

*Monk's marriage in Japan—
The ideas of Shinran and a comparison with M.Luther—*

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1. Introduction

Buddhism is one of unique religions, which prohibit having sex as religious rule. Monks must keep their precepts in which prohibits “any kind of” sex. In laymen’s precepts, on the other hand, “wrong” sex is prohibited. It shows that the difference of sexual precept is one of clear distinctions between monks and laymen.

However, in Japan, we can see monk’s marriage or their children. It shows Japanese monk’s violation of precepts, and it has been perceived as unique phenomenon among Buddhist countries.

Japanese monks have been permitted marry since Meiji period by the government. Since then, among Japanese Buddhist sect, *Jōdo Shinshū* sect was only one Buddhist sect which was permitted monk’s marriage by the government. And *Jōdo Shinshū* sect had permitted monk’s marriage as their doctrine.

Jōdo Shinshū sect was founded by *Shinran* (1173-1262), and he has been said that he was a first monk who married as a monk. His marriage has been evaluated revolutionary (Matuo 2010:p.17) one, however, there are no historical record or his statement about his marriage. Therefore, we cannot know was there any his religious ideas or not now.

In order to explain logic of his marriage, this paper focuses on his ideas, foundation sutra and his structure of faith. He set the three sutras about the Pure Land as his foundation sutra. And he also strongly emphasized on work or power of *Amida Buddha*.

In the western religious history, on the other hand, *Martin Luther* is known for having gotten in marriage under prohibition on sex. Comparing these two men of religion, there could be any common logic that *Luther* and *Shinran* shared, or any critical difference in their perception of marriage.

With logic of *Shinran*’s marriage, this paper attempts to provide an explanation of monk’s marriage in Japan.

2. Some features of Japanese Buddhism

Japanese Buddhism was brought to Japan via China in about 6th century. And Japanese Buddhist reads scripture, which was translated in Chinese.

There are some unique points of Japanese Buddhism; they use Chinese, but use the Chinese-style reading of a character in Japanese. And Japanese monks do take funerals or some rituals, which related to death. And these rituals are one of the most important their work in Japanese society. Also we can find that they are drinking alcohol or having other job as a businessperson.

These points show unique points of Japanese Buddhism among other Buddhist countries. It'll be said that Japanese Buddhism is quite worldly one. In generally, monk must not do such things because of their precepts.

However, it's usual to see their marriage or kindred family in Japan. They live with their family in house, do not live in temple. It's one of the most clear features of Japanese Buddhism, it shows that how worldly Japanese Buddhism is.

Monks has been thought that they must not have sex or marriage because of their precepts. So monk's marriage in Japan looks like quite unique phenomenon among Buddhist country.

3. Difference between Buddhists

There are two clear differences of precepts between monk and layman.

First is its number; layman keep five precepts and monks on the other hand, they keep two hundred fifty precepts.

Layman keeps these precepts as follows,

I. Abstain from destruction of life.

II. Abstain from stealing.

III. Abstain from doing wrong sex.

IV. Abstain from lying.

V. Abstain from intoxicant.

The four precepts of layman, abstain from destruction of life, abstain from stealing, abstain from doing wrong sex and abstain from lying are similar to those of monk's precepts.

But there is a clear difference on sexual precept between Buddhists.

In Monk's precept, it's described as follows,

“All monks must not have all sex including with animals without rejecting monk's doctrine or precepts, or saying that they cannot keep them. If they did it, they must not live with other monks.” (Hirakawa 1993:p.157-8)

In this precept, “All sex” is prohibited. On the other hand, in layman's precept, “Wrong sex is prohibited”. It can be thought that the difference of precept means a distinction between monk and layman and it's a clear difference of them.

Since monk practice with other monks, cannot live with other monk means excommunication as monk. In another words, monk can exist as a monk, because he keeps precepts.

Sex is strong connected with marriage and monks have been thought that they must not marry. Actually, other Buddhist For this reason, Monk's marriage in Japan has been said quite unique phenomenon.

