

Magic and Self-Cultivation in a New Religion The Case of Shinnyoen

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Previous research on the New Religions has tended to focus on their magico-religious aspects. However, we cannot neglect the fact that many of the New Religions incorporate elements of self-cultivation in their schemes for salvation. In this essay we will attempt to clarify the relation between self-cultivation and magic through an examination of Shinnyoen, a New Religion, based on the teachings and practices of the sect as well as reports and experience narratives by Shinnyoen followers. We will show that, at least in the case of Shinnyoen, formalized self-cultivation in the followers' daily lives is based on magical elements.

MAGICAL ELEMENTS have always formed a quite visible aspect of the New Religions, and have contributed significantly to their establishment and growth. Indeed, one of the major reasons people are attracted to the New Religions is the magico-religious salvation offered by them.¹

This is not to say, however, that the New Religions emphasize only magico-religious salvation and worldly benefits—they also provide doctrinally grounded guidance for daily life and attempt to convey a certain order to their followers' lives. Salvation in most New Religions is not simply a gift, it also entails ethical action on the part of the follower (see FUJII 1990, p. 238). Moreover, many of the New Religions are characterized by strong traditional ethical beliefs that are closely related to their vitalistic worldviews (*seimeishugiteki sekaikan* 生命主義的

* This article was translated from the Japanese by Paul L. Swanson, based on a revised and updated version of NAGAI 1993.

¹ The New Religions are not, of course, the only groups for whom magical elements have an important meaning. In Christianity, too, magical elements and expressions play a significant role in gaining and maintaining popular support for the church. See, e.g., SÖDERBLOM 1926 (1946, p. 413).

世界観).² Ethical elements are thus a vital aspect of the New Religions, and together with the magical aspects form the structure of their religious world.

The traditional ethical beliefs manifested in a particular New Religion may at first glance appear contradictory to such magical elements as faith healing, but this is not actually the case—the two elements are deeply related. FUJII points out that “the ethical beliefs are of a kind that do not oppose the magical elements,” and notes that “from the perspective of ‘purification’ ethical practice and magical rites are not contradictory, but actually share the same characteristics” (1990, pp. 239–41). SHIMAZONO, discussing this issue with regard to the modernization of Japan, adds that the magico-religious aspects of the New Religions provided the force to effect an ethical revolution among the masses in Japan (1992, p. 148). Insisting that magical and ethical elements work together and are mutually supportive, he rejects YASUMARU’s thesis (1974) that the two aspects stand at opposite poles.

What, then, is the relationship between magical and ethical elements in the daily life of a follower of a New Religion? In this essay I will examine this issue as it relates to the New Religion Shinnyoen 真如苑, drawing primarily from the experience-narratives (*taikendan* 体験談) of the sect’s followers. First, however, I will attempt a better definition of our basic concepts. By “magic” I mean the reliance upon a supernatural or mysterious power to attain or do something, or the attempt to utilize that power. By “ethics” I refer not only to the practice of ordinary morality in daily life, but also to the extra-ordinary efforts to perfect or complete oneself and realize an ideal form of humanity as taught in one’s religion. I will refer to this latter, narrower meaning as “self-cultivation” (*shūyō* 修養), which can be further defined as “to aim for one’s own improvement through reflecting on one’s actions and one’s mental, spiritual, or emotional well-being.”

One cannot, of course, always discern a clear distinction between magic and self-cultivation in the various activities that make up a follower’s religious life. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish the *degrees* of magical and self-disciplinary elements in various activities. By discussing the elements of magic and self-cultivation and investigating their relationship we should be able to come up with a fuller and more accurate picture of Shinnyoen and the New Religions in general.

² See TSUSHIMA et al. 1979 and the English version of his paper, “The vitalistic conception of salvation in Japanese New Religions” (TSUSHIMA, NISHIYAMA, SHIMAZONO, and SHIRAMIZU 1979). For more recent comments see FUJII 1990 and SHIMAZONO 1992, pp. 147–51.

An Outline of Shinnyoen

Shinnyoen, a New Religion in the tradition of Shingon esoteric Buddhism, was founded in 1936 by Itō Shinjō 伊藤真乗 (1906–1989) and his wife Tomoji 友司 (1912–1967).³ One of the relatively larger New Religions, it currently claims a membership of about three million, but actual membership is probably closer to 720,000 (BUNKA-CHŌ 1995). Its reported following was 185,000 in 1970, 297,000 in 1975, 685,000 in 1980, 1,816,000 in 1985, and 2,596,000 in 1990. It thus boasts an unsurpassed rate of sustained growth for a New Religion over the past twenty-five years, a fact that has caused it to be classified as one of the so-called New New Religions (*shin shin-shūkyō* 新新宗教).

