Phenomenology of Religious Experience II: Perspectives in Theology

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Finger, Text, and Moon: Dennis Hirota and Iwasaki Tsuneo

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Abstract: Dennis Hirota is a modern master of Shin Buddhism who for several decades has explicated the role of natural language in fostering Buddhist awakening. At the core of his *oeuvre* is the claim that Shin Buddhism's founder, Shinran Shonin (1173-1263), accepted the earlier Mahayana teaching of non-dual awareness as a necessary condition for awakening. Shinran's unique contribution was to insist that ordinary persons were, as a matter of historical circumstance, incapable of the disciplines required to arrive at non-dual awareness. It was just this circumstance that the historical Buddha foresaw when he taught the Larger Pure Land Sutra, in which the mind of the Buddha Amida, perfect wisdom and compassion, became available to ordinary people who call his Name in joyful sincerity. This is a difficult teaching of "non-practice" that embraces many subtleties. As a heuristic to ease the way into Shinran as Hirota presents him, this paper introduces a painting by the modern Japanese scientist and artist, Iwasaki Tsuneo. This is not a "Shin painting," but certainly a "Mahayana painting" that connects the aspiration of an ordinary person to ultimate truth through the text of the Heart Sutra, arguably the quintessential Buddhist teaching of non-dual awareness.

Keywords: Hirota, Iwasaki, Shin Buddhism, *nembutsu*, *shinjin*, hermeneutics, Self-power, Other-power, Mahayana, non-dual awareness

1 Prelude

Hanging on a wall in my home is a print of a calligraphic painting by the Japanese scientist and artist Iwasaki Tsuneo (1917-2002). It is a skinny print, over three feet tall and just seven inches wide (see Figure 1). Close to the bottom a man stands in a small boat, his arm stretched straight up, his hand pointing with a single finger. Close to the top rests the moon, partially dusted by cloud. In a single line straight between the man's finger and the moon are the Chinese characters of the Heart Sutra, exquisitely drawn and precisely placed.[1]

I often pause to gaze at this print as I pass by it. I find it to be soaked in reference and emotional sense; it invites interrogation. What more is there to say about the finger, the text, and the moon?[2]

1 The text comprises 275 kanji, including the sutra's title. According to one authority, the shortest known length of the sutra is 268 kanji. Yifa, *Prajnaparamita*, 2.

2 Arai, *Seeing the Wisdom*. Professor Paula Arai of Louisiana State University is the leading scholar on the religious artistry of Iwasaki. She notes that Iwasaki titled this painting *Moonbeam* (personal communication, May 29, 2018). There appears to be a long history of using the Heart Sutra's characters in depictions of objects. For example, Yifa, *Prajnaparamita*, 8, report that the characters were inscribed in the shape of a pagoda on a 9th century scroll discovered in the Moago caves of Dunhuang, China, in 1900.

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Figure 1. *Moonbeam,* by Iwasaki Tsueno (courtesy of Professor Paula Arai)

To begin more or less at the beginning, there is the instruction that Śākyamuni Buddha gave to his cousin and attendant Ānanda in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*:

> The Buddha said to Ānanda, "You and others like you still listen to the Dharma with conditioned minds, and therefore you fail to understand its real nature. Consider this example: suppose someone is pointing to the moon to show it to another person. That other person, guided by the pointing finger, should now look at the moon. But if he looks instead at the finger, taking it to be the moon, not only does he fail to see the moon, but he is mistaken, too, about the finger. He has confused the finger, with which someone is pointing to the moon, with the moon, which is being pointed to.[3]

The Buddha's message to Ānanda is clear: don't confuse the guidance with the truth to which the guidance points. They are related to each other in an important way, but they are not the same thing.

Returning to Iwasaki's painting, what are we to make of what he did by placing text of the Heart Sutra between finger and moon?

This question unpacks into three other questions, and it is these questions that will organize the exposition that follows.

- What is "the text itself?"
- What is the religious significance of the text?
- What principles should guide the acceptance of the text?

I am particularly grateful for the work of Iwasaki because it provided me a moment of clarity about an essential feature of an important corpus of scholarship by a modern master of Shin Buddhism, Dennis Hirota.[4] Hirota has devoted his career to studying the role of language in the process of religious awakening within the Jodo Shinshu (Shin Buddhist) tradition, as spoken and written by the founder, Shinran Shonin (1173-1263). Hirota's attention to questions of religious language in Shin Buddhism, as translator, commentator, and Buddhist teacher, extend back more than thirty-five years[5], with a steady focus on both the illuminations and obscurities of religious communication. By concentrating on Hirota, I continue my expression of appreciation for modern Shin masters and hope that readers unfamiliar with their work will be encouraged to learn more about it.[6]

2 What is "the text itself?"

Our concern here is with Hirota's interpretation of Shinran's texts and oral record. It will become clear that the distinction between Shinran's extensive written corpus and his oral teaching, as transcribed by a faithful follower, is an important dimension of Hirota's Shin Buddhist hermeneutics.