4. Japanese Buddhism and marriage

Japanese monks had been prohibited marriage by the government since Nara period. The government enacted a decree for monks and nuns, and there were sexual rules that prohibited having sex of monks and nuns.

In Meiji period, Japanese monks were permitted marriage and at the same, the government permitted monks to eat meat, having hair and having own names (not names as a monk but names in society). It has been said that the government did it for modern family registration system and they laicized monk. Since then, marriage of monks spread to Japan and all over the country. Almost all Buddhist sects permitted monk's marriage as officially and it became usual one.

On the other hand, until then, *Jōdo Shinshū* sect, which developed one of the largest Buddhism sects in cotemporary Japan was only one sect that was permitted monk's marriage by the government. This Buddhist sect permitted monk's marriage as their

doctrine and they had been permitted it by the government before Meiji period.

Not many religions among the major religions of the world that prohibit marriage or having sex as rule. Buddhism is unique religion that prohibits sex. Nevertheless, it 's usual for Japanese Buddhist sect to marry or having children. It seems transgression for Buddhist precept.

Among many Japanese Buddhist sects, *Jōdo Shinshū* sect was the only one sect, which didn't prohibit monk's marriage as Buddhist sect. Is there any special reason or logic for monk's marry or violation of sexual precept as a Buddhist sect.

This sect has been said *Shinran* founded and his marriage has been said it was revolutionary one in Japanese Buddhist society. For an explanation monk's marriage in Japan, this paper focuses on his ideas and attempt to interpret his logic.

5. *Shinran* and his marriage

Shinran was born in 1173 and had practiced as monk at Mount *Hiei* for twenty years. After at he was twenty-nine years old, he became *Honen*'s pupil.

He has been said that he was a first monk, who married as a monk. His marriage has been said, "revolutionary" (Matuo 2010:p.17) or "it was only *Shinran* whose marriage is connected with his doctrine" (Akamatsu 1961:p.2).

There are two famous traditions that tell factor of his marriage. One is revelation of his dream and the other is teaching of *Honen* who was master of *Shinran*.

First we see a revelation of his dream as follows, he got it by *Kannon Bidhisattva* and he was permitted to have sex with woman.

.... If you did sexual intercourse, I 'll become beautiful women and be violated by you. And I'll protect whole your life. And at after your death, I'll bring you to the Pure land. (*Shinran syōnin zensyu hensyū dōjin*.(Ed.)1957: p.201)

Second factor of *Shinran*'s marriage has been said it was a teaching of *Hōnen*. In this

tradition, he told *Shinran* to marry with woman; *Hōnen* recommended marriage to teach that there is no difference between monk and lay believers.

Shinran's marriage has these two stories and these stories made his marriage special marriage. However both of them have not been proven yet and these stories don't the reason why *Shinran*'s marriage was revolutionary or reasonable one under religious doctrine. He has been said, "he insisted that monk can marry (Matuo 2010:p.17)" however, it's obviously violation of precept for monks. Monks should not have sex or marriage under their Buddhist precepts. Therefore, his marriage should be by no means reasonable one for monk.

His marriage has been evaluated as revolutionary (Matuo 2010:p.17) not only in these traditions but in much discussions and discourses within *Jōdo Shinshū* sect. Needless to say, these are not *Shinran*'s own statement for his marriage, and also these discourses are not one, which was said by *Shinran*'s religious idea. Some people say he had a religious conviction, however there is no record of his statement about his marriage.

In fact, *Jōdo Shinshū* sect couldn't answer the reason why they can marry as their doctrine (Hirata 2010:p.430). This sect described their doctrine by explaining that their founder *Shinran* married. However it's not reason that explains rightness of their doctrine about marriage. There are not any historical records and we do not know why the government permitted monk's marriage only for *Jōdo Shinshū* sect.

In addition, in recent study, it is said that it was not unusual for monks to marry or have child in *Shinran*'s days. Many historical documents tell that many monks have children or partner (Ishida 1995, Taira 2011) and therefore, we can't say his marriage was first or revolutionary one for monk or Japanese Buddhist society at large.

