

**MAPPING THE GARDEN OF TRUTH:  
BUDDHIST AND IDIOSYNCRATIC ELEMENTS  
IN THE RELIGIOUS SPACE OF SHINNYO-EN**

by

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## Abstract

New Religious Movements (NRMs) are typically understood by observers as deviant, bizarre—even pathological—forms of religion that are born in times of crisis and joined by people in crisis. This understanding, however, overlooks the similarities and often close connections between new movements and more established “parent” traditions. Shinnyo-en is a Buddhist-derived NRM that began in 1930s Japan. It has strong ties to Shingon Buddhism and is also characterized by idiosyncratic practices and an emphasis on its charismatic founding family. Like other Buddhist-derived NRMs, Shinnyo-en is simultaneously contiguous with a parent tradition and distinguished from it.

Abandoning the language of pathology, I suggest that we think of NRMs in the modern period as occupying non-locative conceptual “spaces” similar to those of “established” religions, secular spaces, and other ideologies. The very meaning of the name Shinnyo-en 真如苑—the “Garden of Truth,” literally a “borderless garden” (*en* 苑) of “thusness” (*shinnyo* 真如, Skt. *tathatā*)—evokes the image of an expansive, cultivated space. I argue that the space of Shinnyo-en contains two modalities. In its first modality, practitioners and observers see Shinnyo-en as a modernized form of esoteric Buddhism promulgated by the charismatic founding family, which draws on ritual and doctrine inherited from the Shingon school and from Mahāyāna Buddhism generally. In its second modality, initiated practitioners experience Shinnyo-en’s idiosyncrasy, which is a function of unique practices and beliefs that cannot exist apart from the charismatic founding family.

The two modalities of the Shinnyo-en tradition are equally important to members, and must be simultaneously kept in mind to best understand this and other Buddhist-derived NRMs. With this map of the Garden of Truth, Shinnyo-en’s idiosyncrasies that have hindered scholarly and popular understanding become more intelligible, especially the profound emphasis on the founding family and the novel practices and hierarchies they introduced.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Casey Collins.

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## Note to the Reader

Japanese names have been placed in [personal name] [family name] order (e.g. Shinjō Itō). Shinnyo-en uses uncommon pronunciations for many Japanese words, which are reproduced in the chapters below. Translations for Japanese terms are used (e.g. “fire offering” for *goma* 護摩) except in instances where Shinnyo-en only uses a Japanese term (e.g. *sesshin* 接心, lit. “touch heart”).

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*to my family*

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Religion as Space

Shinnyo-en 真如苑 can be translated as “Garden of Truth,” and the literal meaning of its component terms, a “borderless garden” (*en* 苑) of “thusness” (*shinnyo* 真如, Skt. *tathatā*), evoke the image of an expansive, cultivated space. Whenever a person steps into a Shinnyo-en temple, anywhere in the world, a volunteer standing at the gate or front door will greet them with an enthusiastic, “Welcome home!” (*okaerinasai* お帰りなさい). I was surprised and delighted when I heard this on my first visit. Every time I “returned” to the temple, removed my shoes, and placed a purple surplice (*kesa* 袈裟) over my head, this warm welcome reminded me that I was stepping into a different world, into the Garden of Truth.

Thinking of religion as space is not a new idea. From early on, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have conceived of religion in spatial terms. In the early twentieth century, Émile Durkheim wrote of the way religion demarcates sacred and profane spaces (1912). More recently, Jonathan Z. Smith has described religions as occupying non-locative, conceptual spaces (1978). These spaces are nowhere and everywhere, and are shaped by metaphors, mental concepts, and the evolved components of human cognition. In an effort to understand the 1978 mass suicide in Jonestown, Smith brilliantly deploys a spatial model based on Euripides’ twenty four hundred year-old play *The Bacchae* to better understand how two oppositional spaces came into tragic conflict (1982). Smith’s spatial models and metaphors sidestep problematic categories in the study of religion that lack analytical precision or depth by engaging with religion as if it were literature or art (Greiner 2015, 369). In 1905, George Santayana combined spatial metaphors with the notion of “idiosyncrasy,” arguing that:

Thus every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in—whether we expect

ever to pass wholly into it or no—is what we mean by having a religion.  
(Santayana 1920, 6)

Conceiving of religions as conceptual spaces—as other worlds to live in—offers the key to understanding Shinnyo-en, where older beliefs and practices mix and overlap with innovation. A spatial model enables scholars to consider how a person moves through Shinnyo-en, how she journeys into the Garden of Truth, and is guided to its core. Proposing such a model is the task of this thesis.

## **1.2 The Study of Japanese New Religious Movements**

Shinnyo-en has only been addressed in a handful of articles, talks, and papers. Some of these are akin to what J. Z. Smith (1982, 109) might call the “pornography” of Shinnyo-en—tantalizing glimpses into secret beliefs and practices, or into parts of its history that it would prefer to conceal or suppress. Like other new religions in Japan, Shinnyo-en has suffered over a century of negative portrayals in the Japanese media (Morioka 1994), pressure from the Japanese government (Stalker 2008, 159, 188), and ostracism from neighbors and other religious groups.<sup>1</sup> Few of these sensational descriptions help foster a clearer understanding of this Japanese Buddhist-derived religion, why it is compelling to its followers, and why it is a recognizably human institution.

Most scholars of Japanese new religious movements (NRMs)<sup>2</sup> have focused on the idea that NRMs arise in response to historical crises, or that they have certain characteristic features, such as charismatic founders (living or recently alive) or a proclivity for aggressive proselytization (Sharf 1993, 442–43). In contrast, I argue that Shinnyo-en and similar NRMs are better understood as polysemous religious spaces that encompass inherited traditions from a parent religion and an “idiosyncratic modality” that blends existing traditions in novel, historically

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<sup>1</sup> *The Path of Oneness* 2009, 408–410

<sup>2</sup> The NRM category is inconsistent, complex, and problematic. Do the age or beliefs of a movement constitute its novelty? The newness of a movement, combined with beliefs and practices that are perceived as marginal or unusual by the mainstream seem to be the only justifications for this category. Although the category is inherently biased towards mainstream religious practice, it is used throughout this thesis to qualify Shinnyo-en, which has been perceived as a NRM by scholars and mainstream Japanese society, and consequently shaped by that perception throughout its existence.

contingent ways; Shinnyo-en hybridizes existing religious and cultural traditions in the form of novel rituals and organizational hierarchies, but it is ultimately distinguished from established religions by an idiosyncratic modality that is seen as aberrant by the mainstream. Because Shinnyo-en replicates a great deal of the ritual, structure, and doctrine of Shingon Buddhism, on one hand, it appears to a modernist reformulation of Japanese esoteric Buddhism. Yet, Shinnyo-en's charismatic founding family is at the core of what differentiates it from being a mere reformulation. The founding family occupies the center of Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic modality, where they function as supernatural beings that empower unique rituals and structure the religious space of Shinnyo-en.

### **1.3 Scholarly Approaches to Japanese New Religious Movements**

Japanese and North American scholars have tended toward two general models for understanding and analyzing Japanese “new religions” (*shin shūkyō* 新宗教)—the name given to a period of growth in Japanese grassroots religious activity and group formation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which reached a climax in the 1990s with the infamous Aum Shinrikyō murders and subway attacks (Reader 2013, 377). Both models rely on the nearly ubiquitous assumption that NRMs and all their features are largely the result of rapid modernization and social distress (Hale 2014, 5). The first model views the emergence of Japanese NRMs as a unique historical phenomenon, with the character of each NRM determined first and foremost by the historical situation at the time of its founding. Scholars using this first model create detailed historical periodizations to explain each wave of Japanese NRMs from the nineteenth century to the present. The second approaches Japanese NRMs as religious groups that display a distinct set of patterns or “family resemblances.” Scholars using the second model compile lists of characteristics shared among Japanese NRMs. Each of these models yields some insight into the social, economic, and political influences on NRMs, and some of their common features.

The first Japanese religions that came to be classified as NRMs arose during the late Edō (1603–1868) and early Meiji (1868–1912) periods. The most well-known examples are Tenrikyō 天理教, Kurozumikyō 黒住教, Konkōkyō 金光教, and Renmonkyō 蓮門教. These and other Shinto-derived NRMs from this period were originally demarcated as forms of “Sectarian Shintō” (*kyōha shintō* 教派神道) by the Meiji government, and were later ostracized, suppressed, or ordered to change their teachings during the Shōwa period (1926–1989). These same movements were later termed the “old new religions” (Thomsen 1978; Astley 2006, 95). Religions founded during the first half of the twentieth century were grouped together as “new religions” (Astley, 2006, 96). More recently Happy Science (Kōfuku no Kagaku 幸福の科学) and movements that experienced tremendous growth during the 1970s and 1980s, including Shinnyo-en, have been labeled the “new new religions” (Shimazono 2006, 224).

### **1.3.1 Historical Periodization**

Historical periodizations provide some insight into the form and behaviors of NRMs, especially in regards to their organizational structure. For example, legal restrictions on religious belief and behavior during the Meiji period most certainly had an effect on how and where groups met, the style of their activities, and their relationships with other religious institutions. Thus identifying a NRM founded in the Meiji period, such as Ōmotokyō 大本教, as a “late Meiji period NRM” can explain some of the group’s beliefs and practices. It can also explain why they were suppressed and ultimately did not survive state suppression, as was the case with Ōmotokyō (Stalker 2008, 19). Founded by Deguchi Nao in 1892, Ōmotokyō was deemed by the Shōwa government to be an “evil cult” (*jakyō* 邪教) due to its ecstatic practices and for predicting that Japan would lose an upcoming war with the United States. In 1921, the government arrested Ōmotokyō’s top leaders and destroyed all of the group’s property (Garon 1986, 287–89).

According to proponents of this model, the causal connection between NRMs and the qualities of a particular historical period holds true for contemporary NRMs

as well. The problematic assumption here is that NRMs do not change after they are founded; the founding era is thought to be crucial or essential to the nature of the NRM. The era of a religious movement's origin of course effects how it develops later on, but this is no different from the development of other religions except modernity is the historical point of origin in the case of Japanese NRMs. Moreover, the model implies that established or pre-existing religions somehow do not share this comprehensive dependence on historical context. Before discussing the poor fit of Shinnyo-en into any of these periodization models, which tend to focus on landmark historical events (pre- or post-WWII, pre- or post-1973 oil shock), rather than on specific events or experiences within the religions themselves, I will outline the most representative periodizations.

Some scholars use a periodization of four phases: mid- to late-nineteenth century, early-twentieth century, early Shōwa period, and post-WWII (McFarland 1967, 57). Michio Araki, for example, offers a four-phase model: 1840–88, 1895–1930, 1930–1970, and 1970 onward (2003, 216–17). He argues that religions from the first phase emerged from the personal religious experiences of their founders. These experiences were a combination of founders' reactions to contemporary historical and social conditions (e.g., the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan's wars with Russia, China, and later the Allied Powers), and their selections from existing religious ontological assumptions and practices (Araki 2003, 216). Araki claims that religions founded in the second phase also emerged from founders' experiences, but this time the founders and their followers occupied the fringes of a rapidly growing urban society. A third phase contains religions that emerged before and after WWII and were more vigorous in their proselytization activities because they were unencumbered by government persecution (Araki 2003, 217). And the fourth phase is characterized by religious reactions to the goals and values of a modernized and affluent Japan. Other scholars have offered combinations of more recent periodization models based on scholarly consensus in Japan about the role of the 1973 oil-shock as a defining moment for NRMs. Some groups, such as Agon-shū and Happy Science experienced tremendous growth in the 1980s as a result of new socio-economic conditions in post-war, post-oil-shock Japan (Hardacre 2004, 398;

Astley 2006, 96), just as groups from the third phase began to experience stagnation. These “new new religions” are characterized by a younger membership and a more negative view of contemporary social conditions (Shimazono 2006, 224–25).

Despite the crucial historical context these models provide for the emergence and growth of NRMs, scholars admit that such periodizations are weak analytical tools (Hale 2014, 2). Helen Hardacre points out that NRMs may have several dates or no clear date for their founding, or they may have been founded in other countries (Hardacre 2004, 398). Trevor Astley cautions that statistical data and non-exclusive religious affiliation also pose challenges to tracking a movement’s growth from one period to the next (Astley 2006, 96–98).

This model, when applied to Shinnyo-en, ends up splitting the period of Shinnyo-en’s founding in the 1930s from the periods of its first (1950s) and second (1970s) major periods of growth in followers. At the same time, it runs the risk of categorizing Shinnyo-en based on its organizational characteristics in 1945 or 1975, rather than understanding what drives continual, year-to-year evolution within Shinnyo-en.

Additionally, scholars have noted broad social patterns that shape the growth and activities of NRMs, such as Buddhist modernism, colonialism in Asia, and the introduction of Christianity to East Asia (Baker 6; Kim 47). Buddhism during the Meiji period was influenced by a generation of Buddhist leaders that favored a rationalized version of the tradition (i.e. less “superstitious”), lay-oriented, standardized, cosmopolitan, socially responsible, and humanistic (Sharf 1993, 110). Japanese Buddhism and Buddhist-derived NRMs since the Meiji period have generally oriented themselves to reflect these values of Buddhist modernism. Christianity’s introduction to East Asia as the prototypical religion (*shūkyō* 宗教) drove the invention of religion as a distinct cultural phenomenon and legal category, and has also impacted modern expressions of Japanese religiosity (Josephson 2012). This trend, originating in the colonial era, has impacted religion throughout East Asia. Don Baker has noted, for example, trends in modern Korean Buddhism and

NRMs toward monotheism and monodevotionalism since the introduction of Christianity (2003, 20–21).