First let us take a quick look at Shinnyoen's historical development. The founder, Itō Shinjō, was from Yamanashi Prefecture just west of Tokyo. As a young man he moved to Tokyo to work as an aeronautical engineer, while reading fortunes on the side with the aid of divination books traditionally handed down in the Itō family. He gradually became interested in Buddhism, especially the esoteric Shingon school. In late 1935 he enshrined a statue of Fudō Myōō 不動明王 in his home, and in early 1936 took part in winter ascetic practices together with his wife Tomoji. On 3 February, the final day of practices, Tomoji received a spiritual revelation (*sōshō* 相承) from her aunt (it is said that Tomoji's aunt and grandmother had been practicing mediums involved in the exorcism of fox spirits during the early part of the Meiji period).

On the basis of this spiritual message, passed on to him by Tomoji, Shinjō felt a call to the religious life. He quit his job at the aircraft plant and began a new life as a religious leader, establishing the temple Shinchō-ji 真澄寺 in Tachikawa on the outskirts of Tokyo, on land that still serves as the location of the sect's headquarters. The organization he founded, the Tachikawa Fudō-son Kyōkai 立川不動尊教会, was affiliated with the Daigo branch of Shingon Buddhism. Shinjō trained at Daigo-ji in Kyoto, attaining the rank of Dai-ajari (great master) in 1941. Following the war he separated from the Shingon school, and in 1948 established an independent organization called the Makoto Kyōdan まこと教団. The name was changed to Shinnyoen in 1951 following a series of difficulties for the organization during the previous year (including a forty-day spell in jail for Shinjō). A further tragedy occurred in 1952, when Itō's second son died at age fifteen

³ For details on Shinnyoen see YAMAGUCHI 1987, HIROTA 1990, and NUMATA 1990 (1995). Concerning Itō Tomoji, see SAKURAI 1989, 1990, and 1992. For a recent study of Shinnyoen in Europe see SAKASHITA 1995.

(Shinjō's eldest son had died in 1936). As a result of these difficulties Shinjō turned to the teachings of the *Daihatsu-nehān-gyō* 大般涅槃經 (*Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, hereafter the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*) and established the practice of *sesshin* 接心 (spiritual guidance through mediums). Tomoji passed away in 1967 and is now referred to as Shōju-in 攝受院. Shinjō died in 1989. Together they are known as Ryō Jō'e 両常慧. The organization is currently led by Itō's third daughter, Shinsō 真聰, and his fourth daughter, Shinrei 真玲.

Next let us examine the characteristics of Shinnyoen from the perspective of the religious life of its followers. As mentioned above, Shinnyoen accepts the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* as its basic scripture, preaching the goal of individual salvation of each member: "Each and every person should develop their latent potential for Buddhahood (Buddha-nature), attain the realm of nirvāṇa and liberation, and experience a joyful world by realizing permanence, bliss, selfhood, and purity within this world."⁴ In order to realize this goal Shinnyoen followers must accept *sesshin* and undertake three forms of activity (the "Three Activities," *mitsu no ayumi* 三つの歩み): joyful giving (*kangi* 歡喜, financial contribution to the organization), recruitment (*otasuke* お助け), and service (*gohōshi* ご奉仕).

These three activities are usually performed individually on the part of the believer, but the functions of the *suji* 経 (religious group) are also important. A *suji*, consisting of at least one hundred families centering around a leader (*sujiōya* 経親), provides spiritual guidance based on a family-like relationship (*michibiki no oyako* 導きの親子). The primary activity of the *suji* is the home meeting, led by the *sujiōya*. In these meetings the members conduct certain rituals and discuss their religious life. Voluntary service, one of the three activities mentioned above, is often carried out by the *suji* group as a whole. The *suji* is thus the basic unit of the Shinnyoen organization, providing a place where followers can deepen their religious life without regard to distinctions of sex, age, and individual religious background. It is also the place through which one receives one's identity within the Shinnyoen organization; when one applies for a *sesshin*, for example, one must write not only one's name but also the name of one's *suji*.

Magic and Self-Cultivation in Sesshin

The *sesshin* is the central element of religious practice for the follower of Shinnyoen (see ISHII 1986, p. 173). A *sesshin* involves receiving

⁴ The four ideals of "permanence, bliss, selfhood, and purity" 常樂我淨 are taught in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* as characteristics of nirvāṇa, in contrast to the "impermanence, suffering, lack of selfhood, and impurity" of this world.

guidance from a spiritual medium (*reinōsha* 靈能者), a person whose spiritual powers (*reinō* 靈能) are recognized by the Shinnyoen organization. Such guidance is in no small part responsible for the dramatic growth of the organization (see YAMAGUCHI 1987, p. 104; AKIBA 1991, p. 57; SHIOBARA 1992, p. 181). Of particular interest is the belief that the mediums transmit spiritual messages from the spiritual world, messages through which individuals can discern and dissolve the evil conditions that surround them, thus gaining salvation.⁵

What, then, is the relationship between magic and self-cultivation within *sesshin*? To understand this we must first examine some of Shinnyoen's concept of "spiritual power." For Shinnyoen, *reinō* is "the power that is centered around the practice of *sesshin*, that is based on the true teachings of nirvana manifested there, and that actualizes spiritual transformation." It is, in short, the power of spiritual transformation taught in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, the power that "guides both you and other people to [the goal of] permanence, bliss, selfhood, and purity." This last point underscores Shinnyoen's belief that one's concern should be not only with saving oneself but also with helping others. Shinnyoen stresses that anyone can attain this spiritual power, citing the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* teaching that "all beings have Buddha-nature."

