

# The Dimension of Wisdom in Shinran's Shinjin : An Experiential Perspective within the Context of Shinshu Theology

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# The Dimension of Wisdom in Shinran's *Shinjin*: An Experiential Perspective within the Context of Shinshū Theology

TANAKA K. Kenneth

## 1. Misconception

*Shinjin* 信心, normally translated “faith,” “entrusting,” or “faith-mind,” constitutes a central role in Shinran's 親鸞 (1173–1263) doctrinal framework. Despite its importance, the nature of *shinjin* remains unclear and misunderstood especially in the West.

For example, *shinjin* is often perceived as being “merely” *devotional* in nature, rooted in a dualistic and polarized relationship involving, on the one hand, Amida Buddha, a buddha of infinite capacity and, on the other hand, a seeker or practitioner who has no capacity whatsoever to perform any effective practice. While I hold no prejudice toward “devotion” as a religious act per se, it is inaccurate to categorically regard *shinjin* as being devoid of any element of wisdom (*prajñā*). Consequently, *shinjin* is not seen to be in the same league as wisdom promoted and realized by practitioners of other traditions in Mahayana Buddhism.

This misconception has led some to regard the Shin (Shinshū or Jōdo Shinshū) tradition as not being authentic Buddhism and, at its extreme, gone so far as to regard its teachings as an aberration. For example, Albert Schweitzer as far back as 1936 commented, “Of course the doctrine of Shinran is an outrage on Buddhism.”<sup>1)</sup> More recently, a scholar of Buddhism, Heinz Bechert, remarked, “It takes the ideas of the Buddha and, in a way, twists them into their opposite. The most radical spokesman for this approach is Shinran Shonin . . . .”<sup>2)</sup>

## 2. Methodology

There have, of course, been numerous studies of *shinjin* within the traditional Shin sectarian studies (*shūgaku* 宗学). However, given their restricted approach and limited reach beyond Shin studies, they have had little impact in refuting the criticism shown above. In

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contrast, the works of Takamaro Shigaraki, Kōtatsu Fujita, and Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota have overcome many of the shortcomings of sectarian studies and have introduced a deeper and more accurate understanding of *shinjin* to a wider readership.<sup>3)</sup> Building on their valuable findings, I seek in this paper to focus on one of the vital topics not fully addressed in their studies.<sup>4)</sup>

This paper is being carried out within the context of what I am calling “Shinshū Theology,” a term which may strike some readers as being anomalous. While “Shinshū” would not be problematic for it refers to the Buddhist school founded by Shinran, it would not be the case so for “theology,” which normally refers to “the study of God” associated with Christianity. However, *Buddhist Theology*, an anthology published in 2000 by a group of North American Buddhist scholars, has already addressed the questions raised by the use of this term in a Buddhist context. The editors of this volume have argued that “theology” does not refer exclusively to the study of the monotheistic God but also carries a broader meaning of, “an intellectual reflection within a religious tradition,” a definition attributed to a noted American theologian David Tracy.<sup>5)</sup>

As “an intellectual reflection,” I seek to pursue the topic at hand—*shinjin* in Shinran's thought—not within the framework of traditional sectarian studies. In taking this approach, my concern does not lie in stressing or promoting the uniqueness of Shinshū teachings over against the other teachings. Moreover, in line with the definition of “theology” as “an intellectual reflection,” I seek to remain true to my personal experience as a product not only of Japanese but also of American culture. As a result, “Shinshū Theology” provides greater license to engage in “intellectual reflection” unshackled by the frameworks of traditional sectarian studies as well as Japanese cultural values and sentiments that have nurtured our understanding of *shinjin*.

One example of this Shinshū theological approach is the greater allowance for reflection from an *experiential* perspective. In Shin sectarian studies the majority of discussions on *shinjin* are carried out from a normative perspective in which the concern is with the truth claims about *shinjin* as being “true and real as the mind of Amida.” While this normative perspective is obviously important, I believe that an experiential perspective of the practitioner is equally important. The difference in these two perspectives on *shinjin* can be encapsulated in the phrases, “wisdom as endowed by Amida” (normative) and “wisdom as *experienced* by practitioners” (experiential). It is this latter perspective that is of concern

in this paper.