There is no historical record that tells reason of his marriage or why it was revolutionary. We need to organize *Shinran*'s marriage again and whether was it rightness one for Buddhist or not.

Furthermore, we may not say that he "married". In modern concepts, marriage will be described as having one or steady partner, or there is something contract. However in

his days, there is no clear definition of marriage, and there is not any historical record that tells his marriage or contract with woman.

After his dead, some his biographies were made and they tell about *Shinran's* marriage or wife although, there is no his statement about his marriage; he didn't call his behavior marriage and also, he didn't say nothing about his marriage as biographies tell.

If we call his behavior "marriage" like modern concept, we have to find some historical evidence such as something ceremony or contract with his partner. There are two women who has been thought *Shinran's* wife. One woman is *Eshin* nun and the other is *Tamahi hime*, and *Eshin* nun is the most likely theory. She wrote many letters to *Shinran* and had at least two children between *Shinran*. However *Shinran* didn't call her wife and she didn't call him husband, either. Even if she had children between *Shinran*, there is no historical record that proofs her status; whether she was his wife or not. Therefore, marriage that was written in these his biographies is lacks of its objectivity and his marriage needs to be studied more carefully.

In this paper, we distinguish his marriage and sex. Many studies have not distinguished sex and marriage. In Buddhist precept, marriage is not clear prohibition but having sex is obviously violation of precept because it's written in precept.

We can know existence of *Shiran's* child from historical sources. He called a man as his son and he treated the man his real son¹. Therefore, we can't say marriage of *Shinran* was marriage, in modern concept however, we can say that *Shinran* did a violation of sexual precept.

6. *Shinran's* idea -- the Pure Land and faith--

¹ Of course, there is a possibility that the man was adapted child of *Shinran* and he didn't have sex with any woman. But he treated him as his real son, and it means that he accepted suspicious of having sex or violation of precept. Therefore this paper set his behavior (having son) as a violation of Buddhist precept.

This paper focuses on *Shinran*'s two main ideas to explain his violation of Buddhist precept. He set three sutras as his foundation sutra and had absolute faith to *Amida Buddha*.

He set three sutras that tell about the Pure Land as foundation sutra. The Pure Land is a world that *Amida Buddha* lives and there is no discrimination, pain or hunger. Furthermore, people who are born in there can attain enlightenment in their next life.

There is a validation of precept or class because they are promised enlightenment at their next life. To attain enlightenment is common goal for Buddhists so in this present world, Buddhists need to practice for attain enlightenment. They must obey precepts as training for enlightenment, and there is a clear difference between Buddhists, monk and layman.

Monk or not monk is same to which precept they receive and keep, it also means that whether having sex is permitted or not. In the Pure Land, on the other hand, it is certain for them to attain enlightenment at their next life. In that sense, the monks and lay believers become level equal.

Shinran emphasized the faith such as the way to go to the Pure Land. Like other sects that preach to go to the Pure Land, he chanted Buddhist prayer, which is an expression of gratitude to the *Amida Buddha* by calling his name. But it is not a practice for *Shinran* but nothing more than just saying gratitude. In his idea, it's enough even just once or even just recites in mind, although other Buddhist sect did it as practice and they chanted it many times.

Also, *Shinran* thought that can call *Amida Buddha* is a proof of salvation by *Amida Buddha* and going to the Pure Land. He thought that faith is not what you get on your own, rather he thought that faith is something bestowed by the *Amida Buddha* and people are led to believe or led to call *Amida Buddha*'s name by *Amida Buddha*.

In his idea, belief in *Amida Buddha* or can call his name itself is proof of salvation. His idea doesn't need any practice or keeping precepts because their salvation and enlightenment is already certain promised.

If training is denied, precepts are no longer necessary. He thoroughly denied subjective action of human such as training or keeping precepts. It has nothing to do with going to the Pure Land.

Shinran thought that men who can believe in *Amida Buddha* has already been decided that he can go to the Pure Land. Belief in *Amida Buddha* is definite evidence of that can go to the Pure Land, can attain enlightenment and can become equal to Buddha.