Spiritual adepts possessed of such power are able to mirror the mind and heart of other believers as well as convey messages from the spiritual world. They are considered instruments or means by which *sesshin* in its literal sense of "connecting the minds" takes place—they serve as links between the believer and the spiritual world. The mediums do not practice as a manifestation of personal power, and are strictly forbidden from operating away from the designated time and place of a *sesshin*. Shinnyoen keeps its mediums on a tight leash—even after his or her *reinō* is recognized a medium must go through a well-defined course of practice before being allowed to perform *sesshin*, in addition to which the *sesshin* are conducted only in the company of other mediums. All of this makes it is very difficult for the mediums to exercise their spiritual power outside the framework of Shinnyoen's teachings and organization.

Shinnyoen refers to the spiritual world from which the guiding messages emanate as the *shinnyo reikai* 真如靈界. This is not merely the dwelling place of the spirits of the dead, it also encompasses and is equated with the Buddha realm (*bukkai* 仏界). The mediums' contact with this world is not direct, but only through the intercession of two

⁵ On spiritual powers (*reinō*) and mediums (*reinōsha*) see SHIRAMIZU 1978, KAWABATA 1992, HASHIMOTO 1992, NAGAI 1992, and AKIBA 1991 and 1992. The following discussion of *sesshin* and spiritual powers is based on Itō's own explanations; see SHINNYOEN KYOGAKUBU 1984 and 1992.

“children” (*ryō-dōji* 兩童子) in the realm of the guardian gods, whose spirits are viewed as one with both heaven and earth. These two *dōji* are none other than the first and second sons of Itō Shinjō, named, respectively, Kyōdō-in 教導院 and Shindō-in 真導院. Messages from the *shinnyo reikai* are passed to the *reinōsha* by these children (believed to have been spiritual mediums themselves), and subsequently by the *reinōsha* to the ordinary believers.

What kind of messages are given during *sesshin*? A common theme seen in Shinnyoen experience narratives is the assigning of spiritual causes to problems encountered by the believer. The following is a typical example: “When my wife and I were thinking of ending our marriage a message came during *sesshin* that the spirit of someone who had committed suicide after a divorce had no one to perform the proper memorial services. We immediately prayed for the liberation of this spirit. This caused my wife and me to reconsider our own situation, and we were able to avoid divorce.”

Not all messages, however, are this esoteric in nature. Many Shinnyoen followers report that the counsel given during *sesshin* is usually quite prosaic, involving questions like, “Are you properly maintaining the memorial tablets for your ancestors?” or “Do you really understand the [Shinnyoen] teachings?” One journalist who attended *sesshin* described the advice he received as “something anyone could think of” (*Mainichi Shinbun*, 10 September 1992). Samples of spiritual messages gathered by NAGATANI (1995, p. 21) from advanced *sesshin* include conventional advice regarding gratitude, recruitment activities, spiritual practice and other aspects of one’s religious life, plus individual messages concerning the follower’s ancestral spirits, personal characteristics, and way of thinking.

In short, the counsel given during *sesshin* may concern the follower’s spiritual affairs, practice, mental attitude, or personality. Such guidance is, however, only one aspect of *sesshin*. Shinnyoen explanations of *sesshin* stress that the encounter of the follower with the spiritual medium is only the “formal” (*usō* 有相) *sesshin*, and that there is also an “informal” (*musō* 無相) *sesshin* consisting of the individual’s attempts to put into effect the guidance received through the spiritual messages. In the past it has been the formal *sesshin* that has received the most attention, so that people have tended to focus excessively on the spiritual powers of the founder and the other Shinnyoen mediums. The significance of the “informal” side of *sesshin* must not be overlooked, however, since it is only by examining both aspects that one can arrive at an understanding of *sesshin* as a whole. In terms of our analysis one might see the formal *sesshin* as the magical element

and the informal *sesshin* as the self-disciplinary element. The former relies on such supernatural factors as the spiritual world, spiritual power, and spiritual messages. The latter, while taking the spiritual messages as guidance, involves self-disciplinary action like self-reflection, reform, and self-improvement.