One of the difficulties of comprehending Shinran's own religious awakening, at least when his texts are translated into English, is the lack of a single word or brief phrase that sufficiently transmits the significance of *shinjin*, which in Japanese comprises two polysemous kanji characters.[7] In an early publication, Hirota and Yoshifumi Ueda expressed the problem as follows:

> The word *shinjin*...is a basic, widely used Buddhist term and has often been translated "faith." For Shinran, however, the term signifies the central religious awakening or experience in the Pure Land path, and his entire teaching revolves around the clarification of its nature and significance. In order to alert the reader to the uniqueness of Shinran's use of this term and its importance in his thought, we have generally used the transliteration "shinjin," though at times we also translate it "entrusting."[8]

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3 *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, 54. The metaphor of finger pointing to the moon is also recognized in the Upanishads, and became a book title by a modern exponent of that tradition. Osho, *Finger Pointing*.

4 Professor Emeritus, Ryukoku University, Kyoto. I cannot claim to have read everything Hirota has written on this topic, for I have been surprised more than once to find a reference by him to an earlier article or chapter of his that I had not yet uncovered.

5 For example, Hirota, *Tannishō*.

6 Bermant, S*eeing What Is There*; *Already but Not Yet*; *Subjectivity in Shin Buddhism*.

7 See http://www.romajidesu.com/kanji/信 and http://www.romajidesu.com/dictionary/meaning-of-Shinjin.html

8 Ueda & Hirota, *Shinran*, 146.

Among his accomplishments, Hirota served as Head Translator of the *Collected Works of Shinran*, published in two volumes in 1997.[9] Volume I contains Shinran's written works (658 pages) and brief but significant contemporaneous documents including the *Tannishō*, a famous account of Shinran's oral teaching published after his death (40 pages). Volume II contains introductions, glossaries, and reading aides for Volume I prepared by Hirota and his colleagues. These materials are substantive and detailed, including a glossary of Shin Buddhist terms.

The glossary offers a brief but pithy essay defining *shinjin*. We find in this essay the major topics that Hirota has addressed repeatedly in the decades since *Collected Works of Shinran* was published. Excerpts from the essay version are a good introduction to our theme.

> [*Shinjin* is] one's entrusting to Amida's Primal Vow, which is at the same time the negation of calculative thinking, brought about by Amida's working...[It] literally means man's "true, real, and sincere heart and mind" (*makoto no kokoro)* which is given by Amida. This heart-mind has basically two aspects: a non-dichotomous identity wherein the heart and mind of Amida and the heart and mind of the practicer are one, and a dichotomous relationship wherein the two are mutually exclusive and in dynamic interaction.... [*Shinjin*] is a oneness of that which is true and real with its exact opposite....In religious terms, the oneness of *shinjin* expresses the working of great compassion (Buddha's wisdom) taking persons of evil (foolish beings possessed of blind passions) into itself, never to abandon them.... Shinran's teaching, then, is not one of salvation through "faith," for *shinjin* is not a means to salvation but salvation itself.[10]

Shinjin, then, is a transformative awareness of the wisdom and compassion of the world, and a movement to embody and express them. This awareness, the "self," never forgets the reality of its karmic nature as a foolish being ("evil person"). *Shinjin* is a dynamic process that softens the hard edges of "personality" over time, but it cannot eliminate the negative consequences of its nature as an embodied, causal agent in the world. To the extent that simply being alive establishes a zero-sum game with other beings and objects in the world, to that extent one lives at the expense of others and the inanimate environment.

Over the decades of his scholarly career, Hirota has returned repeatedly to the explication of *shinjin's* dynamic nature from various vantage points. "The text itself" that Hirota explicates is very large, (approximately 700 pages in English translation), of which more than ninety percent is Shinran's written work. But the remaining pages contain an enormously influential account of conversations between Shinran and a faithful follower, Yuien (or Yuien-bo), which Yuien published after Shinran's death. Yuien was concerned that some of Shinran's followers were expressing heresies, so his "lament over divergences," *Tannishō,* was an effort to correct these errors by quoting and expanding on his own conversations with the late Master.

The impact of *Tannishō* on Shin Buddhist understanding has been profound,[11] and there are numerous English translations and commentaries. Naturally, one would like to have confidence in the authenticity of transmission across the seven centuries' worth of complex linguistic and cultural boundaries that separate Shinran from us today. The usual assumption would be that text from the master's own hand would have greater authority than text from the hand of a reporter "on the scene," unless something *contextual* at the time and place of the teaching enriched it in an important way. We shall see in subsequent sections that, in Hirota's judgment, there was something special about the occasion of Shinran's oral teaching that authenticated and enhanced its religious significance for us today.