Shinnyo-en’s charismatic founders, Shinjō and Tomoji Itō, were born and raised in neighboring villages in Yamanashi prefecture, surrounded by the Yatsugatake mountains. Many of Shinnyo-en’s beliefs and practices come from the spiritual culture of the Itōs’ rural upbringing and their family traditions. They began to attract a small following during the mid-1930s, which is a new period altogether according to scholars who use periodization models. During the 1930s, Shinnyo-en maintained close ties with various Shingon<sup>3</sup> and Shugendō<sup>4</sup> establishments. During the 1940s, this seminal group grew from a Buddhist confraternity centered on Shingon rites, the charisma of the Itōs, and their special abilities, to a small Buddhist temple community centered on the Itōs. After the Allied Occupation, Shinnyo-en adopted the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*<sup>5</sup> as its scriptural locus, Śākyamuṇi as its main image of worship, and a modern aesthetic that eschewed the disciplines of Shingon monasticism and scholasticism.<sup>6</sup> Later decades saw continued growth and evolution for Shinnyo-en, which continues to change and expand to this day.

Periodization can provide helpful insights into aspects of Shinnyo-en’s organization during specific moments in history, but cannot help characterize the movement as a whole. Shinnyo-en does not fit into one period, although noted

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<sup>3</sup> Shingon 真言 Buddhism was started by the monk Kūkai 空海 (774–835, commonly known as Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師) in the ninth century. It is one of Japan’s Vajrayāna, or Tantric, Buddhist traditions. For more on Shingon, see Yamasaki (1988) and Hakeda (1972).

<sup>4</sup> Shugendō 修験道 is a syncretic tradition indigenous to Japan believed to have been started by the semi-mythical En-no-gyōja 役行者 (also known as the Great Bodhisattva Jinben 神辺大菩薩). Shugendō involves magico-ascetic practices conducted in sacred mountain ranges, and many Shugendō lineages have for at least several centuries been associated with Buddhist temples.

<sup>5</sup> *Daijō daihatsunehan kyō* 大乘大般涅槃經 (hereafter simply the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*)—A text of immense importance in Mahāyāna Buddhism, purported to contain the final teachings of Śākyamuni.

<sup>6</sup> Shinnyo-en has changed its name several times. As of March 28, 1936 (several months after the Itōs began attracting followers), the group was known as “Fellowship of Light” (Risshō Kō 立照漕, a confraternity affiliated with Naritasan Shinshōji, a Shingon temple). The name was officially changed to “Tachikawa Fellowship of Achala” (Tachikawa Fudōson Kyōkai 立川不動尊教会, affiliated with Daigoji 醍醐寺, another Shingon temple) on August 15, 1938. On February 28, 1946, the Tachikawa Fellowship of Achala became legally independent of Shingon Buddhism when the temporarily unified Shingon denomination was dismantled. On January 23, 1948, the name was changed to “Fellowship of Truth” (Makoto Kyōdan 真教団). The group was officially renamed “Shinnyo-en” (真如苑) on June 16, 1951, and Shinnyo-en’s registration as a religious corporation was completed on May 20, 1953.

trends in each period are reflected in Shinnyo-en's evolution. One scholar might categorize Shinnyo-en according to the date of its founding (Hardacre 2004, 398), another according to its greatest period of growth (Shimazono 2006, 224). But Shinnyo-en has changed so much and so rapidly since those moments that it begs the question: why reductively categorize this movement to a particular historical period at all, unless it is already assumed to be a *different* kind of religion altogether? Does this approach foster analysis and understanding? A major obstacle to the study of Buddhist-derived NRMs in Japan is the false perception of NRMs as *sui generis* phenomena that are anchored to historical events, in contrast to established Buddhist traditions that are somehow timeless.

### 1.3.2 Patterns and Shared Characteristics

The other model deployed in current religious studies scholarship on Japanese NRMs focuses on the characteristics shared among groups like Shinnyo-en. There are several Buddhist-derived NRMs that are somewhat similar to Shinnyo-en including Gedatsukai 解脱会 (Kiyota 1982), Agonshū 阿含宗 (Reader 1988), Risshō Kōseikai 立正佼成会 (Morioka 1994), Sanbōkyōdan 三宝教団 (Sharf 1995; Guthrie 1988), Shinrankai 親鸞会,<sup>7</sup> and others. Observations of “family resemblances” among NRMs specifically<sup>8</sup> and within Japanese religious culture in general are analytically more robust than periodization models because they identify the beliefs and practices that shape these movements and carry meaning for adherents.

The shared characteristics that scholars highlight can be grouped into five general themes. The first is a this-worldly orientation. Trevor Astley notes a concern with contemporary problems and messages of hope for the future of this world (2006, 91). NRMs tend to speak of attaining or creating salvation in this world, rather than in the next (Kisala 2006, 9), and part of that project entails seeking this-

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<sup>7</sup> I could find very little on this Pure Land group. It may be an excellent subject for future study.

<sup>8</sup> Identifying characteristic patterns within Japanese NRMs is a discreet *ad hoc* hermeneutical project among scholars studying Japanese religiosity. Most studies, including those listed below, treat all NRMs alike, regardless of whether they are Shintō-derived, Buddhist-derived, Christian-derived, or otherwise, and instead focus on shared characteristics that unite them into one monolithic category.

worldly benefits (*genze riyaku* 現世利益; Shimazono 2006, 224) such as health and prosperity.

The second theme is an extension of concern with this life, and it encapsulates a set of issues arising as a result of Japanese modernization (Sharf 1995, 440). One of these is a nostalgic concern for the natural environment threatened by urbanization and industrialization. Araki observes that many Japanese NRMs proclaim their solidarity with indigenous peoples and their religious practices, or focus on nature worship (2003, 214). Modernization enabled new identities centered on the nation-state and a sense of belonging to a world full of such states. Japanese NRMs display a marked concern with both the nation and internationalization (Sharf 1995, 438). Catherine Cornille and Peter Clarke argue that these concerns produce a tension between nationalism and universalism observable in Shinnyo-en and many Japanese NRMs (Cornille 1999, 229; Cornille 2000, 10; Clarke 2000, 5).

A third theme is a concern with physical and spiritual wellbeing, as well as individual prosperity and status. Susumu Shimazono notes that many NRMs include techniques or technologies designed to effect mental and emotional healing or rectification (*kokoro naoshi* 心直し; Shimazono 2006, 224). Robert Sharf's observation that NRMs offer of the potential for rapid upward spiritual mobility to their followers (1995, 436) is also in keeping with this theme.

The fourth is, in many ways, an extension of a focus on individual flourishing because it is comprised by doctrinal and practical trends that allow modern lay followers to participate more fully. Accordingly, Japanese NRMs have simplified complex doctrines and lengthy rituals inherited from parent traditions (Sharf 1995, 437). This pattern of simplification and laicization is accompanied by egalitarianism (Araki 2003, 219) and anti-intellectual discourse urging believers not to think, but believe, practice, and only then gain understanding. Christl Kessler and Jürgen Rüländ argue that populism is also an extension of the simplification and anti-intellectualism that constitute typical NRM reactions against modernity (2006, 84).

Finally, a fifth theme concerns charisma. First used by Paul in the New

Testament to mean “spiritual gifts,” German sociologist Max Weber used charisma to refer to:

...a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a “leader.” (Scheper 2005)

Sharf notes the centrality of charismatic authorities (1995, 442), and Astely suggests the importance of personal attraction to a charismatic leader in Japanese NRMs (2006, 91). Charismatic leaders infuse Japanese NRMs with creativity and vitality (Astley 2006, 91), but can also result in an institutional volatility that has spawned the large number of schismatic groups and sub-sects of twentieth-century Japanese NRMs (Sharf 1995, 444). These five themes summarize the types of characteristics that Japanese NRMs are observed to share.

In accordance with theoretical models put forward by Shimazono, Hardacre, and others, Shinnyo-en’s innovations are consistent with those of other contemporary Japanese religious movements. It has charismatic leadership, a populist and egalitarian vision, and a concern with this-worldly salvation and flourishing. Shinnyo-en members focus on creating a Pure Land here in this world, and work to polish, improve, and “elevate” themselves through the idiosyncratic practices of *sesshin* 接心 and *eza* 絵座 training, which involve “spiritual guides” (*reinōsha* 靈能者).<sup>9</sup> Members also pursue upward spiritual mobility within Shinnyo-en’s several organizational hierarchies.

Nevertheless, the case has been made that while these trends may describe aspects of Shinnyo-en and other religious movements, they also could be applied to established traditions either now or in their infancy (Winfield 2014, 179). The social status or acceptance of a religious tradition by the mainstream changes and evolves over time. What may have been called a heresy four centuries ago might now be

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<sup>9</sup> This idiosyncratic mediumistic practice and the spiritual guides involved in its performance are discussed below.

called superstitious, backwards, or bizarre. Or, perhaps what was once called heresy is today a mainstream, established Buddhist school. Trends that are ubiquitous have little analytical sharpness; as common denominators, they be removed at a certain point from the equation, leaving the work of analysis still undone.

Of course, definitions that view NRMs as pathological, too, blunt this category's analytical edge. Catherine Wessinger points out that NRMs were very recently referred to as "cults" and "sects," although these appellations have largely fallen out of academic use following popular anxieties about cults and "brainwashing" in the 1970s (2005, 6513). These concerns have particularly diverted analysis of NRMs because of the patterns and features they are said to hold in common, but if NRMs are to be defined as nefarious "cults" that practice "brainwashing," the category will tell scholars little about a tradition and its members. Alternatively, Smith considers it the responsibility of religious studies to make religious behavior more understandable and intelligible, even if that behavior cannot be advocated (1982, 104).

### **1.3.3 Rethinking the Category**

J. Gordon Melton has written on the failure to understand NRMs solely based on shared characteristics (2004) and asserts that we must rethink the entire concept itself (2007). He argues that NRMs "share a common deficiency that pushes them into contested space at the fringes of society," most likely due to activities considered unacceptable to mainstream religious and secular authorities (Melton 2007, 73). Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic belief in the sacrality of its charismatic founding family, their preeminent soteriological significance for their followers, and the practices they innovated comprise the "deficiency" of Shinnyo-en that marginalizes the group and distinguishes it from mainstream religious traditions. Following Melton's arguments, I propose a new model for understanding NRMs (especially Shinnyo-en and other Buddhist-derived movements) in terms of the modalities that exist within their religious space, which generate the perception of a deficiency that is held in common with other Japanese NRMs.

Although parts of the Japanese NRM historical periodization and pattern

models *do* map onto Shinnyo-en, these models continue to fuel analytically weak scholarship that *evaluates* rather than *explains* Shinnyo-en (e.g. Pinto 2011 and Sakashita 1998). Tori Pinto's thesis is an extended argument in praise of Shinnyo-en's flexibility, which she evaluates favorably drawing on Rodney Stark's ideas of a competitive spiritual marketplace. Jay Sakashita's dissertation, on the other hand, is a protracted account of his own frustrations with Shinnyo-en, and his recommendations for how it might make itself more attractive to non-Japanese people who may not be comfortable with the idea "that a particular Japanese man and his family are the group's central figures of worship" (1998, 246).

The best scholarship on Shinnyo-en to date remains that of Jamie Hubbard (1998), who recognized and avoided in his study many of the problems associated with the study of NRMs. Hubbard argues that purely reductive accounts of religion might provide insight into the formation, historical context, and social functions of NRMs, but fail to explain their sustained vitality. Hubbard prefers accounts that acknowledge followers' belief in doctrine and the conscious individual and organizational agency involved in propagation (1998, 82–83). A major obstacle to the study of Buddhist-derived NRMs in Japan is the false perception of these groups as *sui generis* responses to historical events—usually crises—in contrast to established Buddhist traditions that are somehow treated as timeless. Hubbard argues that while crisis certainly factors into the formation of NRMs and motivates individual participation, it does not explain "either the continued vitality of the movement or the continued participation of the individual, phenomena that ... would be much easier to explain if we took account of the doctrines concerning those individual and social crises..." (1998, 83). Hubbard's research is sensitive to Shinnyo-en's inherited practices and values, acknowledges Shinnyo-en's contiguity with Buddhism, and perceives the connections between Buddhist and folk practices and the idiosyncratic elements of Shinnyo-en. Hubbard allows Shinnyo-en to speak for itself as much as possible and he provides historical context where it is helpful. He also addresses outdated information or misinterpretations in older studies.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Shiramizu (1979)

#### 1.4 Shinnyo-en's Two Modalities

Throughout its existence, the religious space of Shinnyo-en has combined two modalities: one that is articulated as a modern, lay-oriented esoteric Buddhist tradition, and one that is articulated in terms of the charismatic founding family.<sup>11</sup> Negative public image, local censure, and the specter of government suppression prompts Shinnyo-en to deny its idiosyncrasy or conceal it within the language of Buddhist apologetics. This same pressure has resulted in Shinnyo-en's history of caution, tacit unease with public scrutiny, and the insistence that Shinnyo-en is a modern form of esoteric Buddhism and not a "newly-arisen religion" (*shinkō shūkyō* 新興宗教). Experiencing the two modalities within the Garden of Truth is a matter of devotion to the charismatic founding family who are at the core of Shinnyo-en and occupy the center in both modalities. This devotional element characterizes Shinnyo-en's religious space, and devotional sacrifices of time, effort, and resources structure one's movement through that space towards its soteriological center. The Buddhist modality places the founders in the role of a typical Buddhist master, or guru, and it includes the formalities of Shingon-style religious ceremonies, presented as such in Shinnyo-en media (print and video). The idiosyncratic modality situates the founders as eternal spiritual beings who extend salvation through Shinnyo-en space and out into the world, and includes innovated meditative practices and extensive oral traditions and transmissions. The link between these modalities is the charismatic founding family itself, which is located at the center of Shinnyo-en and surrounded by several institutional hierarchies through which a member is encouraged to advance.