Some caveats are in order here. The informal *sesshin* is not exclusively focused on self-cultivation but also involves magical elements like *goma* fire rituals (*goma kuyō* 護摩供養) or memorial offerings to “hungry ghosts” (*segaki kuyō* 施餓鬼供養) when called for by the spiritual messages conveyed through the medium. Such activities, of course, involve the mysterious power of the founder and the spiritual world rather than self-reflective disciplinary action on the part of the believer. But neither, on the other hand, is the nature of the formal *sesshin* entirely magical—by providing the believer with guidance in how to conduct his or her informal *sesshin* it shares in the self-disciplinary character of the latter. In this way, the practice of *sesshin* as a whole includes both magical and self-disciplinary elements, and these elements are mutually related.

In the rest of the essay I will discuss the relation of magic and self-cultivation in Shinnyoen teachings, in the reports of the transmission of spiritual power, and in the experience narratives of believers.

Magic and Self-Cultivation in Shinnyoen Teachings

It should be noted that, despite the visibility of magical elements in Shinnyoen, the aspect of self-cultivation receives more stress in the teachings of the sect. As mentioned above, self-cultivation is central to informal *sesshin* and comprises a significant part even of formal *sesshin*, the magical elements of the latter serving to guide later self-reflection and self-cultivation. The emphasis is on the believer’s attitude. The self-disciplinary aspect of *sesshin* is stressed not only in the Shinnyoen doctrines but in the sermons of the founder as well. Itō often stressed the importance of diligent self-reflection so that one might polish and improve oneself regardless of the circumstances.

What, then, are the specific teachings that spell out the concrete actions necessary for self-cultivation? Shinnyoen’s general precepts are based on the traditional Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching of the ten good actions of mind, word, and body,⁶ augmented by the “Seventeen Regulations for Women.” These regulations, compiled by Itō Tomoji

⁶ Namely, observing the ten proscriptions: do not kill, do not steal, avoid lustful acts, do not lie, do not slander, do not use harsh language, do not speak frivolously, do not be greedy, do not be angry, and do not have false views.

for the sake of women followers, are regularly used as a guide for daily living. Basically they teach that a woman should be feminine, gentle, strong, unselfish, nonassertive, and concerned for others. It would be no exaggeration to say that the Seventeen Regulations contain the whole of Shinnyoen doctrine with regard to self-cultivation. According to Shinnyoen sources the regulations are followed by male believers as well, the only difference being that the term "male" is substituted for "female" in the appropriate places. Thus the Seventeen Regulations serve as a universal guide for self-cultivation, providing guidelines for male and female alike.

Still, given the emphasis in Shinnyoen on self-cultivation, it is intriguing that the "Seventeen Regulations for Women" is the only teaching that explicitly deals with this subject. It would hardly be too much to expect Shinnyoen doctrine to display a greater development in this area.

We must keep in mind, however, that the Shinnyoen teachings on self-cultivation are augmented by certain important concepts. One is that the devotee should always be mindful of the buddhas, the idea being that every phenomenon and event in the world is intended by the buddhas as an indication of their presence. One thus disciplines oneself by keeping ever mindful of the universally present Buddha (or buddhas) in every person and every situation one encounters. Shinnyoen also teaches its devotees to be always grateful for the power of the founder's family, which works to guide this self-cultivation. This attitude acts to reconfirm the family's authority and enables the concept of the universally present Buddha(s) to take concrete form in the persons of the founder's family. Thus in Shinnyoen the object or model for one's self-cultivation is two-layered: the Buddha(s) and the founder's family. The concrete existence of the founder's family reminds the believers of the working of their power, which serves as a magical support for their own self-cultivation.

Next let us examine the self-disciplinary elements of the above-mentioned "Three Activities." First, *kangi* (joyful giving) involves making material contributions to the organization. One should give "joyfully" because it is a way of being useful to the Buddha(s). Giving also forms part of the process of self-purification, helping the believer overcome attachments to money. Giving for the purpose of reward or merit is strictly prohibited. Thus the notion of giving as an action with magical effects is rejected; the act should contribute to self-cultivation.

Otasuke (lit., helping) refers, as mentioned above, to proselytization or recruitment. The emphasis here is on making efforts as a believer as well as on improving oneself by guiding others to the way of the

Buddha. From another perspective, the effect of this “helping” is seen as a heightening of one’s own virtue.

Third, *gohōshi* (service) refers to volunteer work. In a broad sense it includes such tasks as cleaning public areas like parks or stations, but it usually involves work performed in and around Shinnyoen facilities. This work is explained as a way of using one’s body for the sake of the Buddha, and as a way to polish oneself by serving others. Thus we see that all three activities are understood as practices of self-cultivation, based on mindfulness of the universal presence of the Buddha(s).