This is an important topic in any effort to understand the phenomenology of religious experience. It inevitably moves one beyond "the text itself" to contextual messages that moderate our responses to the text that is presented as the source of guidance, inspiration, and transformation. At the least, one would like to be sure about key features of the reported narrative.

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9 Hirota *et al, Collected Works of Shinran,*

10 Hirota *et al*, *Collected Works II*, 206-207.

11 "*Tannishō* is indisputably one of the great religious classics of Japan. Among the many Buddhist works this country has produced, there is none as well-known and widely read." Hirota, *Tannishō,* 15.

What follows below is a small example of the difficulty of becoming settled about the nature of "the text itself." It concerns Yuien's Preface to the *Tannishō*. Hirota provides several versions of it. One is from page 21 of Hirota's *Tannishō*. It is copied in plain type in the paragraph below. A second translation is from *Collected Works of Shinran*.[12] Almost all the changes from the earlier to the later version are shown between angle brackets in bold type.

> As I compare, within my foolish thoughts, the time when Shinran was alive with the present, I cannot help but lament the departures from the true shinjin taught directly by the late master <**that he conveyed by speaking to us directly**>, and I fear that those who seek the path hereafter will fall into doubts and confusion concerning it <**and I fear that there are doubts and confusion in the way followers receive and transmit the teaching**>. How is entrance into the great way <**into the single gate**> of easy practice possible except through reliance <**unless we happily come to rely**> on a true teacher whom karmic bonds fortunately bring a person to encounter <**whom conditions bring us to encounter**>? Let there be not the slightest distortion of the fundamental significance of Other Power <**of the teaching of Other Power**> with words of an understanding based on one's own views.
>
> Here, then, I set down in small part words of the late master <**the words spoken by the late Shinran Shonin**> that still speak deeply to me <**that remain deep in my mind**>, solely out of the desire to disperse the doubts of practicers with whom I share the same aspiration <**solely to disperse the doubts of fellow practicers.**>

Are these changes important for understanding Hirota (as translator), on Yuien (as compiler), on Shinran (as master), while moving from classical Japanese to modern English? I am unsure, but I think they may be. To my eye and ear, the later translation is more direct and lively than the earlier one. And the impact of "directness" is certainly important, as we will see in a subsequent section, because of Hirota's claim about a special contextual feature of Shinran in conversation.

Finally, Hirota also provided a third translation of Yuien's Preface, of a different sort. In the *Primer,* Hirota includes a section that presents the entire text a second time, with Japanese characters and transliteration on left hand pages, and literal translations into English on the facing pages. The final section of the Yuien's Preface, beginning "Here then", appears in the literal translation as follows:

> I record a little of the import of what the late Master Shinran said that abides in the depth of my ears. [This] is solely for the sake of dispersing the doubt of practicers of the same mind [as mine].[13]

Here the major shift is, of course, to "*the import*" of Shinran's words from "*the words themselves*." Does this matter? It depends in part on the religious status of Shinran's words as authoritative and hence not easily paraphrased for their import.

As Hirota emphasized, this is the more general problem with moving *shinjin* into English. A distinction between Shinran's words and their import for Yuien may be noteworthy. Without belaboring the point, I will quote here from another translation, this by the Japanese scholar Bando Shojun assisted by the Australian Harold Stewart. They render the sentence as follows:

> Therefore, I have recorded here the gist of what the late Shinran Shonin told me, while it still reverberates in my ears.[14]

The gist, of course, is not the words themselves.

The example of Yuien's preface may be a minor one, even inconsequential, except that interpretations of *Tannishō* have already been so consequential in the history of Shin Buddhism. Perhaps the prudent conclusion is that, in this case, "the text itself" eludes us.

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12 Hirota et al, *Collected Works*, 661.

13 Hirota, *Tannisho*, 51.

14 Bando et al, *Tannishō,* 3.

3 "The text itself" of the Heart Sutra in Iwasaki's painting, and ongoing controversy

A picture is worth a thousand words
...photographs have nothing to do with words.[15]

If a picture is worth a thousand words, does a painting of words increase their value? If photographs have nothing to do with words, does a photograph of Iwasaki's painting, or a print of it in a series of prints, have anything to do with the meanings of the 275 kanji? As we will see, the relationships among speaking, hearing, reading, and *accepting* are at the core of Shin Buddhist awakening in Hirota's account, and a necessary condition of that awakening is a deep appreciation (a "pre-awakening," perhaps?), of a Mahayana truth in the Heart Sutra's message.