The Garden of Truth is also shaped by Japanese social structures and values, such as "gratitude," "acting for the sake of others," and other modern Japanese

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<sup>11</sup> I have chosen to use "modalities" throughout this thesis in order to highlight a particular relationship between two overlapping, polysemous experiences of Shinnyo-en: the Buddhist and the idiosyncratic. It does not make sense to describe these two as hybridized (although Shinnyo-en hybridizes practices and beliefs from various inherited traditions), or as grafted onto something else. The two modalities are simultaneously available to members, and can be fore- or backgrounded in media and ceremony depending on setting, audience, or the intended affect.

Buddhist affects. Several core values of Buddhist modernism are also expressed in Shinnyo-en, such as laicization, urbanization, standardization, simplification, and to an extent rationalization (McMahan 2008). Shinnyo-en thus offers its adherents the opportunity to participate in, and feel nostalgia for, values that are perceived as moral and “traditional,” with the understanding that modern sensitivities structure the tradition. These include an exoticized, colorful, other-worldly Buddhism, highly gendered social roles, bureaucratic procedure, and the aforementioned emotions and affects.

Shinnyo-en is a conglomeration of various spiritual traditions that the Itōs found important, meaningful, or useful. Shinnyo-en’s constitutive elements are not novel or unusual within the scope of Japanese spirituality. The combination of those elements, however, and certain procedures and structures adopted for their modern actualization, are indeed novel. Innovation, for Shinnyo-en and perhaps for other Buddhist-derived NRMs, consists of combinations that work with the lifestyles of the group’s typical adherents. In Shinnyo-en, innovation is visible in the conscious pursuit of skillfulness in communicating specific affects associated with the charismatic founding family, which itself is believed to be the quintessence of Buddhism. I refer to Shinnyo-en’s innovations and hybridizations as its “idiosyncrasies”: the distinctive and peculiar beliefs and practices that belong to Shinnyo-en alone. The charismatic founders compounded elements of Shingon Buddhism with folk traditions and Shugendō, creating hybrids of hybrids that evolved into Shinnyo-en’s idiosyncratic modality—a Buddhist-derived religion that members experience as transformative, valorizes mainstream Japanese cultural practices, but which can seem unpalatable, strange, or even nefarious to outsiders.

Shinnyo-en’s concern with protecting certain information, treating certain ideas as esoteric, sacred, or unspeakable, is evidence of the organization’s awareness of the difference of perceived worth that exists between its two modalities; esoteric Buddhism is palatable, but idiosyncrasy is unseemly. The simultaneity of these two modalities has been navigated primarily through a type of vagueness that is possible in Shingon Buddhism. The sacred biography of the charismatic founding family also allows members to engage with the Itōs in stages

of devotion that progress toward an understanding of the Itōs as the most sacred core of Shinnyo-en and as role models to be emulated. The Itōs are polysemic, having the capacity to operate in different modalities and hold disparate meanings simultaneously. Shinjō can at once be a father, a friend, a Buddhist master, an engineer, an artist, and the Buddha himself. So while one's Shingon master may be seen as an embodiment of ultimate reality, his function as a referent to that reality is somewhat different from the culture of devotion to the Itōs who are said to occupy a similar role, but are in fact presented as being much more.

### **1.5 Sources and Methodology**

In this thesis I attempt to clarify information that can be found in other academic works that address Shinnyo-en. Because Shinnyo-en regards itself as esoteric, conceals some of its beliefs and practices from public view, resists or is at least uncomfortable with academic scrutiny, and because it communicates a great deal of information through oral transmission, it has been difficult for scholars to provide accurate and nuanced information about Shinnyo-en. Most of the information I provide here comes from personal experience with Shinnyo-en. I draw on primary and secondary published materials, unpublished internal documents, my notes and memories, and the knowledge gleaned from seven years of lectures, sermons, meetings, and training activities, which make up part of Shinnyo-en's oral tradition. During that period I was an adherent, not a participant-observer or researcher. Looking back on that period, I have pursued this present analysis as an exercise in critical self-reflection and descriptive religious studies. My aim is to avoid both polemic and apology, to explain rather than evaluate, and to offer a better way for scholars to understand this Buddhist-derived NRM as a comprehensible form of contemporary religiosity.

### **1.6 A Brief History of Shinnyo-en**

Before analyzing its two modalities—Buddhist and idiosyncratic—it is necessary to situate Shinnyo-en in its historical context and touch on some of the key moments in

the charismatic founding family's sacred biography. Shinnyo-en is a Buddhist-derived NRM that began in 1930s Japan with ties to the Shingon school of Buddhism. Shinnyo-en is today one of Japan's largest new religions with temples and members around the globe.<sup>12</sup> It has passed through several developmental phases including periods of formation, difficulty, and growth.<sup>13</sup> As with other Japanese religious movements that began during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Shinnyo-en's practices and beliefs revolve around a group of founder figures who are its soteriological center of gravity: the Itō family. Shinnyo-en was begun and shaped by Shinjō Itō 真乗伊藤 (1906–1989, né Fumiaki Itō 文明伊藤) and Tomoji Itō 友司伊藤 (1912–1967, née Tomoji Uchida 友司内田), who are referred to as “the Shinnyo Parents” (*sōoya sama* 双親様). Their two sons, Chibun 智文 (1934–1936, posthumously Kyōdōin 教導院) and Yūichi 友一 (1937–1952, posthumously known as Shindōin 真導院), passed away as children and are regarded as beneficent spiritual beings styled after *dōji* 童子, the acolytes of Buddhist deities, and are referred to as “the Two Dōjis” (*ryōdōji sama* 両童子様). Their two youngest daughters, Shinsō 真聰 (1942–, born Masako 真砂子) and Shinrei 真玲 (1943–, born Shizuko 志づ子) are the current leaders of Shinnyo-en, although Shinrei has faded in importance since the late 1990s.<sup>14</sup>

Shinjō and Tomoji married in 1932 while Shinjō was working as an aircraft engineer in western Tokyo. At the end of 1935, Shinjō and Tomoji obtained and enshrined an image of Acala (Fudō Myōō 不動明王), an esoteric Buddhist deity

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<sup>12</sup> In 2012 the Agency for Cultural Affairs (Bunkachō 文化庁) reported 902,254 members (*Shūkyō Nenpō* 宗教年鑑 *Almanac of Religions* 71)

<sup>13</sup> Shinnyo-en divides its own history into seven phases: “founding the Teaching” (1935–44), “forming the Sangha” (1945–54), “expounding the Shinnyo Dharma” (1955–64), “spreading the Teaching” (1965–74), “further expansion” (1975–84), “succession” (1985–94), and “toward the Universal Training Ground” (1995–). These periods were outlined in a Chiryū Gakuin lecture and may have by now been revised to describe trends of the last two decades (note from June 10, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Not all members of the Itō family are felt to be religiously or soteriologically as significant as Shinjō, Tomoji, Chibun, Yūichi, and Shinsō. For example, Eiko 映子 (b. 1933) and Atsuko 孜子 (b. 1940), the Itōs two other daughters left Shinnyo-en and now linger in infamy, remembered only for their perceived betrayals. See Appendix 1.

considered to be the wrathful manifestation of Mahāvairocana.<sup>15</sup> Shinnyo-en considers its beginning to be February 8, 1936, when Shinjō quit his job and decided, with Tomoji’s encouragement, to pursue a life dedicated to religion. Since that time, the religion’s practices, beliefs, and organizational structures have evolved significantly. Nevertheless, the centrality of the Itōs and their children has indeed remained a coherent, unifying source of inspiration and devotion.

Shinnyo-en presents the Shinnyo Parents, the Two Dōjis, and Shinsō, their successor, as manifestations of buddhahood and role models for a member’s practice. Members understand the Itōs as teachers, masters, family members, and “ever-present” buddhas, whom they are to emulate, meditate upon, and pray to for spiritual, emotional, and material support. The idiosyncratic veneration of the founding family, while based in part on the master-disciple relationship of Vajrayāna, is unique to Shinnyo-en and distinguishes it from its Shingon Buddhist roots.<sup>16</sup> The Shingon practitioner seeks oneness with the essence of the dharma body—ineffable, impersonal, and nondual—through teachers, patriarchs, and Buddhist deities. Members of Shinnyo-en seek this oneness through the Itōs, who are believed themselves to be in oneness with and embodiments of *shinnyo* 真如, meaning “thusness” (Skt. *tathatā*) or the basic nature of reality as such. In Shinnyo-en, *shinnyo* is virtually synonymous with the charismatic founding family, while also retaining its original meaning.

Since Shinnyo-en’s humble beginnings as a small Shingon confraternity in the late 1930s, there has been a shift in focus from the esotericism of Shingon, to the universalism of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* in the 1950s, to an ever-increasing focus on the Itōs themselves. Although each of these religious layers remains intact, the charismatic founding family is at the core of the entire holarchy—without the Itōs and the events of their lives, there would be no Shinnyo-en organization or

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<sup>15</sup> Dainichi 大日, the primordial, universal Buddha, as per Shingon Buddhism. Other sects revere different buddhas in his stead or have a different cosmology altogether (e.g. Śākyamuṇi in Theravāda, Amitābha in Pure Land, or Samantabhadra in some Tibetan sects—there is tremendous variety).

<sup>16</sup> To be clear: it is not the veneration of charismatic founders or gurus that is Shinnyo-en’s idiosyncrasy. Rather, it is the particular veneration of the Itōs. If in the future half a dozen very large groups venerate the Itōs, this form of devotion may no longer be perceived as idiosyncratic.

practices. In other words, Shinnyo-en has always been organized to place the Itō family at its center.

The movement as a whole conglomerates a range of beliefs, traditions and influences. All of these elements are made meaningful via connection to events in the Itō family members' lives, up to and including their deaths and afterlives. Shinnyo-en began as the Itōs' personal religious quest to save people, which they expressed in the language of esoteric Buddhism and Shugendō. At that time, Shinnyo-en consisted of religious activities conducted by the Itōs inside their home.<sup>17</sup> At the very beginning, the Itōs were unaffiliated with any denomination or temple. Activities centered on the Itōs' charisma and hereditary spiritual abilities—in particular, Shinjō's divination technique (*kōyōryū byōzeishō* 甲陽流病筮鈔) and Tomoji's spiritual faculty (*reinō* 靈能). Shinjō learned *byōzeishō* from his father Bunjirō 文二郎, who learned it from his father, who learned it from a book written by Tokuhon Nagata 徳本永田. *Byōzeishō* is described as a combination of the “five elements divination” (*go gyō eki* 五行易) and the *Book of Changes* (Chn. *yijing* 易經; Itō 2009, 36). Tomoji's spiritual faculty is said to derive from her grandmother Kin Uchida きん内田 and her aunt Tamae Yui 玉恵油井 (née Tamae Uchida 玉恵内田), who were popular mediums in the Yokohama area (*The Path of Oneness* 2009, 196).

Shinnyo-en beliefs and practices thus include elements from the founders' upbringings, and fragments of different religious traditions that the founders adopted or internalized in early adulthood. Shinjō Itō's father practiced Sōtō Zen Buddhism and divination, his mother was a member of Tenrikyō, and his sister was a Protestant. Tomoji's grandmother was a medium and devotee of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the bodhisattva Kannon, and various Shintō deities. Shinjō studied Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, palmistry, physiognomy, acupuncture, psychic and paranormal phenomena, as well as Shugendō and Shingon Buddhism through Daigoji 醍醐寺 monastery in Kyoto.

The basic format of many Shinnyo-en practices and beliefs have undergone a great deal of change as well, and there is a stark contrast between Shinnyo-en's

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<sup>17</sup> See footnote 6 regarding Shinnyo-en's many name changes and early Buddhist affiliations.

formative years as a Shingon confraternity and its post-war emergence as an independent movement. In 1936 Acala was the main image of Shinnyo-en, and the group's practices were almost indistinguishable from those of Shingon and Shugendō. These practices also included long faith healing sessions, exorcisms, shamanism, fire offerings (*goma* 護摩; Skt. *homa*), waterfall training, and one instance of fire walking. Shinjō meditated with candles on his arms to pray for sick or endangered followers, practiced *terō* 手蠟 (filling the cupped hands with oil and then holding a burning wick), sleep deprivation, severe fasting, and ablutions with ice water during winter that caused his skin to crack and bleed. These and other practices (in some of which Tomoji also partook) were characterized by elements of spontaneity, austerity, and magic, which marked the formative years of Shinnyo-en.