### 3. Multi-dimensional Nature of *Shinjin*

According to traditional explanation particularly within the Hongwanji Branch of Shin Buddhism, a seeker entrusts whole-heartedly in Amida's Vow and passively receives *shinjin* as an endowed gift of Amida. This image continues to serve as the basis for the most common English translation of *shinjin* as "true entrusting."<sup>6)</sup>

While "entrusting" does express one vital dimension of *shinjin*, it fails to capture the *full* picture of this multivalent term. The fact that "entrusting" does not adequately reflect the full picture becomes readily apparent when we see Shinran's following description of *shingyō* 信樂, a term synonymous with *shinjin*:

Entrusting<sup>7)</sup> (*shingyō*) is the mind full of truth, reality, and sincerity; the mind of ultimacy, accomplishment, reliance, and reverence; the mind of discernment, distinctness, clarity, and faithfulness; the mind of aspiration, wish, desire, and exultation; the mind of delight, joy, gladness, and happiness. (*The Collected Works of Shinran*. Hereafter *CWS*)<sup>8)</sup>

In this Hongwanji translation, we find on this list of definitions the term "reliance" (*yū* 用), which is synonymous with "entrusting."<sup>9)</sup> We can also include other terms on this list such as "reverence" (*jū* 重) and "faithfulness" (*chū* 忠) that are approximate in meaning to "entrusting" or "reliance." However, this passage includes many other terms not synonymous with "entrusting."

In my view, entrusting or reliance is but one of the four primary dimensions of *shinjin* experience, which are (1) entrusting (委託), (2) joy (歡喜), (3) overcoming of doubt (無疑), and (4) wisdom (智慧). Since entrusting, joy, and overcoming of doubt are well-known dimensions, I have chosen to focus on the least discussed dimension, that of wisdom.

What I am calling "wisdom" in this paper is not limited to the kind of profound wisdom realized by buddhas and bodhisattvas but also encompass a broad range of practitioners' experience that are far more modest in nature but, at the same time, clearly not merely "devotional." These qualities of experience are represented by such terms in the English translations of Shinran's writings as "reflection," "knowing," "awareness," "insight," and "wisdom." In other words, the "wisdom" dimension of *shinjin* points to the tangible experiences of the practitioners wherein they gain a greater degree of understanding, awareness, or re-

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alization about the teachings and of themselves in the process of aspiring for Buddhahood.

This wisdom dimension as *experience* of the practitioner has received little attention in discussions surrounding the nature of *shinjin*.<sup>10)</sup> Justification for paying greater attention to the wisdom dimension can be seen, for example, in Shinran's above passage defining *shinjin*. It includes terms such as "discernment" (*shin* 審) and "clarity" (*sen* 宣), which approximate the meaning of "wisdom" as defined above.

We are now ready to examine some of the passages from Shinran's writings that describe the qualities of reflection, knowing, awareness, insight and wisdom.

### 3.1. Reflection

Shinran quotes from the *Nirvana Sutra* a passage that values the role of reflection.

Again, there are two kinds of *shinjin*: one arises from hearing [*mon* 聞] and the other from *reflection* [*shi* 思]. These people's *shinjin* has arisen from hearing but *not from reflection*. Therefore it is called "imperfect realization of *shinjin*" (*shin fu gusoku* 信不具足). (CWS, 1:235; italic for "reflection" added. The term *shinjin* is not italicized in quotes from the Hongwanji translation in keeping with their practice.)

Here, despite the enormous value traditionally placed on hearing in Shin Buddhist teachings, this passage cautions us against *shinjin* based on hearing without reflection. After hearing the teachings a seeker must *reflect* on them if one is to come to realize true *shinjin*, for, otherwise, it would constitute "imperfect realization of *shinjin*."