Iwasaki honored and celebrated the Heart Sutra in many different paintings that incorporated the sutra's kanji into numerous structural forms, from the cosmos to the stem of a plant as well as the connector of characters between pointing finger and the moon. For him, the text seemed to instantiate the world.

Why this sutra in particular? There is wide agreement of scholars that it presents "the heart" (*Hridaya* in Sanskrit) of Mahayana Buddhism in an especially elegant way. For example, the translator and commentator Red Pine opens his detailed analysis of the sutra as if he also was gazing at Iwasaki's painting:

> The *Heart Sutra* is Buddhism in a nutshell. It covers more of the Buddha's teachings in a shorter span than any other teaching, and it does so without being superficial or commonplace...I would describe it as a work of art as much as religion. And it is perhaps one more proof, if any were needed, that distinguishing between these two callings is both artificial and unfortunate.[16]

In the next section the sutra's content is described in religious terms, in the effort to connect its teaching with Hirota's account of Shin Buddhist awakening. This is both interesting and important because Shin Buddhism, as it has been developed in the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) for more than a century, has not included the Heart Sutra among its canonical scriptural sources[17]. Nor did Shinran refer to the sutra in his major scholarly and doctrinal work, *Kyōgōhinshō*[18]. Nevertheless, as will become clear in the next section, there are numerous pointers in Shinran's texts to the Mahayana truth that the Heart Sutra announces and that Iwasaki celebrates in his calligraphic paintings.

Iwasaki's paintings were based on a deep connection to the semantics of the sutra's Chinese characters and the phonics of their Japanese pronunciations. Many translators and expositors of the sutra, have rendered the characters into English text (or most of them—we return to what remains in original language in the next section). Translations into English from Sanskrit or Chinese have been published for more than 150 years.[19]

After dozens of translations and commentaries over more than a century, one might think that a consensus form of the sutra in English had been obtained. But disagreements among experts continue. In 2014, the revered Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh published a new translation.[20] In a letter to his followers he gives a detailed account of the need for the translation. Speaking of himself in the third person, he begins very clearly: "Thay needs to make this new translation of the Heart Sutra because the patriarch who originally compiled the Heart Sutra was not sufficiently skilled enough with his use of language. This has resulted in much misunderstanding for almost 2,000 years."[21]

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15 Alhadeff, "Moving Targets," 26.

16 Red Pine, *Heart Sutra*, 5.

17 The Heart Sutra does not appear in the 1994 BCA service book nor in the much newer service book published by the [BCA] Orange County Buddhist Church in 2013. It did appear in the service book of the Ekoji Buddhist Temple, Springfield, Virginia, and was regularly chanted there between 1981-2002, during the tenure of the temple's founding minister, Kenryu T. Tsuji. It is no longer chanted there.

18 Hirota et al., *Collected Works I*, 3-292.

19 Beale, *The Paramita-Hridaya Sutra*.

20 Thich Nhat Hanh, *New Heart Sutra Translation*.

21 Ibid.

We will return below to this new translation. It is enough for now to conclude that "the text itself" of the Heart Sutra, being something more than marks on paper, remains elusive. Surely when Iwasaki painted his many calligraphs of the sutra with exquisite care and devotion, he had something more in mind than making ink marks on paper. It was from the entirety of the text in artistic context, informed by the heart and mind of the painter, that the truth in it emerged.

That is the religious significance of the text. It is to that, in Hirota's appreciation of Shinran's corpus and Iwasaki's evocation of the Heart Sutra, that we turn now.

4 Hirota on Shinran: the religious significance of the Name and the Vow

As a high-water mark of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan, Shinran's exposition of "True Pure Land" relied on earlier Mahayana teaching with emphases to which Shinran returned repeatedly[22]. It is worth remembering that Shinran began as a temple monk in the Tendai tradition, living on Mount Hiei outside of Kyoto for twenty years, beginning at age nine. During that time, he absorbed many Tendai doctrines and practices, which included veneration of Amida Buddha.

After two decades on the mountain, he became restless and dissatisfied with his situation, so he descended to the city and, during an extended solo retreat, experienced a transformation. He then joined the followers of an older monk, Hōnen, who had preceded him down the mountain some years earlier. Shinran became totally devoted to Hōnen and claimed repeatedly over his life that his own ministry was a continuation of Honen's.[23]

