart, they all reach the Pure Land.¹¹

This might be a blessing for adults with fully developed cognitive ability. But what about children under or around age fifteen (*shōni*),¹² whose cognitive ability has yet to fully develop? Most likely, they have never committed the five grave offenses or slandered the right dharma, it is very hard to become aware that they can become awakened to true and real *shinjin*. What could Jōdo Shinshū families do while living in a society with a very high mortality rate of children?

A rift arose between the scholarly interpretation and the everyday realities of priests and followers. Scholars at the Hongwanji seminary of the Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha agreed that it was wrong to understand that the power of the parents' entrusting mind was a direct cause for a child's birth in the Pure Land. Despite the scholars' stance, priests of the tradition nevertheless wanted to be able to say that Amida Buddha can save all living beings, even when asked whether Amida can save the children of people who are uninitiated in the Jōdo Shinshū teaching.

In response, the Hongwanji scholars answered that *myōdai danomi* should be considered a wonderful practice demonstrating parents' compassion for their children, allowing priests and parents to create a proper environment for the children to attain *shinjin* through the working of Amida Buddha. Therefore priests should not discourage parents from holding the ceremony. However, the scholars also cautioned that the priests should be careful not to give the wrong impression to followers that either priests or parents have special spiritual power over the spiritual destination of children. In order to clarify this rather contradictory situation, Nikkei Hōrin, the fourth headmaster of the Hongwanji Seminary, provided a doctrinal solution not based on Shinran's writings that by adopted a Mahāyāna Buddhist theory.

2. Nikkei Hōrin's Solution Applying a Tendai Mahayana Theory of Karmic Retribution

In the *Nikkei enchō kōshu shōni ōjō setsu*,¹³ Hōrin, as the fourth

headmaster of the Hongwanji Seminary, frankly admits that the issue of the possibility of children attaining birth in the Pure Land has never been discussed in the Three Pure Land Sutras nor in the writings of the Pure Land masters of the Jōdo Shinshū tradition.¹⁴

In order to solve this question, Hōrin applied a Tendai Mahayana theory of karmic retribution.¹⁵

1. The length of children's lives is determined by how well they observed good precepts in their past lives.
2. The possibility of children attaining enlightenment is based on whether they encountered a good teaching in past lives.
3. Regardless of children's past karma, their possibility to attain enlightenment in their next life can be enhanced by exposing them to good teachings in the present life.

Therefore, Hōrin concludes that, even though parents could not tell their children's biological and spiritual ability, priests should encourage the parents to expose their children to the good teaching to increase their chances to attain enlightenment in the next life, especially for children who had not observed good precepts but had been exposed to the good teaching in their past lives.¹⁶

Meanwhile, those who had observed good precepts but had not been exposed to the good teaching, might not be able to attain enlightenment in the next life because they might abandon the good teaching and grow up to become Confucian scholars, etc., even though parents exposed them to the good teaching when they were children. In such cases, Hōrin explains that, although they are not going to attain enlightenment in the next life, it is still worth exposing them to the good teaching through *myōdai danomi* practice, since it definitely creates a good karma for them to enhance the chance to attain enlightenment in the next two lives.¹⁷

Although Hōrin satisfied the answer he presented was doctrinally

correct, he himself did not seem to be convinced that he had answered the question of the possibility of children attaining birth in the Pure Land. In his lecture, he repeats that he can only say that the possibility of children attaining birth in the Pure Land is “indeterminate.”¹⁸

3. Sōboku's Experiential Approach to the Problem of *Shōni Ōjō*

Although Hōrin's explanation was very plausible, Sōboku, a disciple of Hōrin, did not seem to be convinced until he witnessed the case of the death of a nine-year-old boy in the fall of 1747, which he presents as a case of children's birth in the Pure Land in a letter to his friend, later given the title *Chinzen'in hōgo*.¹⁹

In his letter, he cites his conversations with a nine year-old boy on his deathbed. Sōboku repeatedly asked the boy why he was so sure that he could certainly attain birth in Amida's Pure Land and how he could realize it. Although he was very sick, he responded to Sōboku's questions in a very calm voice, saying that he was certain that he had determined to attain birth in the Pure Land through the working of Amida Buddha. In this life, he was already embraced by Amida's compassion, so he had no doubt about his afterlife and was looking forward to going to the land of the Buddha.²⁰