Since the late 1950s, the Shinnyo-en community has venerated the reclining Śākyamuṇi (sculpted by Shinjō in 1957) as its principle image, and the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* as its primary scripture from the Buddhist canon. While Shinnyo-en practice might have been characterized by elements of the unpredictable, the magical, and the shamanic in its early years, the movement gradually came to nominally deemphasize magical healing and harsh asceticism. This was accomplished by the Itōs in their role as living buddhas, as they carefully standardized belief and practice among their followers. For example, meditative sessions that were spontaneous and even dangerous took hours in the early 1940s, but lasted only a few relatively quiet minutes by the late 1950s.

In addition to the diverse religious influences as mentioned above, these changes in the character of the religion as a whole, too, are tied to events in the Itōs' lives. Moreover, the soteriological significance of the family itself continues to evolve; the Itōs have transformed from gifted priests and teachers to living buddhas, to "ever-present" and omniscient spiritual beings. This process began in 1939 when the Itōs' eldest son Chibun passed away. Almost instantly he came to be thought of as a divinity worshipped by some of the Itōs more enthusiastic followers. Stories that focus on this time period explain that the Itōs and their followers ascribed religious meaning to Chibun's death: he passed away in order to lift their material

and spiritual burdens, and to help them internalize his parents' teachings.<sup>19</sup> His passing also coincided with Shinjō's ordination at Daigoji, giving rise to rumors that Chibun passed away in order to prevent his father's death and to open a path for his parents' training. An improvement in Tomoji's spiritual abilities, which had hitherto been crude, time consuming, and somewhat dangerous, were also attributed to Chibun's self-sacrifice and posthumous activity.<sup>20</sup> One hundred days after Chibun's death, Tomoji had a vision of Chibun climbing into the crater of a volcano and pulling members' ancestors to safety. Chibun's death thus becomes the biographic cause of miraculous healings, ritual innovation and the salvation of members and their ancestors.

When Yūichi, the Itōs' second son, passed away in 1952, Shinnyo-en was just moving out of a period of near extinction following Shinjō's conviction and imprisonment for allegedly beating one of his disciples. This event is referred to as the Dharma Crisis (*hōnan* 法難). Shinjō was declared guilty and given a suspended prison sentence. Shinnyo-en (called Makoto Kyōdan 真教団 at the time) was required to restructure, rename, and revise the contents of its teachings. The entire process took several years, during which Yūichi passed away. Like Chibun, Yūichi's death was interpreted as purposeful, supporting his parents as they created the Shinnyo-en teachings. He is said to have joined his brother in the spiritual world to shoulder the burdens of Shinnyo-en members, and further refine the abilities of Shinnyo-en mediums.

After the Dharma Crisis of the early 1950s, Shinnyo-en continued to grow, evolve, and adapt. After sculpting the Reclining Buddha and refocusing his teachings on the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, Shinjō began to build new, larger temples, and established branches in Tokyo and in western Japan. There were several aesthetic and

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<sup>19</sup> Shinnyo-en calls this activity *bakku-daiju* 拔苦代受, and it is likened to a bodhisattva's willingness and ability to shoulder the sufferings of other beings. It is believed that before Chibun passed away, followers of the Itōs only sought material benefits, but after his death people began listening to and practicing the altruistic contents of Shinjō's sermons.

<sup>20</sup> *Sesshin* training in those days could last for hours and exhausted Tomoji. Sometimes she would become ill because of negative spirits associated with the trainee. It was also not uncommon for followers to become affected by strange symptoms such as being unable to open their eyes or their hands sticking together. At such times, Shinjō would perform a Shugendō exorcism rite and the person would return to normal.

environmental innovations introduced at this time. Shinjō eschewed priestly robes for formal Western attire and let his hair grow back. A multi-story “*sesshin* training hall” was built to accompany the small wooden temple—Shinchōji 真澄寺—that had served the group for nearly two decades. Inspired by the 1954 Olympics in Tokyo, he incorporated television, film, lighting effects, and recordings into ceremonies. He and his wife continued to adapt and refine *sesshin* training, ceremonies, and the temple environment to suit the needs of their modern lay followers.

In 1967, the Shinnyo Parents visited Europe on a mission of goodwill and interfaith exchange. Shortly after their return to Japan, Tomoji passed away at the age of 55. She too is believed to posthumously exist within what had by then become a distinct spiritual space called the “Shinnyo spiritual realm” (*shinnyo reikai* 真如靈界), a kind of Pure Land or mandala first “opened” by Chibun and successively enhanced and expanded by other family members. Shinjō taught his followers that, in death, Tomoji activated the power of “embrace” (*shōju* 摂受; Skt. *parigraha*), by which Shinnyo-en came to be a universally inclusive religion, able to embrace all peoples, cultures, and religious traditions. He compared Shinnyo-en to the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* itself, which is likened to a vast ocean fed by the rivers of the whole world. Many members see Tomoji’s death as an almost voluntary act of self-sacrifice that has allowed non-Japanese members (and their non-Buddhist ancestors) to join, practice, and find spiritual fulfillment through Shinnyo-en. Tomoji’s death thus becomes the biographic cause of Shinnyo-en’s expansion, missions, and internationalization.

Until his death in 1989, Shinjō continued to build temples, teach, and perform ceremonies. His passing has also been linked to specific ontological and doctrinal shifts in Shinnyo-en. Upon his death, Shinjō is believed to have reunited with the source of the universe,<sup>21</sup> from whence he extends the power of “universal salvation (*saisho* 濟摂). The special language used to describe Shinjō’s death and his existence at the source of the universe emphasizes his primacy within the Itō family. His power of universal salvation also seems to be even more active and expansive than

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<sup>21</sup> This might be a veiled reference to Mahāvairocana.

Tomoji's power of embracement. One of his four daughters, Shinsō, became his successor,<sup>22</sup> and has since innovated and expanded Shinnyo-en further, opening many new temples and conducting public ceremonies around the world. She has gradually introduced and propagated the idea that her parents and elder brothers are modern-day buddhas.

The Shinnyo Parents and the Two Dōjis are described as the foundation of Shinnyo-en in more than one way, expanding the Itōs' role to mean many things that are represented both physically and metaphorically. In terms of physical representations, for example, the passing of each of member of the founding family is understood to coincide with, or result in, a significant building project. Soon after Chibun died, Shinchōji temple was built. After Yūichi died, the Sesshin Training Hall was built. After Tomoji died, the Genesis Temple was completed. The building of the Yuon Sanctuary, and later the Ogen and Yūshin Centers, is regarded as the realization of the Shinnyo Parents' dreams for a "universal training ground" (*sōgō dōjō* 総合道場). In 2001 Shinsō dedicated the "Shinnyo Stupa," where the relics of the charismatic founding family are entombed. This stupa is located at Oyasono 親苑 (lit. "parent garden"), a name that could also refer to the head temple as the garden of the Itōs—their borderless religious space. The Itōs selected the site for their temple in 1939 through Shinjō and Tomoji's hereditary spiritual abilities and with the help of a Shingon priest. Through visions and divination, they decided on a forested area close to a Shintō shrine and a small stream. This "sacred site" (*seichi* 聖地) of Shinnyo-en came to be known as Oyasono, and is the group's head temple complex to this day, which members regard as the "home of their souls."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Shinsō and Shinrei were named successors in 1979, completed their Shingon-style priestly training in 1982, and assumed their leadership roles after their father's death in 1989.

<sup>23</sup> There are in fact several temples and shrines located at Oyasono. Two Acala statues (the original figure enshrined by the Itōs, and a larger figure later sculpted by Shinjō) are enshrined in Tōkeizan Shinchōji 燈檠山真澄寺. Temple I enshrines the Eternally Abiding Śākyamuṇi Tathagata (a reclining figure that portrays Śākyamuṇi giving his final teachings), also sculpted by Shinjō. Temple II is dedicated to Eleven-Faced Avalokiteśvara and the Four Heavenly Kings. Also within the precincts are shrines to the protective divinities of Shinnyo-en (Bezaiten 弁才天, Seiryū 清流, and Kasanori 笠法), a statue of bodhisattva Jizō 地藏, an Acala made of whetstone, and the Shinnyo Stupa. Across the street from Oyasono is Etōin 慧燈院, which contains the official residence of Shinsō, and several highly restricted offices and religious facilities.

The chapters that follow focus on how a person is led to encounter, become devoted to, and experience the innermost core of Shinnyo-en, which is the charismatic founding family. By arriving at that core, the individual follower hopes to cultivate the same altruistic sentiments and spiritual determination as the founding family and thereafter share the Shinnyo-en teachings out of a sense of gratitude for having encountered them oneself. Nevertheless, members are never able to fully emulate the founders, who are uniquely positioned as saviors upon whom a member must always rely. Weber's definition of charisma, quoted above, obtains here in that the Itōs are believed to be endowed with exceptional qualities that are not accessible to ordinary people, at least not fully. Following in the Itōs' footsteps, experiencing their emotions, replicating their activities in one's own life, and humbly repaying their kindness through one's practice are the highest goals of a Shinnyo-en member.

### 1.7 Practices

Shinnyo-en, like its parent tradition of Shingon Buddhism, is esoteric. Because Shinnyo-en conceals the details of everything beyond its most basic or superficial characteristics, no scholarly work has presented a complete picture of its interior structure, beliefs, and practices. Most practices are restricted to members, and many of these are not available unless one has been practicing for one or more years. Although researchers and observers have experienced “annual training” (*kanshūgyō* 寒修行, translated as “winter training” until 2014), monthly ceremonies, and *sesshin* training, they often obtain only a limited level of instruction in the meaning or intention of these activities. Members too are not instructed in the significance of even basic practices until they have enrolled in Chiryū Gakuin 智流学院, a course of doctrinal instruction that takes several years to complete and culminates in lay ordination (*tokudo jukai* 得度受戒)—and have undergone several initiations (*denjū* 伝授) into esoteric practices.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> These include the preliminaries of Shingon ritual, merit transfer rites, and permission to chant various liturgical verses, *mantra*, *dhāraṇī*, and *sūtra*.

There are many practices that have not yet appeared in scholarly descriptions of Shinnyo-en. For example, the Shinnyo-en Youth Association holds an annual training to commemorate the Itōs' waterfall training. After their first son passed away, Shinjō and Tomoji would often visit a waterfall on Mt. Takao called Jataki 蛇滝, taking the last train from Tachikawa to Takao and returning on the first train the next morning. Although youth group members are not permitted to enter the waterfall (it is considered sufficient that the Itōs engaged in this practice), a small group of representative participants visits the waterfall each year, following the same schedule as the Itōs. Participants visiting the waterfall and members at temples around the world offer 108 prostrations to 36 divinities. Participants will occasionally take part in “challenge *sesshin*,” in which spiritual guides are attracted to those who have the deepest meditation first.

Many Shinnyo-en members participate in “early-morning service” (*sōchō hōshi* 早朝奉仕) at least once a month. “Service” (*gohōshi* ご奉仕) is normally conducted in a temple where members help prepare for monthly ceremonies together with other members of their lineage. Early-morning service, however, is performed in a public place at five or six in the morning. Members will quietly gather to pick up trash in a park or train station for thirty minutes to an hour. The objective is to see everyday public spaces as religious spaces—this practice (like many others) extends the space of Shinnyo-en outward, mapping it onto streets, parks, and train stations, which members clean as an act of devotion to the potential buddha that exists in every person.

As a lay member progresses in Shinnyo-en's hierarchies (three examples of these hierarchies are explored in chapter four), he is encouraged to attend an increasing number of meetings. After joining, he is first invited to attend “home meetings” (*kateishūkai* 家庭集会), approximately once a month. Later, after a member has guiding children of her own, she is encouraged to attend monthly administrative meetings at the temple. Some lineage parents also hold home meetings for their lineage members. These meetings can cater to particular subgroups: beginners, speakers of a particular language, those who are attempting

to reach a particular spiritual level, and so on. The youth group holds its own monthly meetings (*seinenkai* 青年会) and has its own leadership structure and activities, including “Jataki training” (*jataki kenshū* 蛇滝研修, mentioned above) and “summer training” (*kaki rensai* 夏錬成), which focus on the sacred biography of the charismatic founding family. A larger general meeting (*sōbukai* 総部会) is held for all guiding parents, especially those who have attained a spiritual level or volunteer in a special capacity. Lineage parents and spiritual guides additionally attend restricted meetings called *kyōenkai* 教苑会 (“teaching garden meetings,” which focus on administrative information and Shinsō’s teachings) and *ennai sesshin* 苑内接心 (“inner garden *sesshin*” is training for spiritual guides, who give each other *sesshin* at this meeting). The current state of affairs requires that as a member progresses through Shinnyo-en’s institutional hierarchies, it is incumbent upon her to attend an increasing number of meetings and activities, which are positioned as forms of altruistic practice.