In this way the Shinnyoen teachings emphasize the aspect of self-cultivation, largely ignoring (and sometimes implicitly denying) the elements of magic. The issue is not so simple, however; as mentioned above, the two aspects are interrelated in often complex ways. Let us observe a bit more about how these elements operate in the actual religious lives of Shinnyoen followers, turning for data to the *reinō sōshō repōto* 霊能相承レポート [reports of the transmission of spiritual power] of the spiritual mediums, who in many ways comprise the sect’s spiritual elite.

Magic and Self-Cultivation in Reports of the Transmission of Spiritual Power

The *reinō sōshō repōto* are reports of the experiences that Shinnyoen recognize as comprising transmissions or revelations of spiritual power, transmissions that occur during sessions specifically held for that purpose (*reinō sōshō eza* 霊能相承会座). It is not clear when the first of such experiences occurred, but it appears to have been about ten years ago (though it is possible that earlier experiences were simply not reported). I was allowed access to 220 reports from the years of 1986, 1988, 1989, and the first six months of 1987. The number of people officially recognized as having received a transmission of spiritual power during this time came to 244 people. Since these reports were compiled by the elite inner circle of Shinnyoen, through them one can peer through the cracks in the fence surrounding the organization and gain some insight into the religious life and expectations of the leadership.

The officially recognized mediums serve as models for the Shinnyoen religious life, often being held up as examples to other believers. Their elite status stems from two major factors. The first is the superhuman role they play in transmitting messages from the spiritual world. Second is the position they occupy as “perfect leaders” who live in complete accord with the ideals taught by Shinnyoen. The mediums have also realized the three goals that form part of the

believer's religious life: 1) to become a *sujioya* guiding a hundred or more families; 2) to gain religious rank by studying at Chiryū Gakuin, the Shinnyoen school for training educators; and 3) to rise in "spiritual" rank from *Daijō* 大乘 (Mahāyāna) to *Kangi* 歡喜 (Joy), *Daikangi* 大歡喜 (Great Joy), and finally *Reinō* 靈能 (Spiritual Medium). These three goals are intended to help believers strengthen their faith.⁷ Of the three goals, that of attaining the rank of a spiritual medium has the strongest appeal among believers because of the medium's superhuman function.⁸ Those who become mediums not only are in a position to receive spiritual messages during *sesshin*, but also take on the role of guide for those who receive the messages (see SHIRAMIZU 1978, TSUSHIMA 1990, and NAGAI 1992). The mediums thus combine the image of superhuman figure and perfect leader, resulting in their elite status within the Shinnyoen organization.

Let us now take a brief look at the form of these reports. They are written on B5 size paper and begin with a list of questions:

- 1 What spiritual message was transmitted during the revelation?
- 2 What efforts were made by yourself in preparation for the revelation? What did you realize from this experience?
- 3 What help or reward (*okage*) have you received?
- 4 In retrospect, what vows should have been made?

The person who experienced the revelation is encouraged to write freely about it in the course of answering these questions. This report is handed in to the Shinnyoen office on the same day of the experience or the day after (or no later than four or five days later). No one in the Shinnyoen office adds any comments to this report, so that it reflects the "raw voice" of the believer.

I would like to examine in particular the answers given to question 2, which relates to the area of self-cultivation. The following are the full texts of three examples:⁹

⁷ Reaching the level of a spiritual medium is not the final goal; there are still two further goals to be reached. The religious attainment by the family members of the founder is at the peak of a hierarchy of attainment. For others, there are further advances to be made within this hierarchy even after becoming a spiritual medium.

⁸ After the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* was recognized as scripture by Shinnyoen in the late 1950s, the group accepted the idea that it was possible for anyone to become a spiritual medium if they cultivated certain practices. Since then the image of the medium changed, and the medium also was a human being. ISHII (1990) claims that it was from this time that becoming a spiritual medium became a major goal of Shinnyoen believers. However, this change in the image of the medium did not involve a denial of some innate spiritual power, and it did not lead to the loss of the medium's role as a superhuman figure.

⁹ For further details on the contents of these and other reports, see NAGAI 1992.

- 1 [I prepared by] meditating on the history of Shinnyoen and the contents of the magazine *Kangi*;
 reading and reflecting on forty years of following the way;
 chanting praises over three hundred times during morning and evening worship;
 appealing frequently to the section chief to allow me to seek wisdom;
 performing as much voluntary work as possible.
 [I realized] my selfishness and worthlessness;
 my strong urge to gain personal reward and my lack of true faith;
 my failure to fulfill my responsibilities toward my family and group;
 the fact that I am encompassed by the great compassion of my leaders, the two *dōji* (the founders' sons), and the two parent-founders.
- 2 [I prepared by] thoroughly purifying the three types of karmic deeds [physical, verbal, and mental];
 practicing humility toward the people at work, my family, and my group.
 trying to get rid of my feelings of criticizing others, and to improve my personality.
 [I realized] the importance of prayer for extinguishing selfishness, and of the teaching that one should always be considerate of others.
- 3 [I prepared by] being honest and kind to all people that I came in contact with;
 being careful about my daily tasks and trying to act in the way that the founder would have acted;
 trying to be grateful for the health that has been given to me, since I tend to be overconscious of my body due to lack of sleep;
 purifying my karma through water ablutions (*suigyō* 水行) and the chanting of spiritual formulas (*reiju* 靈咒) and praises (*gosandai* 讃題) each morning.
 [I learned] to rely completely on the leaders, the two *dōji*, and the two parent-founders, and to give thanks to my own parents and everyone in my group;
 many other things, such as the fact that though I can do nothing myself, I am given life if I have the teachings.