When he learned that the boy had passed away a few days after the visit, he came to the conclusion that there is no use debating the possibility of children attaining birth in the Pure Land. After witnessing the case of the nine year old boy, he could only explain it as the inconceivable working of the Buddha's compassion by citing Shinran's saying that “there is true working [of Amida] in no-working [of sentient beings].”²¹

Instead of relying on scriptural authority as his master Hōrin did, Sōboku responded to the problem of the possibility of children attaining birth in the Pure Land by citing the case of the death of a nine-year-old boy that he himself witnessed. He concludes that it is wasted effort to

search for an intellectual solution to the problem, which is inconceivable by unenlightened humans and is the moment of inconceivable working of the Buddha's compassion as expressed in the vow saying, "Should [all living beings] not be born in the Pure Land, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment."²²

Conclusion

Although the approaches of the two scholars are different, both show the limits of the utility of doctrinal study. The scholars' efforts to find intellectual solutions to understand the death of infants, which was a part of everyday life experience of people living in eighteenth century Japan, clearly failed. Instead, they themselves recognized the possibility of children's birth through their engagement with the everyday practices of devout Shin followers.

A post-fin story of the eighteenth century doctrinal debates on the possibility of children attaining birth in the Pure Land is that the letter of Sōboku on the birth of the nine year-old boy was most likely sent to Jitsujōin Gōsei 実成院仰誓 (1721-1794), who later became famous for compiling the *Myōkōninden* 妙好人伝, a collection of the stories of devout Shinshū followers.²³ Although Gōsei did not cite this letter in his *Myōkōninden*, he included it in the *Shinshū shōbushū* 真宗小部集 (A Collection of Shorter Writings by Shin Scholars).²⁴

Gōsei, like Sōboku, originally trained to become a learned scholar of Jōdo Shinshū scriptures. Gōsei's shift of interest to the everyday life experiences of devout Shinshū followers in his later life might have been influenced by Sōboku's letter on the possibility of children's birth in the Pure Land. If that is the case, the eighteenth century doctrinal debates on the *shōni ōjō*, even though inconclusive, provided the Jōdo Shinshū tradition a doctrinal flexibility to cope with contemporary issues that cannot be handled by examining the given scriptural sources. As Sōboku demonstrated in his letter, the answer is already out there in everyday life

experiences. In order to discover the answer, what we need is socially engaged Buddhist practice responding to our ever-changing society.

Translation:

Dharma Words of Chinzen'in (*Chinzen'in hōgo*)
(*Shinshū shōbushū* vol. 1, *Shinshū zensho*, *Zatsubu*, p. 8-9)

Enkyō 4, the year of Fire-Rabbit (*hinoto-u*, 1747). This autumn, I returned to Echigo to visit the family of my Dharma-friend who had passed away earlier to express my condolences to them. At that time, I saw a nine-year-old child who was gravely ill, and there was no longer anything that anyone could do for him.

I felt very sad, and I sat next to his pillow. Then I asked him, "I am very sorry to see that you are feeling so helpless, aren't you" Then he looked up at me and said, "Certainly, I am very helpless. I understand that I cannot stay with my mother for very long. So I feel that I would like to go to the Buddha's land where my father lives now..." He was not able to complete his words and tried to recite the *nenbutsu* instead.

Although this made me feel unbearably sad and I had to wipe my tears with the sleeve of my black robe, I asked the child, "Well, then, do you know how to be born in that land where your father is living?" Then he replied, "Once we are assured that the Buddha surely saves us, then he surely takes us to that land. Therefore, I entrust him and recite the *nenbutsu*." He replied calmly, which made me feel very grateful for his answer. However, I asked him again, "Do you really have no doubt about what you said?" The he replied, "Is there anything I need to doubt?" and continued reciting the *nenbutsu*. So I recited the *nenbutsu* together with him and then left.

Later I was told that he survived one more day without taking any medicine, as if he were looking forward to having his life come to an end. The next day he passed away while reciting the *nenbutsu* as if he were falling asleep. I felt this to be inconceivable.

Is this child's understanding of the teaching a merit of his efforts in listening to the teaching? Or should we understand it to be caused by the karma accumulated in his past life? Concerning the inconceivability of Other Power, this must be the reason why our master (Shinran) said, "There is true working in no-working." I hope that those who tirelessly debate over the workings of sentient beings and the working of Amida Buddha could also contemplate on what I witnessed and entrust the working [of Other Power] simply as inconceivable.