Reflection also plays a vital role in overcoming doubt, which as alluded to above is one of the four dimensions of *shinjin*. This is evident in the following statement by Shinran:

Truly we know, then, that this is called *shinjin* because it is untainted by the *hindrance of doubt*. *Shinjin* is the mind that is single. The mind that is single is *shinjin* that is true and real. (CWS, 1:194; italics added)

Despite such a statement, there is no detailed explanation as to how that elimination of doubt is achieved. It is, of course, presumed to be eliminated in the process of "receiving" *shinjin*, but it is not clear how that is done. There is, however, one reference among the numerous passages on doubt that throw some light on this issue. Here in this passage we see an exhortation to "reflect" on the truth that one is assured of not being abandoned.

But if in this lifetime still you are entangled in a net of doubt, then unavoidably you must pass once more in the stream of birth-and-death through myriads of kalpas and countless lives. Hear and *reflect* on the truth that one is grasped, never to be abandoned—the teaching of attaining birth in the

Pure Land with transcendent quickness and ease; and let there be no wavering or apprehension.  
(*CWS*, 1:303; italic added)

In my view, “to reflect” requires the seeker to not only hear the teachings but to think upon and digest its meaning. Without going through such a mental process, the hindrances to doubt would not simply disappear; reflection contributes to casting away the veil that clouded his understanding of the teachings.

### 3.2. Knowing and Understanding

Next, the process of “knowing” is expressed in the well-known passage that Shinran cites from Shandao's 善導 statement about the “deep mind.”

Deep mind is true and real shinjin. One *truly knows* (*shinchi* 信知) oneself to be a foolish being full of blind passions, with scant roots of good, transmigrating in the three realms and unable to emerge from this burning house. And further, one *truly knows* (*shinchi*) now, without so much as a single thought of doubt, that Amida's universal Primal Vow decisively enables all to attain birth.  
(*CWS*, 1:55; italics added)

Here, the seeker is shown to have come to “know” (*shinchi*), but the character for “knowing” (*chi* 知) forms a compound with the character denoting “faith” or “conviction” (*shin* 信). I take this to mean that the “knowing” here is extremely firm or with conviction. I would even consider this firm knowing as “insight,” for this is not just about knowledge but a deeper understanding about the nature of oneself and one's relation to Amida. Hence, the deep mind or *shinjin* entails firm knowing or having insight into the truth of, (1) the seeker's passion-filled, foolish nature as well as (2) the Vow that assures the seeker's birth in the Pure Land.

Besides the above passage, there are other passages that point to a degree of knowing and understanding:

But though the light of the sun is veiled by clouds and mists,  
Beneath the clouds and mists there is brightness, not dark.  
When one realizes shinjin, *seeing* [*ken* 見] and revering and attaining great joy, One immediately leaps crosswise, closing off the five evil courses. (*Shōshinge* 正信偈, *CWS*, 1:70)

The character for “seeing” (*ken*) suggests that despite the clouds of desire, anger and hatred, the practitioner comes to see, know or understand that it is bright beneath the clouds on account of the working of Amida's compassionate light. This, in my view, shows that the seeker has come to know, understand and even gained insight into the newly-found re-

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ality on account of the transformation experienced through *shinjin*.

### 3.3. Awareness

The sense of coming to a deeper understanding of one's karmic evil is clearly expressed in Shinran's own words in one of his letters to his disciples. He specifically uses a term, *omoishirite* おもひしりて, which the Hongwanji translators rendered, "having become thoroughly aware."

When people first begin to hear the Buddha's Vow, they wonder, *having become thoroughly aware* of the karmic evil in their hearts and mind, how they will ever attain birth as they are. (*CWS*, 1:553; italics added)

I believe that further evidence of awareness can be found in the following passage in the Preface of *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証:

Reverently *entrusting* [*kyōshin* 敬信] myself to the teaching, practice and realization, . . . I am especially *aware* [*shirinu* 知りぬ] of the profundity of the Tathagata's benevolence. (*CWS*, 1:4)

While this passage is not a direct reference to *shinjin*—though ultimately so—it expresses Shinran's fundamental attitude in which he acknowledges the experience of being "aware" of the depth of the teachings.

### 3.4. Insight

The following passages reveal a mental working that I categorize as "insight," which are realized as a result of the seeker being "associated" or "identified" with the teachings or practitioners at higher levels of the Buddhist path.