What attracts one's attention here are the reports of self-purification practices—e.g., pouring cold water over one's head and chanting mystical or magical formulae—that cannot be found in the official doctrines or teachings of Shinnyoen. Although it is true that water ablu­tion is taught at the Chiryū Gakuin as one method of Buddhist training,¹⁰ the emphasis is on the religious meaning of this practice as a “training the mind/heart through action” (MIYAKE 1973, p. 358). The focus, in other words, is on the mental/emotional improvement; ascetic practices should not be an end in themselves (see KISHIMOTO 1961, pp. 68–70). However, as one examines these practices it becomes clear that the emphasis is more on the magical efficacy of the water or the formulae than on any effects of self-cultivation. The water ablutions in particular are significant in that they were performed by the founder too; it seems that many believers attempt in this way to follow in his footsteps. Although these believers would no doubt claim that such disciplines contribute to their self-improvement, this element inevitably slips into the background when the emphasis shifts to the efficacy of the practices per se, and “the more the better.” This has led to a weakening of the emphasis placed on self-cultivation in the lives of some Shinnyoen believers.

The next point to note is the dominant role played by the founders and their family. Generally speaking, the faith of the believers seems to stop here; despite the sect's stress on consciousness of the Buddha's presence, one finds almost no mention in the reports of this supposedly universal figure.

Again, the official doctrine teaches that one should sacrifice oneself for the sake of “others,” meaning people in general. The reports, however, seem to limit the circle of “others” to family members and other Shinnyoen believers. Part of this stems from the fact that the teachings do indeed emphasize that “charity begins at home.” Hence Shinnyoen followers tend to think of those in their immediate vicinity when they set out to “sacrifice themselves for others.” The same thing can be said for “practicing humility” (*gezagyō* 下座行), a practice officially defined as carrying out activities that people usually wish to avoid, such as picking up garbage or cleaning toilets, but which also includes serving and setting oneself below other people. Here, too, the references to “practicing humility” all concern activities taking place within the believer's immediate circle of acquaintances; they are

¹⁰ One must meet a number of criteria to be accepted for training at Chiryū Gakuin, including the recruitment of a certain number of people for Shinnyoen. Therefore the people who study there represent only a small percentage of the total number of people involved with Shinnyoen.

almost always “in-house” activities such as cleaning the toilets of the Shinnyoen facilities or bowing and saying “welcome home” or “farewell” to people as they arrive at or leave Shinnyoen headquarters.

Finally, it should be mentioned that these activities are consciously seen as means for attaining the transmission of spiritual power. Shinnyoen teachings hold that the religious life should ideally be lived in such a way that one is constantly self-aware and mindful of the Buddha(s). Among the 220 reports I examined, however, I found only one in which the believer admitted that “there is nothing I specifically did to receive transmission of spiritual power, but just tried my best in everything I did from day to day.” All the other reports list various concrete actions, as if to assert how much the reporter has striven for [and thus deserves] the transmission of spiritual power.

This reflects the degree to which Shinnyoen followers are conscious of attaining spiritual power, and the importance it occupies in their religious lives. Even the self-disciplinary actions listed in the reports seem to have been done for the purpose of attaining a higher spiritual rank. The impression one is left with is that for many believers spiritual power is not the incidental result of self-disciplinary efforts directed primarily toward the goal of self-improvement, but the conscious purpose of those efforts from the very beginning. Self-disciplinary activity in this case is actually magical activity used as a means to attain spiritual power.

Magic and Self-Cultivation in Experience Narratives

Let us now examine a few experience narratives found in Shinnyoen publications. The narratives are from approximately the same period as the *reinō sōshō repōto* taken up in the preceding section, coming from the October 1985 through October 1991 issues of the Shinnyoen magazine *Kangi sekai* 歡喜世界 and the January 1989 through December 1991 issues of the Shinnyoen newsletter *Naigai Jihō* 内外時報. About eighty experience narratives, both long and short, were examined; three are summarized below.