Most important for a member, however, are the “three practices” (*mittsu no ayumi* 三つの歩み; lit. the “three steps”), which are modeled on the six practices of a bodhisattva<sup>25</sup> and determine one’s ability to advance in Shinnyo-en’s hierarchies. These three practices are explained as simplifications or condensations of the six perfections, which Shinjō considered too daunting or abstract for modern laypeople (*The Path of Oneness* 2009, 349). These three main practices include: *kangi* 歡喜 (lit. “joy”), *gohōshi* ご奉仕 (lit. “service”), and *otasuke* お助け (lit. “help”). In the narrowest sense these respectively refer to donating money to Shinnyo-en, volunteering one’s time at Shinnyo-en temples, and convincing people to join Shinnyo-en. Members are taught that these three activities will purify their body, speech, and mind, and help them accumulate positive karma that will improve their lives. Each practice is given a Buddhist context: laypeople have always donated money or resources to support the Buddhist community; the monk Cūḍapānṭhaka, unable to remember the Buddha’s teachings, attained enlightenment by sweeping

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<sup>25</sup> The six “perfections” (*haramitsu* 波羅蜜; Skt. *pāramitā*), namely: generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom (*What Is Shinnyo-En?* 2003, 11–12).

the monastery instead; and Buddhism has always been a missionary religion. Shinjō contextualized these practices as a return to the true spirit of Buddhism, which he felt had been lost in Japan’s culture of “funeral Buddhism.”<sup>26</sup> Other common practices include: making requests for fire offerings (*goma*; primarily for spiritual purification or to ask for material blessings) and *segaki* 施餓鬼 rites (to transfer merit to spirits and ancestors), *sesshin* training (covered in chapter three), training to become a spiritual guide (*reinōsha* 靈能者; covered in chapter three), attending ceremonies, conducting religious meetings in one’s home, reading Shinnyo-en publications, and daily chanting.

### 1.8 Beliefs

Shinnyo-en shares beliefs common to nearly all Mahāyāna Buddhist schools, but claims that these beliefs are made fully understandable, accessible, and efficacious by the charismatic founding family. These Mahāyāna beliefs are articulated in Shinnyo-en with reference to the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, the esoteric dharma stream of the Shingon school (through Shinjō’s training at Daigoji), and the “spiritual faculty” (*reinō* 靈能)—the uniquely effective spiritual powers unlocked and radiated by the charismatic founding family.

Shinnyo-en members believe that making the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* Shinnyo-en’s primary scriptural basis, rather than the two central scriptures of Shingon,<sup>27</sup> allowed the Itōs to guide laypeople more effectively and enables miraculous powers (e.g. the spiritual faculty) and phenomena (e.g. good weather or rainbows after ceremonies).<sup>28</sup> Shinjo often presented the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, which he directly equated with Shinnyo-en, in words such as these:

The Shinnyo Teachings *are* the final teachings. They always have been. The Great Nirvana Sutra will first stabilize any wavering or unresolved states of

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<sup>26</sup> The most common interaction a Japanese person might have with Buddhism is through tourism or funeral services. It is often observed that people get married at a Shintō shrine (and/or a Christian church), and are buried by a Buddhist priest. This contributes to a perception of Shintō as a religion of life, and Buddhism as a religion of death in Japan. See Rowe (2011) and Kisala (2006, 9).

<sup>27</sup> The *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (*Dainichi-kyō* 大日經) and *Vajraśekhara Sūtra* (*Kongōchō-kyō* 金剛頂經)

<sup>28</sup> *A Walk Through the Garden: Foundations of Shinnyo-En* 1999, 2:41

mind we experience. They will make us become focused. The Last Teachings seem to satisfy even those who like to try one faith after another.

All rivers flow into the ocean. Likewise, all religious traditions also flow into one big sea. There are many different rivers, such as rivers of the Lotus Sutra teachings, the Shingon rivers, the Tendai rivers, the Pure Land rivers, the River of Christian teachings, the Tenrikyo River. There are so many rivers in the world, but they will all eventually flow into one great ocean.

You have come to the Last Teachings, so you don't have to go back upstream, no matter how much you like doing that. You are already settled. So now, strive to purify yourselves, purify your negative karma and change your destiny. The muddy waters of the rivers will flow into the ocean, but the ocean has the capacity to cleanse them with salt. Please understand this principle. So now that you are pursuing the Nirvana Sutra, that is, the Shinnyo Teaching, strive to purify and change your destiny. You will then attain the state of permanence, bliss, self, purity, which is the goal of the Nirvana Sutra. (Itō, March 15, 1965)

Four fundamental ideas from the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* are highlighted as exoteric revelations of esoteric truths, which the Itōs emphasized in their teachings: (1) the buddhas are ever-present (*nyorai jōjū* 如来常住); (2) reality is characterized by permanence, bliss, self, and purity (*jō raku ga jō* 常樂我淨); (3) all sentient beings have buddha nature (*issai shujō shitsu u busshō* 一切衆生悉有仏性); and (4) those “lacking good roots” (Skt. *icchantikas*)<sup>29</sup> can attain buddhahood (*issendai jōbutsu* 一闍提成仏) (Itō 2001, 24). A member comes to understand the core, esoteric meaning of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* through the practices outlined above and those described in chapter three, and by internalizing and replicating the sacred biography of the charismatic founding family. Shinnyo-en practice is believed to generate experiential knowledge of these four points, which are almost always given context through reference to the Itōs. For example, the Itōs are ever-present buddhas, they can and did save the most stubborn and deluded people, and so forth. Therefore, members simultaneously gain experiential knowledge of the Itōs' unique spiritual significance and their role as Shinnyo-en's devotional locus.

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<sup>29</sup> A totally deluded being who has “scorched” their own buddha nature through evil deeds and is unable to attain liberation.

Esoteric beliefs related to Shingon Buddhism are also contextualized through stories about the Itōs or through testimonies that refer to them. The dharma body (*hosshin* 法身; Skt. *dharmakāya*; the ineffable, cosmic body of the Buddha) is simply explained as that which the Itōs attained. Mandalas, ritual implements, mantras, and states of meditative absorption inherited from Shingon are also given simple explanations in terms of the Itōs. The Diamond and Womb Realm mandalas are displayed in Shinnyo-en temples, and members acknowledge the deities that they depict, but the mandalas themselves serve largely as evidence of Shinjō's training at Daigoji, or as representations of a "spiritual realm" (*reikai* 靈界) where the Itōs now exist in oneness with ultimate truth. This mapping of a Shingon cosmological concept onto the idiosyncratic spiritual realm of the Itōs also serves to symbolically equate the charismatic founding family with the numinous universe of the dharma body.

The spiritual faculty (*reinō*) and its related "miraculous" phenomena are rooted in elements of Japanese folk belief, Shugendō, Shintō, and shamanism. Shinnyo-en insists, however, that its spiritual faculty (and the practices that employ its use) is not a form of shamanism or fortune telling. Rather, it is considered to be a combination of hereditary spiritual abilities from the Itōs' ancestors that are utilized in accordance with the Buddhist dharma, specifically the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* (*The Path of Oneness* 2009, 197–204).

### **1.9 Summary**

Shinnyo-en is a Buddhist-derived NRM with two primary modalities. It is a polysemic religious space that offers an experience of Shingon traditions and idiosyncratic practices that give those traditions new meaning based on the lives and teachings of Shinnyo-en's charismatic founding family. The project of understanding this tradition demands that we as observers pay closer attention to the content of Shinnyo-en's belief system, rather than using the reductive approaches of existing scholarship that intend to account for the emergence of all Japanese NRMs regardless of their era of origin or their doctrines and practices,

which continue to draw members year after year. Closer attention reveals Shinnyo-en's polysemy, its contiguity with Shingon Buddhism, and its idiosyncratic practices and devotional culture centered on its charismatic founding family.

In the chapters that follow, we will step into the world of Shinnyo-en and analyze both of its modalities. Chapter two presents Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality as it is reflected in public events and communication strategies. Chapter three turns to Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic modality, which is exemplified by novel rituals and practices. Finally, chapter four provides a glimpse of how these two modalities work together through an analysis of three hierarchies tied to the founding family—the lineage system, spiritual elevation, and priestly rank. In each chapter, we will find the charismatic founding family playing a slightly different role, but always at the soteriological center of the Garden of Truth.

## 2 SHINNYO-EN'S BUDDHIST MODALITY

### 2.1 The Three Jewels in Shinnyo-en

When I first began to attend ceremonies at Shinnyo-en's USA head temple, then located in Burlingame, California, I was exposed to Shinjō Itō's teachings in the form of recorded sermons. In many of these sermons, some of which were recorded in the 1950s and 1960s, one can hear a very animated Shinjō vehemently insisting that "the Shinnyo teaching is not a newly-arisen religion" (*shinnyo no oshie wa shinkō shūkyō dewa nai* 真如の教えは新興宗教ではない).<sup>30</sup> Over and over Shinjō reiterated this to his followers, sometimes pounding on his pulpit, visibly and audibly displaying his conviction that Shinnyo-en is not a new religion, but is connected through him to the traditional Buddhist dharma stream (*dentō hōryū* 伝統法流). Not understanding Shinjō's reference to "new religions" at the time, and thinking that I was in a type of Shingon temple judging by the altar, the repetition of this comment was confusing to me. As I read and experienced more, I discovered that a great deal of time and energy is spent on underscoring Shinnyo-en's legitimacy as a modern Buddhist order for laypeople.

Shinnyo-en ceremonies, publications, and priestly practices highlight the connection to Buddhism with reference to Shinnyo-en's main image of devotion (*honzon* 本尊; a golden reclining Śākyamuni Buddha sculpted by Shinjō), its Buddhist scriptural basis in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, and its connection to traditional Buddhism through the Shingon lineage, rites, and customs. These three elements are understood to correspond with the Three Jewels of Buddhism—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—and characterize Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality; they are repeatedly presented in ceremonies and publications to establish Shinnyo-en as a Buddhist religion.

In this chapter we will examine these three elements through their manifestation in Shinnyo-en's ceremonies, publications, and priestly practices. Shinjō himself explains Shinnyo-en's relationship to Shingon as follows:

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<sup>30</sup> (Itō 1977a, 2); (Itō 1977b, 2); (Itō 1979, 2)

The esoteric rites of Buddhism have been handed down to Shinnyo-en through proper transmission, with much of the symbolic imagery and meaning of the rites deriving from Shingon Esotericism. Nevertheless, while these teachings are one source and foundation, we are not practitioners of Shingon Buddhism. We practice the teachings of Shinnyo-en.

This is because we practice a tradition that is also permeated by the Nirvana Sutra, a sutra representing both the final teachings of Shakyamuni—his last will and testament—and a form of global Buddhism. How truly wonderful that you have had the opportunity to encounter, and practice, this path! As you practice the teachings of Shinnyo-en and embody them well, all of you can become bodhisattvas. We are practicing the way of the buddhas, and it is important to know that you also have the potential to become a buddha. (Excerpted from a sermon given on April 24, 1968; Itō 2013, 4)

Shinjō is quite clear here in saying that Shinnyo-en is derived, but distinct, from Shingon Buddhism. He highlights that distinction with reference to the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* and to Śākyamuṇi Buddha, which to him characterize Shinnyo-en as a form of “global Buddhism.” Toward the end of the quote, he also expresses the goal of Shinnyo-en practice in Buddhist terms—“you can become bodhisattvas.” Analysis of this Buddhist self-understanding as one of Shinnyo-en’s modalities presents us with a clearer picture of the movement and helps explain its continued vitality.

From the beginning, the Itōs attracted people who sought healing. But as more and more people gathered for healings and solutions to their problems,<sup>31</sup> the Itōs began searching for a Buddhist focal point for their followers. This may have been to protect their group from police scrutiny, or from allegations of heresy that in the 1930s could have led to the Itōs’ imprisonment and the disbanding of their group. Selecting a Buddhist main image (*honzon*) of worship would also establish the first of the Three Jewels—the Buddha—within the religious space that would become Shinnyo-en. After much deliberation over which figure they might enshrine, Shinjō purchased a statue of Acala, the wrathful emanation of Mahāvairocana, the cosmic buddha of Shingon. Over the course of Shinnyo-en’s history, other buddha

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<sup>31</sup> For an earlier generation of new religious movement adherents, Jason Josephson has proposed a lack of access to medicine as a motivating factor for joining: “Many of the vast numbers of people who contracted [cholera] were unable to appeal to either *kanpō* or Western medicine. The increased need for healing rituals [as Japan quickly urbanized and endemics ran rampant and untreated], coupled with the reticence of established sects to provide them, contributed to the boom in new religious movements and charismatic cults that occurred in the early 1880s” (Josephson 2012, 182).

images have become focal points of devotion, including “Eternally Abiding Śākyamuni Tathāgata” (Kuon Shōchū Shakamuni Nyorai 久遠常住釈迦牟尼如来) in 1957, and Eleven-Faced Āvalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (Jūichi-men Kanzeon Bosatsu 十一面觀世音菩薩) in 1979. Together, these three—Acala, Āvalokiteśvara, and Śākyamuni—represent the “three wheel bodies” (*sanrinjin* 三輪身) of buddhahood: the wrathful *vidya-rāja*, the compassionate bodhisattva, and the perfected buddha (*The Path of Oneness* 2009, 511–12). More recently under Shinsō’s leadership, statues of the charismatic founding family have become focal points of devotion, an idiosyncratic trend that is addressed in the next chapter.