When a foolish being of delusion and defilement awakens *shinjin*, he *realizes* [*shōchi* 証知] that birth-and-death is itself nirvana. (*Shōshinge*, *CWS*, 1:72)

In this passage Shinran uses the Chinese character (*shō* 証) which means "proof" or "confirmation" of what one comes to know or understand (*chi* 知), which the Hongwanji translators rendered as "realizes." And what the seeker comes to realize here is that "birth-and-death is none other than nirvana," which, by any standard of Mahayana Buddhist doctrine, constitutes a high level of insight or teaching.

Next is the well-known passage that Shinran cites in *Kyōgyōshinshō* "Chapter on *Shinjin*" from the *Nirvana Sutra*, in which he equates *shinjin* with Buddha-nature.

Buddha-nature is great *shinjin*. Why? Because through *shinjin* the bodhisattva-mahāsattva has acquired all the paramitas from charity to wisdom. All sentient beings will without fail ultimately realize great *shinjin*. Therefore it is taught, "All sentient beings are possessed of Buddha-nature."

Great *shinjin* is none other than Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is Tathāgata. (CWS, 1:99)

One of the important points that this passage conveys is that a person of *shinjin* is identified with the categories that are intimately associated with some higher levels of awakening, that is to say, Buddha-nature and the *pāramitās* from charity to wisdom. Given Shinran's understanding of human nature, it would be difficult to interpret this passage to mean that foolish ordinary beings (*bombu* 凡夫) have *fully* attained these higher levels of enlightenment. Nevertheless, it would be reasonable to interpret, based on the above discussion, that persons of *shinjin* have experienced some levels of these elements of awakening.

Such being the case, we can regard those of *shinjin* to have gained some degree of understanding, awareness or insight into the teachings in their continuing effort to live up to the ideals of these teachings. That, after all, is the spirit of *bodhisattva-mahāsattva* which the *Nirvana Sutra* identifies with the person of *shinjin*. Further, since Buddha-nature is none other than *shinjin*, the persons of *shinjin* can be regarded as being associated with some higher level of insight, since only the bodhisattvas of the tenth *bhūmi* can fully understand Buddha-nature.<sup>11)</sup> It is, thus, safe to presume that some degree of insight can be experienced by them, and this is precisely the point that Shinran's following words appear to support.

In this passage Shinran explains the level attained by the persons of *shinjin* within the context of earlier Buddhist teachings.

Thus, when one attains the true and real practice and *shinjin*, one greatly rejoices in one's heart. This attainment is therefore called the *stage of joy* [*kangi ji* 歡喜地]. It is likened to the first fruit: *the sages of the first fruit* [*shoka shōja* 初果聖者] . . . . (Kyōgyōshinshō, CWS, 1:54; italics added)

Here, the person of *shinjin* is said to have attained the Stage of Joy, which is the first *bhūmi* stage within the Mahayana doctrine on the stages of enlightenment and constitutes an extremely high stage of attainment; those at this stage are often thought of as bodhisattvas. Furthermore, Shinran equates this Stage of Joy to the first stage of the Sages (*shoka shōja*), which is expounded in pre-Mahayana works and is also actively taught by contemporary Theravādins. The “sages of the first fruit” are called the “stream-enterers” (*srotāpanna*), when one is said to overcome doubt and attachment to the notion of a substantial self (*satkāya-dṛṣṭi*). It is worth noting that a certain level of insight would be necessary to overcome especially the attachment to substantial self.