It is always said that people commit evil deeds by presuming upon Amida's Primal Vow. But, reflecting on myself, I do not believe this to be so. Rather, I lament that nowadays I hardly meet followers who presume upon the Primal Vow. I have never seen any children who could presume upon a stepmother's goodwill. Children can take advantage of their parents by presuming upon their goodwill without any hesitation only if they are the true parents. I envy people whose mind is so settled that they can presume upon Amida's Vow. They deeply entrust the Primal Vow even to the point of presuming upon it, but when they see an evil act or two, they refrain from committing evil deeds, because that is the manifestation of working of Amida's Other Power.

If our birth in the Pure Land were determined by our physical actions, certainly those who are stricken with paralysis could not attain birth. If birth were determined by verbal actions, the birth of those who are suffering impaired speech would not be certain. Concerning our mental ability, what could we do if we were suffering mental disorders. However, there is no karmic cause of birth to be found in the three kinds of karmic actions of sentient beings. We can attain birth in the Pure Land only because there is the Vow in which all living beings are embraced, never to be abandoned. Those who hear this teaching and become joyful are the most enviable persons of shinjin.

Notes:

- 1 This essay is based on my presentation at the Public Symposium and Workshop: Religion and the World of Lived Experience held at Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions in February 2011, and a paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, Annual Meeting in San Francisco in November 2011.
- 2 For an overview of Jōdo Shinshū scholars' doctrinal discussions on children's birth in the Pure Land in the Edo Period, see Hoshino Kanryō, *Shōni ōjō ron* (Kyoto: Privately published by Hoshino Genpō, 1938); Ōhara Shōjitsu, "Shōni ōjō no mondai," in *Shinshū kyōgaku no shomondai* (Kyoto: Kōkyō Shoin, 1942), p. 263-277; and an entry "Shōni ōjō no ron," in Okamura Shūsatsu, ed., *Shinshū daijiten* (1935, Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 1972).
- 3 See the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, "Chapter on Shinjin," in *Collected Works of Shinran* (hereafter CWS), vol. 1, p. 93-94.
- 4 Citation of the passage of the *Sutra of Salvation through the Perfect Enlightenment of Amida, Supreme among Buddhas*, in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, "Chapter on Practice," 9, CWS, vol. 1, p. 15. This passage is from an alternative Chinese translation of the Larger *Sukhāvativyūha Sutra* and corresponds with Amida's Seventeenth Vow. The full citation of the passage is:
It is stated in the *Sutra of Salvation through the Perfect Enlightenment of Amida, Supreme among Buddhas*: Fourth, I vow: When I attain Buddhahood, I will cause my Name to be heard throughout the countless Buddhalands of the eight quarters, the zenith, and the nadir. All Buddhas will preach my virtues and the perfections of my land to the multitudes of monks in their own lands. There will be none among devas, human beings, and even insects that fly, crawl, or creep, who, upon hearing my Name, fails to awaken a heart of compassion. Dancing with joy, they will all be enabled to come and be born in my land. Fulfilling this Vow, I will attain Buddhahood; if it not be fulfilled, may I ultimately not attain Buddhahood.
- 5 On "the Nature of Shinjin," Shinran also admits that there is no age discrimination for realization of shinjin by saying that "In reflecting on the great ocean of shinjin, I realize that there is no discrimination between noble and humble or black-robed monks and white-clothed laity, no differentiation between man and woman, old and young" ("Chapter on Shinjin," 51, in the

Kyōgyōshinshō, CWS, vol. 1, p. 107).