Shinjō’s Shingon training legitimized Shinnyo-en’s esoteric Buddhist practices and modality, and its connection to established Buddhism. In February 1936, Shinjō quit his job and began searching for a Buddhist mentor. After Shinjō obtained priestly qualifications, Shinnyo-en was able to safely operate under the legal and doctrinal umbrella of the Daigo school of Shingon Buddhism. Although Shinnyo-en does not publicly present itself as the “Shinnyo Samaya Lineage of the Daigo School of Shingon Buddhism” (Shingon Shū Daigo Ha Shinnyo Sanmaya Ryū 真言宗醍醐派真如三昧耶流), Shinjō’s status as a Shingon master (*ajari* 阿闍梨; Skt. *ācārya*), conferred by Daigoji, is repeatedly offered as proof that Shinnyo-en is not a new religion. Shinjō completed two training paradigms that are offered at Daigoji monastery in Kyoto. The first was the Ein Samaya Lineage (*ein sanmaya ryū* 恵印三昧耶流), which incorporates elements of Shugendō and is passed down through Daigoji’s Sanbōin temple.<sup>32</sup> The second was initiation into the Shingon lineage of the Vajra and Womb Realms (*kontai ryōbu denpō kanjō* 金胎兩部伝法灌頂).<sup>33</sup> In 1997, Daigoji erected a small temple within its precincts dedicated to the Shinnyo Samaya Lineage to acknowledge Shinjō’s establishment of an independent lineage or stream derived from Daigoji’s traditions. Thus, Shinnyo-en’s continuing relationship with its “parent tradition” serves to legitimize its Buddhist modality. Daigoji and Shingon

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<sup>32</sup> Shinjō received the Ein *kanjō* 灌頂 (Skt. *abhiśeka*, “consecration”) on October 27, 1939, from the 96<sup>th</sup> Chief Abbot of Daigoji, Egen Saeki 恵眼佐伯.

<sup>33</sup> Shinjō received *denpō kanjō* on March 3, 1941 (Shinnyo-en officially records this as taking place in 1943 for technical reasons), also from Egen Saeki.

Buddhism are presented in ceremonies and publications alongside references to Shinnyo-en's enshrined buddha images and Buddhist scriptures to combat any association with the NRM category, which is felt to be highly pejorative and marginalizing in Japan.

Shinjō's own religious qualifications are also put forward as proof of Shinnyo-en's legitimacy as a modern Buddhist community. Oral tradition tells of how very few members knew of Shinjō's "official" religious qualifications in the 1940s. Shinjō's succession documents were discovered in a temple safe in the early 1950s following Shinjō's arrest and imprisonment for allegedly beating a disciple. Such stories imply that Shinjō concealed his status as an ordained Shingon priest because he wanted his teachings and conduct to speak for themselves. In later decades, however, Shinjō frequently retells the story of his training and succession, and even puts forth that he split from Daigoji so that he could openly teach the esoteric content of his training through the idiom of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* (*The Path of Oneness* 2009, 317).

Toward the end of the 1940s and during the 1950s, Shinjō began citing the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* as Shinnyo-en's scriptural foundation. Shinjō invokes the supremacy of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* to establish Shinnyo-en's legitimacy and special potency among the forms of Buddhism practiced today.<sup>35</sup> As Śākyamuni's "last will and testament," Shinjō taught that it enabled special meritorious powers to flow through Shinnyo-en, including the shouldering and lifting away of negative karma (*bakku-daijū*), embracement (*shōju*), and the spiritual faculty (*reinō*) that radiate from his sons and his wife.

Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality—characterized by the Three Jewels and anchored to the charismatic founding family—provided legitimacy and legal protection during an era of strong governmental regulation of religious activities. Shinjō's decision to part ways with Daigoji was not an easy one to make, and he was aware of the criticism he would invite upon himself and his community by becoming

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<sup>35</sup> Shinjō follows the 6<sup>th</sup> century Chinese monk Zhiyi 智顛 in classifying Buddhist teachings into five periods, placing the *Lotus* and *Nirvāṇa* sutras at the pinnacle of Buddhist wisdom (*The Path of Oneness* 2009, 102–3).

an independent movement after the end of World War II.<sup>36</sup> Under the Shōwa military government, affiliation with Daigoji helped protect Shinnyo-en from the scrutiny of the Special Police. The Public Order and Police Law of 1900 (Chian Keisatsu Hō 治安警察法) and Public Security Preservation Law of 1925 (Chian Iji Hō 治安維持法) gave the government tight control over religious activities (Astley 2006, 100–1). As the Japanese constitution of 1947 contained guarantees of religious freedom,<sup>37</sup> it was no longer necessary for Shinnyo-en to remain beholden to what Shinjō then felt to be doctrinal and institutional restrictions. From that point on, Shinjō and Tomoji continued to articulate their teachings in the idiom of Mahāyāna Buddhism, but were free to experiment with and innovate new methods for teaching their disciples. Some of the idiosyncratic methods they developed are discussed in the next chapter.

To nonmembers and beginners, Shinnyo-en emphasizes its authenticity as a form of Buddhism *vis-à-vis* an evolutionary narrative that places Shinnyo-en at the pinnacle of Buddhist tradition.<sup>38</sup> The communication strategies that Shinnyo-en employs are teleological and purposeful, expressed in the language of Mahāyāna altruism and Vajrayāna esotericism. Shinnyo-en positions itself through stories, teachings, and ceremonies that are polysemous; they are simultaneously Buddhist and idiosyncratically centered on the charismatic founding family, accomplishing a variety of goals for the organization and for the individual member. For members, an emotionally moving lantern floating ceremony held in Honolulu underscores Shinnyo-en's universality, while also displaying a rational, accessible form of modern esoteric Buddhism to nonmembers and beginners. The following is an analysis of key elements of Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality; how and where Shinnyo-en is presented as a modern Buddhist tradition. Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic modality is often articulated in Buddhist terms, so it helpful to first gain an

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<sup>36</sup> These sentiments are recorded in Shinjōs diaries. Although the contents are mostly unpublished, selections from them have made their way into Shinnyo-en's oral tradition.

<sup>37</sup> Articles 20 and 89; Astley 2006, 101

<sup>38</sup> Evolutionary narratives of this kind are common to most modern Japanese sects, and can also be found in the writings of many premodern and medieval founders and reformers, such as Kūkai, Saichō, Shinran, Dōgen, and Nichiren.

understanding of how Shinnyo-en is contiguous with Buddhism through its events, publications, and priestly practices.

## 2.2 Public Events

Public events large and small provide Shinnyo-en with public exposure, and Shinnyo-en invariably presents itself as Buddhist on such occasions. Perhaps because of its esoteric Shingon beginnings, large-scale public events of the sort that characterize Shinnyo-en under its current leader Shinsō (who attained this position in 1989; see *The Naigai Jihō* 内外時報 1991) are a relatively new development in the movement's history. Since the late 1990s, public events featuring Shinsō offer Shinnyo-en's charitable activities, esoteric ritual, and the founding family itself for public consumption.

This shift seems to be one product of Shinsō's consolidation of power and authority that took place during the 1990s. After Shinjō's death, two of his daughters, Shinsō and Shinrei, were placed in charge of the Shinnyo-en community and inherited their parents' dharma lineage and responsibilities. According to Shinjō's will (the *Teiki* 定記), Shinsō was to be the "front" (*omote* 表) while Shinrei the "back" (*ura* 裏) of a dual leadership structure. Nevertheless, Shinsō emerged as the unquestioned leader of Shinnyo-en in the mid-nineties, after some initial years of "confusion" over each daughter's role. By the turn of the century, the Shinnyo-en organization and community had become stable enough for Shinsō to begin making considerable innovations. Shinrei was stripped of her religious responsibilities, gradually removed from public view, and placed in charge of one of Shinnyo-en's philanthropic organizations. This keeps Shinrei out of Tachikawa for extended periods of time so that Shinsō and those loyal to her in "the Office"<sup>39</sup> are as far as possible not hampered by Shinrei's interference.

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<sup>39</sup>The Office (*jimukyoku* 事務局) is the internal bureaucracy of Shinnyo-en. Office staff members fulfill a variety of religious and administrative functions, ranging from preparing offerings and performing Shingon-style esoteric rites, to editing, accounting, and public relations. The Office is an extension of the Itōs, who originally carried out all of these duties. The Office tightly regulates all aspects of Shinnyo-en belief and practice, produces Shinnyo-en publications and ceremonies, and supersedes the authority of all three hierarchies mentioned in chapter four.

Shinsō's consolidation of power has been accompanied by visible changes. Shinsō has increasingly brought Shinnyo-en's ceremonies and philanthropic activities into public view, despite the fact that Shinjō stressed the esoteric nature of Shinnyo-en and reiterated that Shinnyo-en is not a charity. As part of a new communication strategy, Shinsō now provides yearly reports of "her sister's efforts" abroad, including photographs of how donations are used to fund philanthropic projects around the globe. This is a practice common to many Buddhist-derived NRMs, including Risshō Kōseikai, Sōka Gakkai, and Reiyūkai. Shinnyo-en's publishing departments (previously overseen by Shinrei) have simultaneously moved away from complex language and philosophy to simplified explanations, stories about the Itōs, and highly emotional testimonials<sup>40</sup> written by members about the approachability and effectiveness of "Shinnyo Buddhism."

Shinsō began holding public ceremonies in the late 1990s, beginning with a very small lantern floating event in Hawai'i, to the concern of some members who see Shinnyo-en as primarily esoteric—something to be shielded from public view—or who are sensitive to public scrutiny and wish to avoid the perception of Shinnyo-en as a NRM. The lantern floating eventually grew to be Shinnyo-en's largest annual event, a publically televised occasion now attended by thousands of members and nonmembers on Memorial Day at Honolulu's Ala Moana Beach Park. It is broadcast each year to Shinnyo-en temples around the world.<sup>41</sup>

Based on the success and positive reception of the lantern floating ceremony both in Japan and in Hawai'i, Shinnyo-en began to plan other large-scale public events, including some that recur annually. All of these events present Shinnyo-en as Buddhist and Shinsō as a Buddhist master (she is publically referred to as Her Holiness, Master Shinsō, or by her priestly name Kongōhōin Shinsō Daisōjō 金剛寶院真聰大僧正, rather than the more familiar Keishu-sama 継主様 among members). Members are encouraged to focus on these events and make personal efforts, including efforts to proselytize, or "share the Dharma," dedicated to the successful and wondrous accomplishment of the ceremony.

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<sup>40</sup> See Nagai (1995) and Shimazono (1984)

<sup>41</sup> For more on the Hawai'i Lantern Floating, see Pinto (2011).

Shinnyo-en disseminates information about these events internally to assure members of Shinnyo-en's legitimacy and impact as a benevolent Buddhist organization. Usually this display takes the form of a short video that is shown before ceremonies while people are finding their seats. At the Ogen Center in Tachikawa, for example, films like this are shown for about thirty minutes prior to a ceremony. This type of update about Shinnyo-en's activities provides members with a sense of the group's relevance and vitality, as well as proof that the power of Shinnyo-en is manifesting in the world around them, inside and outside of Japan. Although Shinnyo-en did not begin publicizing its philanthropic activities until well after Shinjō's death, these activities are presented as fulfillments of the Itōs' wish for world peace, likened to the bodhisattva vow,<sup>42</sup> and seen as the creation of a this-worldly Pure Land.

The nature of Shinnyo-en's public events is varied and might be divided into four general categories: religious events, civic events, spiritual events, and cultural events. All of these operate within Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality and serve to promote Shinnyo-en's positive image. In each type of event the charismatic founding family and their soteriological significance are presented in Buddhist terms, and Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic beliefs and practices (covered in the next chapter) are deemphasized.

### **2.2.1 Religious Events**

Religious events include a Shinnyo-en ceremony based on Shingon ritual and distinguished by the use of Shingon paraphernalia. Shinnyo-en's religious events (including ceremonies conducted in temples) are based on Shingon liturgical procedures. One example of this type of event is Shinsō's 2008 visit to Linguan Monastery in China. In addition to an exchange of Buddhist statues and other gestures of solidarity among Japanese and Chinese Buddhists, Shinsō conducted a ceremony to enshrine a statue of the Reclining Buddha, sculpted by Shinjō,<sup>43</sup> at the monastery. Another example of a religious ceremony is the "*goma* of universal

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<sup>42</sup> The vow to help all sentient beings achieve liberation.

<sup>43</sup> All Shinnyo-en temples and training centers enshrine replicas of statues or reliefs of the Reclining Buddha sculpted by Shinjō. Some older temples enshrine originals.

salvation” (*saisho goma* 濟撰護摩) that has been performed in Taiwan as a public event. This particular fire ceremony is of Shinsō’s design, based on the Shingon *goma*, and is in fact intended to extend to the world the salvific powers unlocked by the Itōs: *saishō* 濟撰 (“salvation,” associated with Shinjō), *shōju* 撰受 (“embrace,” associated with Tomoji), and *bakku-daiju* 拔苦代受 (“shouldering and lifting of karmic suffering,” associated with Chibun and Yūichi). The idiosyncratic powers of the *saisho goma*, which flow from the charismatic founding family, are not publically emphasized. These and other events serve to familiarize outsiders with Shinnyo-en and promote its image as traditional, but also trans-sectarian and global.

### 2.2.2 Civic Events

Civic events do not include a Buddhist ceremony, but they do present Shinsō as a Buddhist leader. Such events draw attention to celebrities and academic personalities or institutions in a manner that highlights Shinnyo-en’s legitimacy as a Japanese Buddhist organization, and its comfort with secular spaces. An example of a civic event in the United States is the Shinnyo-en-sponsored Pathfinder’s Peace Award ceremony (awarded to Martin Sheen in 2007, Morgan Freeman in 2008, and Maria Shriver in 2009), where Shinsō or her husband Isao Itō 勲伊藤 sometimes bestows the award. In March 2014, Shinsō marked the beginning of an official relationship between Shinnyo-en and the University of Southern California with the signing of papers and a \$6.6 million donation (“Overview” 2015).