At the center of Hōnen's and Shinran's Pure Land teaching is the *nembutsu* (also *nenbutsu)*, a term with several subtly distinct meanings. The meanings all surround the name Amida Buddha and announcing of the name as *Namu Amida Buddha* (also *Namu Amida Butsu)*. "It might be said that 'Amida Buddha' is a name, but Namu-Amida-Butsu is the Name."[24] "*Namu*" (also *Namo)* means that the speaker is taking refuge, and taking refuge in "the Buddha" is among the oldest of all Buddhist practices—but the referent has undergone a change. The Buddha of the *nembutsu* is Amida. But traditional understanding is that the life, transformation, and saving power of Amida was revealed in a sutra spoken by the historical Buddha Śākyamuni in the so-called Larger Pure Land Sutra. Today, we appreciate that this sutra is part of the early Mahayana tradition, perhaps composed in the Gandhāra region in the first century CE.[25]

The importance of *nembutsu* for Shinran's soteriology cannot be overstated. And there is an intimate connection between *nembtsu* and *shinjin*. In one of his many letters to his followers Shinran wrote:

> although the one moment of *shinjin* and the one moment of *nembutsu* are two, there is no *nembutsu* separate from *shinjin*, nor is the one moment of *shinjin* separate from the one moment of *nembutsu*.[26]

Here again is the concept of dual aspects of a single reality; we saw it earlier in Hirota's essay on *shinjin* (text at n.10 above). Shinran carries this even further: he teaches that the *nembutsu* is in fact the voice of Amida expressing universal wisdom, compassion, and salvation.

The influence of Shinran's close connection to Hōnen included a commitment to bring religious comfort to people on the bottom rungs of Japanese society, which necessarily influenced the language and style of his teaching. Mark Blum has summarized the transformation of emphasis in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism:

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22 Ueda & Hirota, *Shinran,* 139. "[Shinran] brought about a basic change in the Pure Land path by rooting it in fundamental Mahāyāna thinking concerning the complex relationship this world and the world of enlightenment."

23 For a brief account of Shinran's life, see Ueda & Hirota, *Shinran,* Chapter One. For a novel based on his life, see Tabrah, *The Monk Who Dared.*

24 Hirota et al., *Collected Works II*, 195.

25 Inagaki, *The Three Pure Land Sutras, 55;* Buswell & Lopez, *Princeton Dictionary,* 683.

26 Hirota et al., *Collected Works I*, 538.

> Pure Land Buddhist thought presents a reversal...wherein Buddhism is considered from the ground of the unenlightened person...[E]ach individual must attain a realization of the fundamental truth that he/she is so steeped in karmic limitations that attaining complete enlightenment "on one's own" is an existential impossibility. .... Everyone is an "ordinary person" (*bonbu)*...The Pure Land discourse is thus marked by a distinct movement away from the metaphysical to the existential.[27]

Hirota's reading of Shinran and his context has led him to the following principles of Shinran's Pure Land soteriology:

- Linguistic communication is an inevitable, necessary aspect of religious learning, hence of religious teaching.
- Yet, almost all language and communications are distorted by the greed, anger, and ignorance that infect human lives.[28]
- As language, only the *nembutsu* is true and real.
- *Nembutsu* crosses from the formlessness of absolute reality to the form of this world as the voice of Amida: wisdom and compassion.
- Bringing *Nembutsu* into the world of *samsara* is the fulfillment of Amida's Primal Vow.[29]
- Awakening to Amida's "embrace" coexists in tension with a new sensitivity to one's living as an afflicted human being.[30]
- The key to opening the door of awakening is the decentering or weakening of the subject-object dichotomy.[31]

Hirota locates Shinran's insights as distillations of Mahayana fundamentals into Pure Land terms, interpreted in keeping with Shinran's disappointments with the prevailing orthodoxies and sectarian monkish elitism. Awakening is available to all who speak the Name and hear the call.[32]

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27 Blum, *Origins*, 6.

28 Shinran expressed negative views about human nature, particularly his own. Hirota helps us to place these expressions in a larger Buddhist context. Traditional Buddhism identifies intellectual and emotional grasping, thirsting, lusting, attaching, etc. as the causes of existential suffering, but it also teaches that through sincere practice (the eightfold path, for example), these afflictions can be greatly reduced or even eliminated by the time of death. In medieval Japan, however, the concept of "the age of degenerate dharma" (*mappō*) taught that the historical Buddha's message had faded too far into the past to be understood, thus placing enlightenment beyond human accomplishment. Based on his acceptance of the Pure Land sutras, his interpretations of certain commentaries, and his personal religious experience, Shinran taught that Amida's Vow to save all beings via *nembutsu* had in fact been fulfilled, erasing the debilities of history, so that awakening to reality in the present life was available to all. (Discussion of post-mortem circumstances are beyond the scope of this article).