I realize that in this passage Shinran is stressing one of the vital doctrinal points, that is



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to say, that persons of *shinjin* attain the level of non-retrogression or the rightly-established state. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume, based on the above discussions, that persons of *shinjin* could very well have embodied these qualities traditionally associated with the stream-enterers, that is to say, overcoming (1) doubt, (2) attachment to worldly conventions, and (3) attachment to substantial self. After all, the overcoming of doubt similarly constitutes one of the dimensions of *shinjin* experience. Moreover, as we look at Shinran's life, we see a man who expressed views sharply criticizing even the Emperor and lived a life relatively unshackled by worldly precepts and conventions. And finally, his overcoming of the attachment to the view of substantial self can be demonstrated in his exuberant utterance wherein his existential base has shifted from the conventional ego to that of the Buddha's Vow:

How joyous I am, my heart and mind being rooted in the Buddha-ground of the universal Vow, and my thoughts and feelings flowing within the dharma-ocean, which is beyond comprehension!  
(*Kyōgyōshinshō*, CWS, 1:291)

**3.5. Wisdom**

It is well known that Shinran identified *shinjin* in terms of wisdom as seen in the following passages from the *Shōzōmatsu wasan* 正像末和讃:

It is by entering the wisdom of *shinjin* (*shinjin no chie* 信心の智慧)

That we become persons who respond in gratitude to the Buddhas' benevolence. (CWS, 1:407)

Shinran then clarifies in his notes by what he means by "wisdom of *shinjin*" as follows:

Know that since Amida's Vow is wisdom, the emergence of the mind of entrusting oneself to it is the arising of wisdom. (CWS, 1:407)

There then follows another verse which uses a similar but varying phrase, "the nembutsu that is wisdom," a term that Shinran also explains in his note.

It is by the power of Dharmākara's Vow

That we realize the nembutsu that is wisdom (*chie no nembutsu* 智慧の念仏)

Were it not for the wisdom of *shinjin*,

How could we attain nirvana?

[Shinran's note affixed next to the above main verse:] *the nembutsu that is wisdom*: this is said because one attains Buddhahood through Amida's Vow. (CWS, 1:407)

It is sufficiently clear that *shinjin* is not the product of the seeker's practice or effort. The traditional doctrinal position is firm on this point, that is to say, the seeker is the recipient of endowed wisdom from Amida.

However, the question before us is to inquire into the nature of the seeker's response. To adopt a well-known Indian Buddhist metaphor, is the seeker one hundred percent passive like a kitten carried by the neck by its mother in her mouth? Or is there more active participation on the seeker's part, like a child monkey grabbing onto its mother?

Based on Shinran's note above, "the emergence of the mind of entrusting oneself to it is the arising of wisdom," the seeker comes to entrust in Amida's vow on account of Amida's wisdom. It is, again, not the case that "wisdom" is actually manifested *fully* in the seeker, but it does seem safe to assume that there awakens in the seeker some degree of understanding which then triggers the willingness and the decision to entrust in the Vow. And that act, in my view, requires some degree of understanding and wisdom about the teachings that enables the seeker to contextualize its meaning within the framework of one's own religious search and eventually take the action to trust in the Vow.

#### 4. Joy and Overcoming Doubt

I have now cited passages that reveal the wisdom dimension associated with *shinjin* as expressed in terms ranging from reflection to awareness to wisdom. In that process I referred to one reference in which the overcoming of doubt, one of the four dimensions of *shinjin* experience, also required some qualities of wisdom. Allow me now to briefly discuss how the same argument can be made with regard to joy, the third of the four dimensions of *shinjin*.

Shinran's writings abound with passages that identify *shinjin* with "joy" and its cognates such as "joyfulness" and "rejoicing." One such passage is the following that describes the one-thought moment of *shinjin*:

One thought-moment expresses the ultimate brevity of the instant of the *realization* of *shinjin* and manifests the vast, inconceivable mind of *joyfulness* [*kyōshin* 慶心]. (*Kyōgyōshinshō*, CWS, 1:110–11; italics added)

He then goes on to quote the famous passage from the *Larger Sukhāvativyūha Sutra*, in which "joy" appears in a compound phrase with *shinjin* itself.

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 non-retrogression. (*Kyōgyōshinshō*, CWS, 1:111; italics added)

In my view, joy points to an emotional quality of the practitioner's experience. However,

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here as in the case with overcoming of doubt, it is accompanied by some degree of wisdom. In the above passages, we see that the seeker's joy came as a result of having come to *realize* that Amida has not abandoned him and was guaranteed birth in the Pure Land. One would not be able to feel that level of joy without some level of realization.