Shinnyo-en’s charitable activities might also fall into this category. As with Shinnyo-en’s large religious ceremonies, these activities are presented as Buddhist contributions to world peace. In the recent past, Shinnyo-en has donated books and medical equipment in South and Southeast Asia, cultivated the Ōme forest in western Tokyo Prefecture, and formed a volunteer disaster response team called SeRV (the Shinnyo-en Relief Volunteers). It should be noted that although they are

philanthropic in nature, Shinnyo-en's "social contributions" (*shakai kōken* 社会貢献) are not based on social engagement, but are symbolic civic gestures.<sup>44</sup>

### 2.2.3 Spiritual Events

Spiritual events are similar to civic events, but they often include a short Buddhist ceremony or contemplative activity. These events also focus on Shinsō as a modern Buddhist master, leading a modern Buddhist organization. She appears in vermilion robes and speaks of Shinjō and Tomoji as her Buddhist masters. The fact that her masters happen to be her parents as well is noticeably deemphasized, even though that is not an unusual situation in Japanese Buddhism. Shinsō's appearance at a Global Peace Initiative for Women conference hosted by the United Nations in Nairobi, Kenya, for example, included a speech about world peace, recitation of the *Adhyardhaśatikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (*Rishu-kyō* 理趣経; an important esoteric component of Shingon liturgy), and a brief Shingon rite called *shajō* 洒淨 ("purification by water"). Another example might be Shinsō's interviews with Tricycle magazine, in which she speaks of her parents as Buddhist teachers and explains Shinnyo-en's concept of buddha nature.<sup>45</sup>

Within the last five years, Shinnyo-en also began experimenting with a form of meditation suited for nonmembers, called "*shinnyo* meditation." It is based on *sesshin* (described in the next chapter) in that it is only conducted by spiritual guides who chant, perform esoteric hand gestures, and enter into spiritual communion before giving participants verbal guidance. They are dressed, however, in black Buddhist robes for the occasion, rather than in casual business attire worn during *sesshin*. The content of their verbal guidance focuses on inspiring Buddhist concepts or vague encouraging imagery such as flowers and sunshine. The charismatic founding family is almost never mentioned during *shinnyo* meditation.

Spiritual events present Shinnyo-en as a form of Japanese Buddhism, emphasizing Shingon's long history, Shinnyo-en's contiguity with that tradition, and Shinsō's status as a Buddhist leader. These events are intended to familiarize

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<sup>44</sup> I draw on Jessica Main and Rongdao Lai's definition of social engagement for this assertion (Main and Lai 2013, 7–8).

<sup>45</sup> Todd 2008, 128; "Our Visit with Her Holiness Shinto Ito" 2010

nonmembers with Shinnyo-en, leaving them with an impression of the group as Buddhist, but downplay the tremendous soteriological importance of the founding family that marks Shinnyo-en's idiosyncrasy.

#### **2.2.4 Cultural Events**

Shinnyo-en has also recently sponsored a number of secular and cultural events, which cultivate Shinnyo-en's public image as a well-meaning Buddhist organization, especially in Japan. In 2005, Shinnyo-en supported the reconstruction of Silk Road musical instruments from Nara's Shōsōin Repository. A performance featuring the instruments and a group of vocal musicians from Shinnyo-en's membership, styled the Shinnyo Shōmyō Choir, toured Japan and Europe. *Shōmyō* 声明 is an ancient form of Buddhist liturgical music preserved in Shingon and other Japanese Buddhist denominations. Through these performances, Shinnyo-en could express its concern for the preservation and promotion of Japanese culture, as well as showcase its *shōmyō* choir.

In 2008, Shinnyo-en exhibited Shinjō's artwork—sculpture, calligraphy, carvings, photography—in the United States and Italy. This exhibition was intended to raise awareness of Shinjō as a modern Buddhist artist and Shinnyo-en as a modern Buddhist tradition. The exhibition centered on Shinjō's sculptures of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and *vidya-rājas*. Although the focus was Shinjō's art, the exhibition also helped introduce Shinjō as an accomplished Buddhist master, succeeded by Shinsō who appeared in Buddhist robes at several events related to the exhibition.

The common emphasis of these events is on Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality—Buddhist regalia, practices, terminology, and Shinnyo-en's continuity with an ancient and mysterious Japanese school. These elements in turn solidify the image of the Itōs as traditional Buddhist masters, rather than innovators subject to moral suspicion.

#### **2.2.5 Local Public Events**

In addition to large public events, Shinnyo-en temples hold small, local public events that also present Shinnyo-en as a positive and inviting lay-oriented Buddhist

community. Such events introduce “Shinnyo Buddhism,” attract potential members who are curious about Buddhism, connect with people who live in the neighborhood, and provide an occasion for existing members to bring their friends. Similar kinds of activities are held at temples in Asia, the Americas, and Europe. These may include open houses, bazars, Japanese cultural events (musical performances of *taiko* and *gagaku*, or demonstrations of flower arrangement, tea ceremony, and calligraphy), annual picnics, sports, and holiday gatherings.

### **2.2.6 Communal Focal Points, Public Relations, and Proselytization**

Public events, large and small, serve three purposes: focal points for the membership, public relations for the organization, and proselytization of nonmembers. As focal points for the Shinnyo-en community, events help members reflect on their Buddhist identity and think of Shinnyo-en in terms of its Buddhist modality. The anticipation leading up to these events sustains members’ interest and enthusiasm. Publications, *sesshin* training, and preparatory meetings reinforce the importance of a given event in Buddhist terms, often framing each as a profoundly significant opportunity to accumulate merit, share the dharma, and practice the six perfections of a bodhisattva.

By arousing a positive, compelling experience of Shinnyo Buddhism, public events can become the impetus for membership. For this reason, members volunteering at such events are instructed beforehand (either in *sesshin* or at preparatory meetings) that they should through their conduct try to “convey the heart of the Shinnyo Parents” to the attendees in order to allow them to experience Buddhist liberation through the Itōs’ salvific powers. Public events are thus envisioned as opportunities for Buddhist training.

The second goal of Shinnyo-en’s Buddhist modality is public relations. In Japan, Shinnyo-en and other NRMs face over a century of state regulation and negative press that focuses on scandal, corruption, and violence. The Itōs’ affiliation with Shingon Buddhism and Shinjō’s efforts to obtain Buddhist credentials had very practical implications for Shinnyo-en’s early survival. Overseas, especially outside of Asia, Shinnyo-en must distinguish itself from other Buddhist groups and cultivate a

positive public image. Public events, especially large religious, civic, spiritual, and cultural events demonstrate that Shinnyo-en is a safe, normal, and legitimate form of modern Buddhism. These events also demystify Shinnyo-en and its charismatic founding family by presenting them as human and compassionate Buddhist teachers.

A third purpose for Shinnyo-en's Buddhist events is proselytization, which is understood as a longstanding Buddhist activity and goal. Certain public Shinnyo-en events are specifically designed to cater to the needs and interests of nonmembers. A public "*goma* of universal salvation" (*saisho goma*) in Taiwan, or an open house activity at the Tokyo Head Temple in Hiroo, are examples of events that are designed specifically for beginners or nonmembers. Large public events are grand, awe-inspiring, emotive, and place the spotlight on the rich, mysterious, and solemn pageantry of Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality. Smaller meetings and events are tailored to focus on topics that will not mislead or confuse "beginners" about the nature of Shinnyo-en or the Itō family. For example, Śākyamuṇi and basic Buddhist concepts are foregrounded, while idiosyncratic elements such as the charismatic founding family or *sesshin* training are either moved to the background or described in Buddhist terms. Peace, meditation, karma, buddha nature, and Shinnyo-en's authenticity are the focal point of these meetings.

Its Buddhist modality provides Shinnyo-en with a religious framework for members to contextualize idiosyncratic beliefs and practices that center on the Itōs or were innovated by them. It makes sense, therefore, that Shinnyo-en emphasize its Buddhist modality for beginners and to the public.

### **2.3 Media**

As a member gradually moves from Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality to its idiosyncratic modality, films and publications hint at and clarify the Itōs' special significance within the Garden of Truth. Shinnyo-en presents the Itōs as both Buddhist masters and as eternal spiritual beings through various media. These include film and print. Ritual (discussed in the next chapter) is a special medium

that helps convey mostly oral, esoteric beliefs about the charismatic founding family. In its esoteric Buddhist modality, Shinnyo-en repeatedly points to the limitations of language, books, or any form of intellectual engagement with Shinnyo-en's inner idiosyncratic world, and promotes the experience of the Itōs' true significance through ritual and daily practice. Using the language of esoteric Buddhism, Shinnyo-en stresses the primacy of faith and practice in order to gain understanding, rather than thinking, reading, or study.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, Shinnyo-en publishes a great deal of newsletters, pamphlets, magazines, and books that center on why Shinnyo-en is Buddhist, and the charismatic founding family's role as Buddhist masters.

### 2.3.1 Print Media

Shinnyo-en's print media include newsletters, quarterly magazines, books, and other small materials (pamphlets, bookmarks, cards, calendars, etc.). All of these are produced with the explicit intention of enabling people to connect with and emulate the charismatic founding family and understand Shinnyo-en in Buddhist terms.

These printed materials focus on the founders, poems by Shinjō called *sonouta* 苑歌 (lit. "garden poems"), teachings by Shinsō, testimonies by members, annual slogans, and simplified explanations of Buddhist concepts.

Shinnyo-en claims the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* as the central scriptural foundation for its teachings.<sup>47</sup> Members and Office staff, however, only chant, study, and read several passages from these scriptures. Instead a book called *The Path of Oneness* (Ichinyo no Michi 一如の道) is the main textual focus for Shinnyo-en members.<sup>48</sup> *The Path of Oneness* is divided into five sections. "The Sacred Way" covers the sacred biography of Śākyamuṇi. "Aiming for Nirvana" contains selections from Buddhist scriptures (including the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*) and Shinjō's explanations of Buddhist doctrines. "Spiritual Wonders" contains miraculous testimonies and idiosyncratic

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<sup>46</sup> *The Path of Oneness* 2009, 167–68, 526

<sup>47</sup> In fact, Shinnyo-en "embraces" all Buddhist scriptures, but considers the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* to be the "finest essence" (*daigo* 醍醐; Skt. *sarpinrmaṇḍa*) of the Dharma. Shinjō taught that the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, *Lotus Sutra*, and *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* form the core of Shinnyo-en doctrine (note from Chiryū Gakuin lecture given on June 13, 2009).

<sup>48</sup> Shinjō compiled and partially authored this book, which was later edited by various bodies within the Office.

teachings related to the Shinnyo spiritual faculty (*reinō*, covered in the next chapter). “Mastering the Way” provides further teachings on Buddhist themes interpreted according to Shinnyo-en’s idiosyncratic beliefs and practices. “Pursuing the Way” contains the sacred biography of the charismatic founding family and their founding of Shinnyo-en. A detailed analysis of this book’s contents would go far beyond existing summaries of Shinnyo-en beliefs. It would also, I believe, substantiate my claim that Shinnyo-en possesses two modalities, which are both represented in this core text. Shinnyo-en publishes dozens of other books that focus on Itōs or compile their sermons.

### **2.3.2 Modern Temples**

Shinnyo-en temples eschew much of classical Shingon architecture in favor of modern buildings and building materials. The interiors of Shinnyo-en temples are generally uniform in nearly every detail, from the carpet to the photographs of the Itōs hung on the walls. The use of television is, however, perhaps the most arresting feature of Shinnyo-en temples. When visiting a Shinnyo-en temple, one will invariably find large television screens at the front of the main altar room. Ceremonies are rarely performed live at the opulently adorned altar, but instead viewed on monitors mounted on either side of it. Shinjō and Tomoji first began incorporating closed circuit television after the 1954 Tokyo Olympics. They saw this technology as a way to allow people crowded into the temple hallways to watch the ceremony and listen to sermons. Later on, video recordings and even live satellite broadcasts of ceremonies would reach monitors at all Shinnyo-en temples. Today this practice allows Shinnyo-en members throughout Japan and around the world to view ceremonies performed in Tokyo by Shinsō.<sup>49</sup>

Its liberal use of technology also allows Shinnyo-en to maintain tight institutional, doctrinal, and practical normativity throughout the organization. At many temples in Japan, members check in by swiping their membership card, which

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<sup>49</sup> This practice is gradually beginning to change. Ten years ago, the entire service—typically: chanting/ritual, testimony by a member, dharma talk, recorded sermon by Shinjō, and group recitation of slogans—was exported and shown at every temple. It is now more common for a temple to use portions of these videos supplemented by live content.

provides the Office with data on their frequency of attendance and practice of *sesshin*. Temples are also equipped with infrared transponders for translation equipment, professional audio-visual equipment, cameras, stage lighting for special effects during ceremonies, and much else besides. The television, however, is perhaps the most important of these because nearly every ceremony at every temple makes use of them.