29 The Larger Pure Land Sutra, spoken by Śākyamuni to a very large group gathered to hear it, relates the story of Dharmakara Bodhisattva, who spent billions of years learning the truths expressed by all the Buddhas of the universe. He subsequently made forty-eight vows listing what he must do before accepting ultimate enlightenment for himself. Shin Buddhists especially venerate the eighteenth vow, known as *hongan*, or Primal Vow. A well-known English translation is this: "If, when I attain Buddhahood, sentient beings in the lands of the ten directions who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, desire to be born in my land, and call my Name even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment." (Inagaki 243). There is an "exclusion clause" following the quoted text, which made the vow inapplicable to certain sinners. Shinran, following other sutras and commentators, denied the efficacy of the exclusion, so that the *hongan* is taken to be universal.

30 Hirota, *Asura's Harp*, 100.: "The new paradigm is characterized precisely by the decentering of the self as subject-agent that discerns and relates itself to elements of the Buddhist path (Amida, Name, Pure Land) as objects. In place of the autonomous subject, there emerges a dual presence: the self as false, samsaric existence, and the Vow or Name as that which is true and real...Self and Vow, inseparable and in polar opposition, emerge together in this way at the very point that a divide between them forms."

31 Hirota, *Asura's Harp*, 99-100: "Authentic engagement [with Shinran's Pure Land path] is not simply an intellectual grasp or affective embracing of the verbal teaching, but involves a fundamental shift in awareness...This awareness is not attainment of nondiscriminative wisdom in which the subject-object dichotomy that characterizes delusional thought and perception has been eradicated; nevertheless, a transformative paradigm of apprehension of self, world, and reality emerges in which the subject-object dichotomy has lost its domination."

32 Kenryu Tsuji composed these lines: "When I call Amida's name, it's Amida calling me. His voice and my voice are one. I *gassho* to Amida." Bermant, *Already but Not Yet*, 243.

5 The religious context of Iwasaki's painting

How does the incorporation of the Heart Sutra into Iwasaki's painting support the sutra's meaning, if at all, and how does it contribute to the religious significance of the painting? Iwasaki's case is a special one, because his art was initially private, an act of devotion accomplished without professional or commercial intent.[33] That he chose the characters of the Heart Sutra was not surprising, however, because of the sutra's popularity in Japan.[34]

But Iwasaki's *Moonbeam* testifies to the artist's personal appreciation of what is true and real beyond verbal expression, symbolized by the moon, and his own limitations as a human being reaching the end of his life. The text of the sutra, which is in large part a series of negations of the permanence of the existential categories taught by the Abhidharma[35], softens the boundaries between self and world and encourages aspiration for connection to what is beyond categories. One can think of the sutra as a ladder erected from below or dropped down from above. Or both. Top down or bottom up: Perhaps that is a distinction that makes no difference.

6 Bringing Iwasaki and Hirota into congruence

It is at this point that contemplating Hirota and Iwasaki together can deepen appreciation of them both. For Iwasaki, the Heart Sutra is the ladder (erected up) or lifeline (dropped down) connecting his self-awareness as an old man gripped by karmic vicissitudes to the felt sense of "getting past" such burdens, as joyfully expressed in the sutra's closing mantra: "*Gate gate paragate parasamgate. Bodhi svaha!* [36] The mantra emerges sincerely from Iwasaki's painstaking devotion.

The religious meaning of the sutra, its force or power, is thus contextualized by the circumstances of its production and producer. Contextually, the painting of the sutra's text connecting the pointing finger and the luminous moon is both a scene on paper and a perfected expression of an artist's life.

Contemplating the importance of such context clarifies the intent and significance of Hirota's emphasis on Shinran's oral teaching in *Tannishō*, discussed in the next, final section.

Hirota's account of Shin awakening specifies a state of mind for the initial experience of *shinjin*. This is a decentering of self in consciousness, equivalently expressed as a weakening of distinction between self and other, or self and objects more generally—it is a move toward oneness. In the Mahayana background to Jodo Shinshu, this might be expressed as *sunyata*. But Shin teaches that ordinary people, which includes just about everybody, are existentially incapable of reaching an awareness of such emptiness "under their own steam," so to speak. The ordinary religious seeker needs help. Exactly such help is in fact available to everyone, configured as Amida, the Buddha of limitless light and life, wisdom and compassion. Amida calls those who listen through *nembutsu*, which is not different from the sincere and joyous recitation of the Name by the earnest practicer. Continued practice with *nembutsu* deepens the awareness and gratitude of the practicer without destroying the practicer's continued awareness and activity as the self-ascribed evil person, the foolish person of blind passions. [37]

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33 Arai, *Seeing the Wisdom of Compassion.*

34 Nattier, The *Heart Sutra,* 153*:* The sutra "is surely one of the best loved Buddhist scriptures in all of East Asia.... And the tenacity of [its] mass appeal is attested by the fact that in contemporary Japan the *Heart Sutra* has been printed on more teacups, hand towels, and neckties than has any other Buddhist scripture." Perhaps the end of the road of a religious text's popularity is kitsch; other examples are the fate of Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer in the U.S., and *Bhagavad Gita* excerpts used as checkout-counter giveaways in India. The skill, devotion and intention evident in Iwasaki's painting protect the work from this reputational fate.