- 1 I joined Shinnyoen after hearing the words of my religious parent (*michibiki oya*), at a time when my parents and relatives were all ill with cancer. In 1983, before I became a regular member, I, too, had a condition that the doctors told me was 80–90% cancerous. During *sesshin* I was told that if I strove diligently, the condition could be rectified with minor surgery. The construction of a new temple for our group was being planned, so I threw myself into the performance of the Three Activities. When the day came for my

surgery they did not discover any cancer, and the problem was taken care of with minor surgery, just as the spiritual message had said. This is all the result of the noble teachings [of Shinnyoen].

- 2 After my eldest daughter joined Shinnyoen she became more kind and understanding toward her drunken husband, who in turn also improved. This attracted me to the organization, which I began visiting in 1976. I had always had poor eyes, and was now threatened with blindness due to ocular hemorrhaging. I threw myself into *sesshin* and the Three Activities, including cleanups of the local train station in the early mornings. I was still troubled by recurrent hemorrhages, but was determined to become a person who could transmit the [Shinnyoen] teachings no matter what happened. Around that time I had a vision of the Eleven-faced Kannon in a dream, and decided to attend the Shinnyoen services before I lost my sight. When the service started I opened my eyes, and could see as clearly as if a membrane had been removed. Thereafter the hemorrhaging stopped. In 1981 I got a boil on my knee the size of an egg. Thinking that I should do it while I could still walk, I visited acquaintances and recruited a new member. Eventually the boil went away, to the surprise of my doctor. The following year I got lung cancer. When I got the boil I was saved by recruiting others, but I thought that perhaps by now my merit had been all used up. In any case I tried to help others in my hospital room, and also continued my recruiting efforts. Before I realized it the cancer was gone. I have always suffered from selfishness, but have learned the nobility of serving others. In 1983 I attained the rank of *Daijō*. The property I live on is located on an ancient battlefield, and I realized that it must be haunted by the spirits of many who, like me, suffered from bad eyesight. I will continue to propagate the teachings [of Shinnyoen] in this area and work diligently with my colleagues.
- 3 My mother joined Shinnyoen in 1976, when I was still a child. After growing up I, too, began following the Shinnyoen teachings because of an interest in the *sesshin*. I worked with the young people's group, participated in the Three Activities, and received the rank of *Daijō* in 1980. I married in 1984, gave birth to a son the next year, and began sponsoring meetings for mothers with their children. I was blessed in every way, but was unable to increase my feeling of gratefulness. When I became pregnant with my second child in 1987, I was diagnosed as having cancer of the thyroid gland and was shocked when told I should terminate the pregnancy. Through *sesshin* I discovered that a distant ancestor of mine had

been killed during a war by being pierced through the throat and chest. The ancestor, I was told, was causing my condition at this time when a new life was about to be born because he wanted someone to understand his own suffering. This was the voice of my ancestor, which I had been unable to hear before. I prayed deeply for the sake of the ancestor, then visited the hospital the following day. The doctor told me that the child was healthy, and I underwent successful surgery on the same day we held a memorial service [for the unfortunate ancestor]. A baby girl was born on schedule. I am grateful for the salvation that comes from the unity of this world and the spirit world (*kenyū ichinyō* 顯幽一如), and for the liberation from suffering brought by meritorious deeds (*bakku daiju* 拔苦代受). I vow to perform deeds of thankfulness, knowing that I have been repaid many times for the merit gained through diligent training.

It should be kept in mind that there are several important differences between experience narratives and the type of transmission reports examined earlier. Since the narratives are selected and edited for publication, it is only natural that the most impressive and inspiring narratives should appear. Considerable time, too, separates the narratives from the events being narrated. There is also a difference in the type of person responsible for the respective pieces. Whereas the transmission reports are the work of the highly ranked mediums who work within the organization guiding other believers from above, the experience narratives are generally by the enthusiastic new converts or middle-ranking *Daijō* or *Kangi* ranks who support the organization from below through enthusiastic outside proselytization activities.

Unlike the transmission reports, the narratives contain no mention of such activities as water ablution or the chanting of sacred phrases. Instead, they portray a religious life centered on the Three Activities, with their performance believed to lead to accumulation of merit; among the three the enthusiastic recruitment of new Shinnyoen members is seen as the most directly related to this result. Unlike the official sectarian teachings, which emphasize the spiritual aspects of the Three Activities, the narratives say little concerning the mental attitude with which they should be carried out—the Three Activities are understood to comprise self-cultivation in and of themselves, with an added emphasis on the *amount* performed. This may be the result of their being seen as merit-making acts.

The Three Activities form a highly systematized form of self-cultivation. That is, they do not comprise a cultivation of *spirit* but a cultivation of *deed*. Since this cultivation is linked to the acquisition of

merit, it easily takes on a strong coloration of magic. We can see this in the first two of the narratives above, where the narrators carried out the Three Activities for the purpose of surmounting an emergency situation, and where they were miraculously and mysteriously saved.