### 5. *Shinjin* as "Realization"

I believe I have provided sufficient number of passages that revealed the strong wisdom dimension related to *shinjin*. Furthermore, we saw that the qualities of wisdom were also at work in relation to the other two dimensions of *shinjin*, joy and overcoming of doubt. As a result, even with the admission of "entrusting" as one of its four dimensions, *shinjin* deserves a different English rendering than "entrusting." I, thus, propose "realization" that best articulates the wide range of terms that represent "wisdom."

As an English term, "realization" conveys a sense of fulfillment of a personal goal that transforms a seeker to experience higher or deeper levels of reality, as in the usage of "self-realization" in the field of psychology and in everyday parlance. Further, its verb form, "to realize," conveys a greater sense of active and dynamic qualities than "to entrust," while not taking on the qualities of "self power" (*jiriki* 自力) that Shinran vehemently opposed. And I believe that "realization" captures the sense of "spiritual empowerment," which a growing number of contemporary seekers value to a much greater extent than in the past. This reflects the emergence of a new religious environment that has turned more individualized and internal in contrast to the more collectivized and external orientation of the past. I believe "realization" is in concert with the former while "entrusting" belongs to the latter.

In the end, no one translation would be completely satisfactory. However, "realization" is a better choice than "entrusting" for it dispels the misconceptions discussed at the outset and captures more dimensions of *shinjin* experience. This finding was made possible based on an analysis from the Shinshū theological perspective, which allowed the inquiry to emphasize the perspective of the practitioner's experience—not that of Amida—and to be freed from the constraints of the traditional sectarian paradigm.

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1) Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and Its Development*, trans. Mrs. Charles E. B. Russell (1936; Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 154.

2) Hans Küng et al., *Christianity and the World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 373.

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3) Shigaraki Takamaro 信楽峻麿, *Jōdokyō ni okeru shin no kenkyū* 浄土教における信の研究 (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 1975). Fujita Kōtatsu 藤田宏達, *Genshi jōdo shisō no kenkyū* 原始浄土思想の研究 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1970). Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota, *Shinran* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1989), 150–57.

4) I have found one article by one of the leading scholars of traditional Shinshū studies written in his younger years that specifically acknowledges the experience of wisdom on the part of the seeker. Washibara Tomoyasu 鷲原知康, “Shinran kyōgi ni okeru shinjin no chie (2)” 親鸞教義に於ける信心の智慧 (二), *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 印度学仏教学研究 29, no. 1 (1980): 162–63.

5) Roger Jackson and John Makransky, *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000). The definition is found on p. 2.

6) “True entrusting” is promoted by some of the most influential books in English on Shin Buddhism. Ueda and Hirota, *Shinran*, 150–57. Taitetsu Unno, *River of Fire River of Water* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 58–62; Alfred Bloom, *The Promise of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Buddhist Study Center Press, 2002), 129.

7) I question the choice of “entrusting” as translation for (*shingyō*) in keeping with the thrust of the argument in this paper.

8) *Kyōgyōshinshō* in *The Collected Works of Shinran*, 2 vols., trans. Dennis Hirota, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga, and Ryushin Uryuzu (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997), 94. Hereafter, *CWS*.

9) I am, however, perplexed as to why the character (*yū* 用) was translated as “reliance” for it normally does not warrant such a meaning. Even if we assumed that there is justification for this translation, “reliance” is merely one of seventeen terms that define *shinjin*.

10) Shigaraki Takamaro is one of the main proponents among contemporary writers who have pointed out the non-dual, wisdom-based nature of *shinjin*. See for example, his discussion, *Shinshūgaku gairon* 真宗学概論, *Shinshūgaku shirizu* 真宗学シリーズ 2 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2010). In this paper, I have sought to examine passages that point to what I am referring to as qualities of reflection, knowing, awareness, and insight, which Prof. Shigaraki appears not to have fully addressed.

11) See Jikido Takasaki, *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttaratantra) Being a Treatise on the Tathāgatagarbha Theory of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Serie orientale Roma 33 (Roma: IsMEO, 1966).

〈Key words〉 *shinjin*, wisdom, Shinran, experience, theology, realization, faith

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