35 Thich Nhat Hanh wished to clarify the nature of these negations in his 2014 translation of the Heart Sutra. It may be, as he feared, that misunderstanding the lines about emptiness and form predispose readers to a nihilistic, hence incorrect, interpretation.

36 The Sanskrit mantra is most often left untranslated, but there is ample commentary about its translation and significance. Red Pine, *Heart Sutra*, 156-160.

37 Maida, *Evil Person.*

7 Conclusion: Seeking religious validation in the being of the speaker

How does one learn to listen, and finally to hear the call? Religious seekers seek teachers. The problem is not merely to find a teacher, because in today's religious environment there is competition among teachers, as writers, speakers, and media personalities, vying for the attention and support of earnest seekers. How is one to choose among the possibilities?

There is no short answer to this question, and this is not the place to attempt a complete one. There is an important aspect of the answer, however, that is grounded in the preceding discussion.

If one accepts the possibility of *shinjin* as an authentic religious experience that is open to deepening with continued practice, then it is reasonable to ask the following question: *Are the religious expressions of a person of shinjin, an awakened person, credible for that reason alone?* In other words, to what extent are the "texts" of an awakened person, whether written or spoken, validated by the special state of the person's being?

The classical texts provided some guidance on this question by framing hermeneutical principles. These are called the Four Reliances, and are the subject of traditional and modern commentaries.[38] Among modern scholars, Robert Thurman posed the background question almost forty years ago::"What need do the Buddhists have of a hermeneutical system?"[39]

Thurman listed the Four Reliances as follows: *Rely on the teaching, not the teacher's authority; rely on the meaning, not the letter; rely on the definitive meaning, not the interpretable meaning; rely on (non-conceptual) wisdom, not on (dualistic) cognition.*[40]

Thurman's use of "authority" in the first Reliance lessens the tension between it and the fourth Reliance. Other commentaries have spoken of the "personality" of the teacher, which is to be subordinated to the "teaching itself." On this interpretation, if one is unable to find benefit through reading and therefore turns to listening, then, naturally and inevitably, the characteristics of the speaker will loom as a salient dimension of the context of the practicer's listening. The listener faces a direct conflict between the admonitions of the first and fourth Reliances.

The listener will want to find clues in the demeanor of the speaker of the non-conceptual wisdom out of which Mahayana religious truth emerges. It is exactly here, with the reference to non-duality, that Hirota's frequent references by to decentering the self and weakening the subject-object dichotomy find their Mahayana philosophical underpinning.

The movement forward from initial realization to deepening awareness is also clarified. In traditions other than Jodo Shinshu, "conceptual, analytic wisdom" must be accompanied by a specially advanced state of mind if awakening is to be realized:

> [conceptual, analytic wisdom] will not produce the experiential transformation called enlightenment...*unless it is combined with a systematically cultivated one-pointedness of mind*...The Buddhist hermeneutical tradition is a tradition of realization, devoid of any intellect/intuition dichotomy. Authority here gives way to intellect, yet never lets intellect rest, as it were, but pushes beyond it toward a culminating non-dual experience.[41] (Emphasis added.)

Shinran differs from the Mahayana background in two important ways. He identifies conceptual analysis as *hakarai*, a self-powered calculating mind that becomes a dead-end toward awakening.[42] Nor will the ordinary person, regardless of devotion and sincerity, be able to cultivate one-pointedness of mind through

38 See for example Lopez, *Buddhist Hermeneutics* 3, 7.

39 Thurman, *Buddhist Hermeneutics,* 22.

40 Ibid., 23.

41 Ibid., 35.

42 "In Shinran's more common usage, as a synonym for self-power, [*hakarai]* refers to all acts of intellect and will aimed at attaining liberation. Specifically, it is the Shin practicer's efforts to make himself worthy of Amida's compassion in his own eyes and his clinging to his judgments and designs, predicated on his own goodness, for attaining religious awakening." Hirota et al., *Collected Works II,* 174.

meditative practices to arrive at a state of mind of ultimate reality. The Shin practicer becomes stuck in the pursuit of these pathways. The practicer escapes the trap of self-power by relaxing into another "reliance," which is not hermeneutical but existential: reliance on the Name and the Vow. The practicer accepts the non-dual mind of Amida, which includes a compassionate acceptance of self as *bombu* the foolish one.