This magical aspect is most clearly manifested when a medium identifies the influence of a spirit as the cause of a believer's difficulties. In such cases one reflects on oneself and compares one's own situation with that of the problematic spirit in the spirit world, then, relying on the mysterious power of the founder and others in the *shinnyo reikai*, performs memorial or other services depending on the nature of the spirit. Through this process the spirit is saved and the believer's difficulty in this world is resolved. Here we see a highly systematized magic employed for the spiritual resolution of problems. When the problem is resolved the believer's own "condition" is purified, a development the narrators view as a form of self-improvement. In other words, magical salvation and self-purification are mutually related.

Summary

We have discussed the relationship between magic and self-cultivation in Shinnyoen by examining the practice of *sesshin*, Shinnyoen teachings, transmission reports, and experience narratives. In *sesshin* the self-disciplinary actions of reflection and reform are supported by the magical activity of accepting guidance from the spiritual world through the intermediary of a spiritual medium. The teachings emphasize self-cultivation, but the authority of the teachings is based on an acceptance of the magical function of the founders' family. The transmission reports mention many self-disciplinary activities, but reveal a tendency to view such activities as a means of attaining spiritual power, lending them an aura of magical efficacy. Finally, the experience narratives show that even the self-disciplinary practice of the Three Activities—the core of Shinnyoen religious life—frequently takes on a magical character as a means to bring about salvation. Furthermore, these activities are highly standardized and systematized. In short, the self-disciplinary aspects are supported by magical elements at every level of Shinnyoen that we have examined.

In a previous study I have compared the self-disciplinary activities of Shinnyoen and Shūyōdan Hōseikai 修養団捧誠会, a New Religion that emphasizes self-cultivation and ethical behavior (see SHIMAZONO, ed. 1992, pp. 117-52, and NAGAI 1993). I concluded that Shinnyoen's self-disciplinary activities had three characteristics: externality, subordination, and particularity.

“Externality” refers to the fact that emphasis is put on the “form” of the practice, whether it be performing the highly systematized Three Activities or engaging in such practices as water ablution and the chanting of sacred formulae.

“Subordination” refers to the role of intermediaries in Shinnyoen, from the individual guidance given by spiritual mediums during formal *sesshin* to the leadership provided by the *suji-oya* in the daily religious life of the believers. The guidance of these intermediaries results in a standard interpretation of Shinnyoen teachings. Moreover, their counsel to put one’s faith in a mysterious power increases the tendency for self-disciplinary action to take on a magical character. For example, if a spiritual cause for a certain problem is identified the leaders will recommend a *goma* fire service or transfer of merit ceremony, the efficacy of which is attributed to the power of the founder. It is enough for the believer to accept this and carry out the activity.

The “particularity” of Shinnyoen practice is clearly revealed in the gap that exists between the ideal image of self-cultivation and its actual practice. According to the Shinnyoen teachings, self-disciplinary activity is based on the universal presence of the Buddha(s) and directed towards all of humanity. In actual practice, however, the concrete figures of the founders and their children assume a far greater importance than the Buddha, and one’s family and fellow believers are far more often the focus of religious activity than anyone outside this circle. In other words, Shinnyoen practice is in reality largely internal, a fact that enables a thoroughgoing practice within the organization. It is also deeply connected to Shinnyoen’s institutional solidarity.

I would like to close with a few comments on the believers’ attitudes toward self-cultivation. In 1991 a group from Osaka University conducted a survey of spiritual mediums that included a question on their motivations for joining Shinnyoen (see KAWABATA 1992). The results showed that 14.6% joined for reasons of self-cultivation, a figure second only to the 17.7% who joined to perform ancestral rites. As Kawabata points out, it is hardly surprising that these were the two leading motivations, given the high level of interest shown by believers in spiritual advancement and self-improvement on the one hand, and the frequent performance of memorial services (six times a year) by the organization on the other (KAWABATA 1992, p. 222). What is more interesting in the context of this study, however, is the fact that these two motivations actually decrease the longer the believer has been a member. The above survey revealed that among believers who reach the rank of *Daijō* the concern with ancestral rites drops from 17.7% to 1.9%, and with cultivation from 14.6% to 11.8%. On the other hand,

interest in elements distinctive to Shinnyoen (attraction to the founder, attraction to the teachings, and interest in the spiritual world) rose dramatically from 22.4% to 55.7%. If, as the Shinnyoen teachings claim, the most important aspect of religious life is self-cultivation for the sake of spiritual and mental growth, then one would expect a deepening concern with this element as the years go by. In fact the opposite is the case, with a decreased interest in self-cultivation accompanied by an increased interest in magical elements and spiritual aspects specific to Shinnyoen. This reflects the fact that Shinnyoen believers practice a standardized self-cultivation based on the authority and power of the founders' family. For Shinnyoen, the systematized practice of self-cultivation is actually based on magical elements.

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