- 6 The Hongwanji Seminary was first established as the Gakuryō (Boarding School) in 1639, by the 13th abbot of Hongwanji, Ryonyo, for the promotion of the academic study of Shin Buddhist teaching. The school was reestablished as the Gakurin (literally, Learners' Forest) in 1655. The Hongwanji Seminary was reestablished again as Ryukoku University in 1922 under the new University Ordinance.
- 7 For an outline of the ritual of *myōdai danomi*, see Genchi's *Kōshinroku*, vol. 3, in *Shinshū zensho, Zatsubu*, vol. 40, Tsumaki Naoyoshi, ed., (Kyoto: Zōkyō Shoin, 1915), p. 87-88.
- 8 "Chapter on Shinjin," 2, in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, CWS, vol. 1, p. 80.
- 9 Five grave offenses [go-gyaku]: In the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, Shinran sets forth two traditions, Hinayana and Mahayana, concerning the five grave offenses — acts deemed so evil as to condemn one irrevocably to hell. The Hinayana tradition lists them as: (1) killing one's mother, (2) killing one's father, (3) killing an arhat, (4) causing blood to flow from the body of a Buddha, (5) disrupting the harmony of the assembly of monks. The Mahayana traditions gives them as: (1) destroying stupas and temples, burning sutras and Buddhist images, or plundering the three treasures, causing others to do these acts, or being pleased at seeing them done; (2) slandering the disciples, solitary Buddhas, or the Mahayana teaching; (3) harassing the practice of a monk or causing his death; (4) committing any of the five grave offenses of the early tradition; (5) committing the ten transgressions with the conviction that there will be no karmic recompense and without fear for the next life, or teaching others such an attitude (CWS 2, 186-187).
- 10 "Chapter on Shinjin," 24, in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, CWS, vol. 1, p. 80.
- 11 "Chapter on Shinjin," 122, in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, CWS, vol. 1, p. 149.
- 12 In pre-modern Japanese society, children less than about 15 years old were generally considered as *shōni* 小兒, whose cognitive abilities had yet to fully develop
- 13 This text is based on Hōrin's lecture on the commentary of the *Jinwang-ching* by Tendai Master Zhiyi (538-597). The text is found in *Shinshū shōbushū*, vol. 5, compiled by Gōsei (1721-1794) in *Shinshū zensho, Zatsubu*, vol. 41 (1915), p. 235-238.

- 14 *Shōni ōjō setsu* in *Shinshū shōbushū*, vol. 5, p. 235a.
- 15 *Shōni ōjō setsu* in *Shinshū shōbushū*, vol. 5, p. 236ab.
- 16 *Shōni ōjō setsu* in *Shinshū shōbushū*, vol. 5, p. 236b.
- 17 *Shōni ōjō setsu* in *Shinshū shōbushū*, vol. 5, p. 236b-237a.
- 18 *Shōni ōjō setsu* in *Shinshū shōbushū*, vol. 5, p. 235b, 236a, 236b, and 237a.
- 19 The text is found in the first volume of the *Shinshū shōbushū* compiled by Gōsei. See *Shinshū zensho, Zatsubu*, vol. 41, Tsumaki Naoyoshi, ed. (Kyoto: Zōkyō Shoin, 1913), p. 8-9. The letter is later included in the *Myōkōninden* compiled by Sōjun (1791-1872). See *Taikei Shinshū shiryō, Denkihen*, vol. 8, *Myōkōninden* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2009), p. 148-149. For an English translation of this text, see “Dharma Words of Chinzen’in,” by the author included in this essay.
- 20 *Chinzen’in hōgo* in *Shinshū shōbushū*, vol. 1, p. 8a.
- 21 *Chinzen’in hōgo* in *Shinshū shōbushū*, vol. 1, p. 8b. Shinran used this phrase (*gi naki wo gi to su*) often in his letters and other shorter writings. For example, a letter he wrote to one of his disciple reads:

A person said: At the point of the awakening of the one moment of shinjin, we come to be grasped and protected by the unhindered light of Amida’s compassion; hence, the cause of birth in the Pure Land is one and the same [for all]. Thus, there should be no doubt about this. Therefore, there is no need whatsoever to inquire into whether one has firm faith or not. Hence we say “Other Power”; this is why it is said that there is true working in no-working. We are completely possessed of ignorance and our minds are wholly covered over by blind passions. (CWS, vol. 1, p. 573)
- 22 *Chinzen’in hōgo* in *Shinshū shōbushū*, vol. 1, p. 9a; and “Chapter on Shinjin,” 2, CWS, vol. 1, p. 80.
- 23 See Tatsuguchi Myōsei, “Sōboku ni okeru Shishū monto no arikata,” *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 58-2 (2010): 796-802; Ōkuwa Hitoshi, “Gōsei no tachiba to *Shinmon myōkōninden*,” in Bukkyōshi Gakkai, ed., *Bukkyō no rekishi to bunka: Bukkyōshigakkai sanjūshūnen kinen ronshū* (Kyoto: Dōbōsha Shuppan, 1980); and Asaeda Zenshō, *Zoku Myōkōninden kisokenkyū* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 1989), p. 38-39. For the development of *myōkōnin* stories and the collections of various editions of the *Myōkōninden*, see Kodama Shiki and Kikufuji Myōdō, eds., *Taikei Shinshū shiryō, Denkihen*,

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vol. 8, *Myōkōninden* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2009).

24 See note 18.