He said as follows

“People who can get belief in *Amida Buddha* are already Buddha. They are equal to Buddha.” (Tada 1964:p.115)

Enlightenment is common ultimate goal for Buddhists and they practice by keeping precepts. However, in his idea, people who can believe in *Amida Buddha* are promised to attain enlightenment and it means that the people are already Buddha. What all they have to do is believe in *Amida Buddha* and its belief is given by *Amida Buddha*.

He called himself “no precept no name monk” or “non-monk-non-layman”. By absolute faith for *Amida Buddha*, he denied precepts that distinguish Buddhists. There are not any precepts. If there are not precepts, there are not violations of precepts.

7. A comparison with *Martin Luther*

Luther is famous as the central figure of the reformation. First common point of *Luther* and *Shinran* is that they had strict monastic life. *Shinran* was at temple, and *Luther* was at monastery. There were strict rules that they must keep and in those rules, there were rules prohibit sex or marriage. Nevertheless, they have been said got married or had sex although, they knew well that they must obey their precept as monk. They had strong belief, *Luther* in God and *Shinran* in *Amida Buddha*. Their action is called a revolution and after their death, each of them established group or sect.

For *Shinran*, belief in *Amida Buddha* is definite evidence of can go to the Pure Land and attaining enlightenment. Man who can belief *Amida Buddha* or can call name of *Amida Buddha* is already Buddha. He doesn't need to keep precept therefore he can marry. He is able to obtain the ultimate goal of Buddhists nevertheless he violate Buddhist precepts and denied being a monk. These his position is supported by an absolute devotion to *Amida Buddha*.

Luther, on the other hand, had absolutely belief in God. And he tied to rectify by gospel understanding, the tradition of the Christian world so far. Monks of the church have been required in the single and virgin, however, he proved that there is no prohibition of monk's marriage or having sex in the Bible. He insisted on that whether they marry or not should be left freely by each person. And he claimed being single and virgin was to be contrary to the provisions of God. After he admitted the great value to be married than single or religious life and he married *Katharina von Bora*. His marry based on faith in God and the Bible.

Marriages of *Shinran* and *Luther* seem to obviously violation of their religious rules. But we can also say that *Shinran* and *Luther* did it by very basing on faith. Their marriage or having sex was violation of sexual precept, however, *Shinran* did it by denying a monk and *Luther* did it by basing on the Bible or gospel, which come from God.

8. Conclusion.

It has been said that *Shinran* violated sexual precept, and his marriage has been evaluated as revolutionary one, although the marriage has no reliable record and no explanation about the revolutionarily of his marriage.

To evaluate his marriage as revolutionary one, this paper focused on his foundation sutra and his belief stance. There is a special structure of the Pure Land and a structure of faith. In the Pure land, it's possible to invalidate precept because everyone who can be born in the Pure Land are promised attaining enlightenment in their next life. In the present life, Buddhists are different for their precepts and this difference of precept distinguishes their class. In the Pure land, on the other hand, Buddhists are

same in attaining enlightenment in next life and they don't need any precepts or practices keeping precepts because it is sure that they attain enlightenment.

Also, *Shinran* emphasized work or power of *Amida Buddha*. He thought belief in *Amida Buddha* is certain proof of salvation. In his idea, belief is one that given by *Amida Buddha*. His attitude seems similar to the point that absolute faith in God by *Luther*. This is a quite unique point for Buddhism because his idea seems to be monotheism. *Luther* and *Shinran* have in common in point of absolute faith and this point needs to be compared in more detail the structure of the faith.

Also from a different point of view, it can causes blood relative. In fact, *Jōdo Shinshū* sect has achieved great development by kin, and it is only this sect among other Japanese Buddhist sect. As a Buddhist sect, which denies Buddhist precepts, *Jōdo Shinshū* sect has developed one of the largest sect in Japan. It's an interesting point as sociological theme and this paper will be a first step for such points.

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