"Non-working" characterizes this acceptance, but nothing is harder than such non-working. Shinran put it this way:

> It is the consummate teaching among consummate teachings,
> The sudden teaching among sudden teachings.
> It is hard to encounter the true essence of the Pure Land way, hard to realize *shinjin*.
> This is the most difficult of difficulties; nothing surpasses it.[43]

Here as throughout Buddhist history and practice, the critical importance of a teacher cannot be exaggerated. The best Mahayana teacher is the one who speaks from a position of non-dual awareness.

How does *bombu* recognize this person? There are examples in the Pure Land tradition, but they are formidable. First is the case of Dharmakara, whose teacher, the Buddha Lokesvararaja, sent him on a religious pilgrimage lasting five billion years. Upon his return, his forty-eight Vows established the Pure Land and our assured places in it. (Fortunately, that trip did not need to be taken again.) But we know this only because Śākyamuni told us so in the Larger Sutra. It is most important that the opening segment of the sutra, includes an extraordinary compliment paid to Śākyamuni by his cousin and attendant Ānanda, which includes the following praise:

> Today, the World-Honoured One dwells in the rare and wondrous Dharma; today, the World-Hero dwells in the Buddha's abode...today, the World-Valiant One dwells in the supreme Bodhi. For what reason does his countenance look so majestic and brilliant? [44]

Amusingly, the Buddha checks to see if Ānanda had been put up to his speech by some *deva* or another. Assured by Ānanda that his compliments are sincere, the Buddha accepts them and elaborates on the scope of his powers and wisdom, concluding with these words:

> The reason for [my attributes]is that [my] meditation and wisdom are perfect and boundless and that [I have] attained unrestricted power over all dharmas. Ānanda, listen carefully. I shall now expound the Dharma.[45]

The Buddha was speaking from a special state of mind with special understanding. Ānanda saw the embodied radiance, then heard the wisdom of the teaching as the Larger Pure Land Sutra.[46]

We arrive third and finally at Hirota's characterization of Shinran, particularly Shinran's oral teaching as written by Yuien in *Tannishō*. Hirota finds numerous instances of Shinran upsetting the framework of questions put to him by practicers who had walked for many miles to meet with him in Kyoto. Shinran's refusal to respond in the terms put to him signifies to Hirota that Shinran was responding from the perspective in which the self as agent has surrendered to the fulfilled promise that made irrelevant the distinctions that continued to confuse his visitors. Hirota says this:

> In these passages, a fundamental rift runs between the question and the mind-set from which it arises, on the one hand, and Shinran's response, on the other. In other words, Shinran's reply is not an attempt to lead the listener discursively into the realm of *shinjin*, but rather an expression that manifests the difference between our ordinary thinking and the thinking

43 Hirota et al., *Collected Works I*, 629. In this verse, he is citing the seventh-century Chinese Pure Land Master Shan-tao (Shandao; Zendo in Japanese).

44 Inagaki *Three Pure Land Sutras*, 234.

45 Ibid., 235. In the text, the Buddha refers to himself in the third-person, as *Tathagata*.

46 Several authors have emphasized the importance of this preliminary portion of the Larger Sutra, including for example Roger Corless, who noted that Shinran himself had "authenticated" the Larger Sutra for just this reason. Corless, *Shinran's Proofs of True Buddhism*, 275.

> that occurs as and through *shinjin.* Thus, the response begins with a presentation of an utterly transformed vision of the issue raised and then proceeds to disclose the stance from which this perspective flows.[47]

This section began with the question *whether the religious expressions of a person of shinjin, an awakened person, are credible for that reason alone.* I believe a good provisional answer is that a practicer who works to keep the Four Reliances in mind until fatigue intervenes will find that the wisdom of the teacher is assessed in a dynamic relationship with the practicer's sense of the text. Confidence in the speaker can enlarge acceptance of text that might otherwise be rejected, but at a certain point, the practicer falls back onto solo reflection away from the teacher's presence and influence. Shinran recognized this when he said of his own teaching,

> Such, in essence, is the *shinjin* of the foolish person that I am. Beyond this, whether you entrust yourself, taking up the *nembutsu,* or whether you abandon it, is your own, individual decision.[48]

I suppose that all regular readers of *Tannishō* find certain passages especially demanding, worthy of repeated visits. I will conclude with a choice of my own, number eight:

> For the practicer who says it, the *nembutsu* is not a practice, it is not a good deed. It is said not to be a practice because it is not said out one's own efforts and designs. It is not a good deed because it is not brought about by one's efforts and designs. Since it is totally Other Power and free of self-power, for the person who says it, *nembutsu* is "not-practice," it is "not-good."[49]

Thus were his words.

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47 Hirota, *Asura's Harp*, 83-84.
48 Hirota, *Tannishō*, 23.
49 Ibid., 26.

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