### **2.3.3 Film**

Promotional films feature clips from recent large-scale events or philanthropic activities, and educational films produced at Shinnyo-en's headquarters in Tokyo are distributed to every temple and training center. Educational films (5–10 minutes long) usually contain simple explanations of a Buddhist concept or practice associated with that day's ceremony, reinterpreted according to the sacred biography of the founding family. These films are played prior to a ceremony while people are arriving and getting settled. For example, a fire offering (*goma*) is always performed on the 28<sup>th</sup> day of each month. Before the ceremony proper, the video will explain the Brahmanical and Shingon origins of the fire offering, its purpose and place in Buddhism, and the reasons for its incorporation into Shinnyo-en, which are largely tied to its charismatic founders.

### **2.3.4 Chiryū Gakuin**

Videos are also produced for a four-year educational course called Chiryū Gakuin 智流学院. This course is presented as a more in-depth examination of Buddhist doctrine and Shinnyo-en teachings. After completing the entire course, the member receives a Buddhist priestly rank and becomes eligible for initiation into esoteric practices and lay ordination (covered in chapter three). The videos themselves contain recorded lectures by Shinjō, Shinsō, Office staff members, and advanced members. In order to complete Chiryū Gakuin and receive lay ordination, members must view a certain number of videos by attending weekly or monthly classes at a temple. These video lectures focus on a variety of doctrinal subjects covered in *The Path of Oneness*, and consistently reiterate the sacred biography of the Itōs, indirectly encouraging devotion to them and their soteriological importance.

## 2.4 Linking Shinnyo-en's Two Modalities through Media

Often, a successful communication medium is a commingled form<sup>50</sup> that is experienced communally and consumed through multiple sensory sites (Orbaugh 2015, 297). This particular combination of factors is experienced at Shinnyo-en's events and it is replicated thematically in publications and films that serve to reinforce Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality.

Shinnyo-en's teachings involve storytelling. Personal and relational, simple and direct, these stories focus on Buddhist concepts and the sacred biography of the charismatic founding family—the compassionate actions of ordinary people who heroically overcame hardship and became buddhas. Shinnyo-en's stories are delivered through multiple sensory sites, and are usually consumed communally at temples or in people's homes.

Ceremonies create a space where stories are transformed into immediate emotional experiences of both Shinnyo-en's Buddhist and idiosyncratic modalities, which can be uniformly replicated and experienced at temples throughout Japan and around the world. A typical monthly ceremony is viewed on television monitors at a temple with other members. These videos are treated as direct links to Shinsō and Oyasono, Shinnyo-en's head temple in Japan. Emotional stories and situations are conveyed through this medium and may include personal testimonies by members who have experienced hardship, inner realization, or miraculous phenomena. Recordings of the Itōs often move members to tears. Before and after viewing such materials, members offer three bows as a sign of respect and gratitude. Ceremonies often end with Shinsō processing out through the temple, which is also shown on video and can last for five minutes or more. During this time Shinsō sometimes waves to the camera in Japan, and members in Los Angeles will applaud and wave back, or even call out "Keishu-sama!" as if to attract her attention, feeling that the technology used in the temple on some level facilitates a kind of connection to Shinsō and the ceremony, distant as they may be.

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<sup>50</sup> This term was first used by J. L. Anderson and refers to media that combine visuals, narrative, and performance (Orbaugh 2015, 41).

Shinnyo-en tells stories about its founders that are evocative and emotionally charged. The Itōs' sacred biography revolves around how the Shinnyo Parents overcame various difficulties they faced in creating the Garden of Truth: the loss of their sons, their betrayal by a beloved disciple, their arduous training, and their tireless commitment to guiding and uplifting their followers until the very day they died. All of these are explained in Buddhist terms in Shinnyo-en's publications and films. While hardship and effort are common tropes of Buddhist stories, the events of the Itōs' sacred biography—and herein lies Shinnyo-en's idiosyncrasy—are believed to contain soteriological potential if members internalize and then re-experience or embody them.

Take the story of Tomoji's immediate reaction to the Dharma Crisis in August, 1950. The police had arrested Shinjō and desecrated the altar in their small temple (also their home at the time). Tomoji was left alone with five children and the leadership of thousands of followers who began to slip away as the group became more and more infamous in the news. It became apparent that the government might disband the group and seize all of its property, which included several followers' homes that had been donated and converted into temples. Tomoji gathered the concerned followers, calmly explained the situation, and then swore to them with tears in her eyes that even if they lost everything, she and Yūichi would travel around Japan with the Acala statue strapped to her back, begging for money until she could repay them every last *sen*.

Other stories tell of Tomoji skipping meals so that she could feed followers, cleaning toilets and being mistaken for a servant, or carrying vegetables from Yamanashi to Tokyo during the war, only to give them all away during the train ride home. Another well-known story of Tomoji's longsuffering recounts how she and another woman journeyed to a remote village to meet with some followers there, but were turned away because no one showed up. There are also the stories of Tomoji's reactions to her sons' deaths. In the case of Chibun, she was distraught, confused, and damaged by the tragedy. Yūichi, on the other hand, was hospitalized for a year before his death and knew he was going to die. Despite his condition, he is said to have told an Office staff member that rather than get better himself and go

home, he wished that even just one more person could be saved and find happiness through Shinnyo-en. Although financially strained because of the legal fallout of the Dharma Crisis, Shinjō bought a tape recorder to capture his son's final moments. Portions of that recording are sometimes played during Yūichi's annual memorial service in July, wherein one can hear Yūichi moaning while Tomoji tells him, "Yuichi, be brave. You are a man. Go to your brother Chibun and together become the foundation for *bakku-daiju*" (*The Path of Oneness* 2009, 440). These emotionally-charged stories are delivered in carefully-monitored communal settings through multiple sensory sites: auditory, visual, and even olfactory and tactile.<sup>51</sup>

All of these emotional stories are connected to and overlap with Buddhist themes that Shinnyo-en hopes to impart through the personal example of its charismatic founding family's sacred biography. Although Shinnyo-en mobilizes Buddhist communication strategies that present the Itōs as Buddhist masters, its idiosyncrasies may not be recognized as sacred or legitimate by members of established Buddhist traditions. Similar situations can be observed in the cases of other Buddhist-derived NRMs, Ahmadiyya Islam,<sup>52</sup> or Mormonism, for example. At most, members of parent religions might acknowledge the idiosyncratic modality of NRMs, but choose not to engage with that modality (e.g. a Shingon Buddhist might respectfully acknowledge Shinjō's training, but refuse to embrace a lifestyle of strong devotion to him and his family).

Every minute detail of the Itōs' life stories is repeated, reflected upon, memorized, internalized, and repeated again with zeal and emotion—in publications, lectures, sermons, videos, and rituals. One is quietly admonished to emulate them during *sesshin*, and again reminded of them during home meetings and other informal gatherings. Members are explicitly taught not to think of the Itōs' stories as mere historical events, but as deeply personal lessons to embody and experience for oneself. Although these events took place decades ago, they move people to tears. They are rehearsed with intense emotion and conviction, and (most importantly) these stories actually *compel* people to change their behavior and

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<sup>51</sup> For more on propaganda and affective technologies, see Orbaugh 2015.

<sup>52</sup> See Maria Massi Dakake's *The Charismatic Community*, 2007.

believe in the Itōs as omnipresent, immortal spiritual beings worthy of deep devotion. The emotional and experiential components of Shinnyo-en may be tied to the group's continued vitality and success.

#### **2.4.1 Public and Private Materials**

Shinnyo-en currently publishes a number of public, private, and highly restricted materials that are intended for distribution to specific groups of people. For nonmembers, Shinnyo-en produces pamphlets, public websites, social media, and several periodicals. These materials mostly focus on Shinnyo-en as a modern form of Buddhism, Shinnyo-en's philanthropic activities, and Shinsō's recent travels.<sup>53</sup>

Although Shinnyo-en has published only a handful of books that are available to the public, dozens are available to members in a number of languages. These include collections of teachings and poems by the Itōs, the chanting book, *The Path of Oneness*, newsletters, magazines, and photographic collections. Although several paraphrased portions appear in *The Path of Oneness*, Shinnyo-en does not publish the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, nor does it encourage members to read it. In fact, Shinnyo-en does not publish or sell any "classic" Shingon or general Buddhist materials (e.g. books by or about Kūkai or the Buddha). Instead, all of Shinnyo-en's publications focus on the Itōs' teachings on Shinnyo-en, and their sacred biography.

Some private materials are intended for new members and these too focus on Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality (e.g. *Starting Out*). As with anything else that falls into the public, Buddhist modality of Shinnyo-en, books for new members (like meetings for new members) foreground simplified explanations of Buddhist concepts and practices and present the Itōs as Buddhist masters.

I find it helpful to divide the content of Shinnyo-en publications into three categories: emulation, education, and admonishment.<sup>54</sup> Most of the information in Shinnyo-en's monthly newsletters and quarterly magazines (*The Nirvana*; *Naigai Jihō* 内外時報; *Kangi Sekai* 歡喜世界; and others), focuses on the Itōs and encourages members to emulate them. The latest permutation of Shinnyo-en's

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<sup>53</sup> Titles include: *What Is Shinnyo-En?* (2003), *A Walk Through the Garden: Foundations of Shinnyo-En* (1999), *Starting Out* (2010), and a periodical called *In Step*.

<sup>54</sup> Orbaugh (2015)

English newsletter, *Resonance* (formerly *The Nirvana*), features increased content on Buddhism, the history of Shinnyo-en, and features on the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, in addition to sermons by the Itōs, current events, and members' testimonies. All of these articles contain educational information and encouragement to emulate the Itōs. They also tacitly admonish members to become more determined in their practice (especially the practice of proselytization), more grateful (especially to the Itōs), and more devoted (to the Itōs and to the organization itself).

A recent issue of *Resonance* included the following, quoted extensively here because it captures both Shinnyo-en's continued sensitivity to its own idiosyncrasies, as well as Shinjō's awareness of Shinnyo-en's two modalities:

The following teaching by Master Shinjo appeared as an interview in the inaugural January 1950 issue of *Naigai Jiho*, the monthly Japanese-language newsletter that today is titled *Oyasono Jiho*. It was published in the early days of our spiritual community, then known as the Sangha of Truth, before the construction of the Sesshin Training Hall, the incorporation of the Nirvana Sutra into the Shinnyo Path, or the adoption of the Nirvana Image as our principal representation of buddhahood. Master Shinjo's teaching was given during a time of transition, when our sangha was evolving from a primarily Shingon Esoteric Buddhist organization anchored in monastic Buddhist practice to a lay community based on the beliefs and practices developed over the 2,500 years of Buddhist history. Its reassuring message of tolerance and encouragement, originally directed towards an audience wary of turning its back on established family Buddhist connections and traditions, remains just as relevant in the present day for a diverse international community hailing from a broad range of spiritual traditions. We present this teaching to show how Master Shinjo, from the very beginning, stressed how the teachings we practice are grounded both in traditional Buddhism—one of the three pillars<sup>55</sup> of Shinnyo-en today—and in a spirit of interfaith acceptance, openness, and mutual respect.

*Is the Sangha of Truth Buddhist or Shinto?*

We are Buddhist.

*What is its lineage, and who is the founder?*

Our teachings derive from the inspiration of Prince Shotoku, the lineage of Kukai, and the heritage of the bodhisattva Jinben [the practice of Shugendo

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<sup>55</sup> Shinnyo-en's "three pillars" are: traditional Buddhism (or the "dharma stream"), the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, and "spiritual wonders" (*jintsū reimyō* 神通靈妙) connected to the charismatic founding family.

mountain asceticism]. Our principal buddha is Mahavairochana Tathagata and I am its founder.

*Are you a new religion?*

Buddhism derives from the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, so no; we do not practice a new religion. If we were a new religion, we would not be Buddhist.

*If you are Buddhist, as you say, then you must have a name for your school.*

The sublime richness of Buddhism necessitated its development as a broad range of teachings, but the essence of those teachings and the reason they have been transmitted is to help people cultivate spiritual awakening, to provide them with a path out of the suffering arising from the negative karmic cycles induced by greed, anger, and ignorance. From the earliest days of Buddhism in Japan, people have recognized the difficulty of conveying the truths of the Buddha's awakening to people of a different time and place in an accessible way. This led to the formation of various groups, each with a different emphasis on one of the Three Jewels: the Buddha in the case of those who base their teachings on the Pure Land Sutras, the Dharma for those who study the Lotus Sutra, and the Sangha for Zen and other traditions.

These are the solutions some Buddhist masters and their respective schools have devised to help people find awakening through traditions that have been passed on to us over the course of many centuries. But it does not mean that we have to fit into the mold of an established Buddhist school of the past, thinking that unless we practice in certain ways we will not find spiritual awakening. It is more important to recall and respect the spirit of the founders of those schools than to become attached to the form those schools have come to take. (*Resonance* 2014, 1–2)

We read here that in 1950, Shinjō very explicitly considered Shinnyo-en Buddhist, but was also aware of Shinnyo-en's distinction from established forms of Buddhism. He also articulates his reasoning for innovation and an emphasis on the "spirit" of founding figures, rather than the form of the teachings they left behind.

#### **2.4.2 Restricted Materials**

Certain publications are only available to select groups within the general membership. Chiryū Gakuin lecture notes, two books of Shinjō's poems, and a chanting book with material only for the initiated are given to Chiryū Gakuin students. Handouts and documents pertaining to institutional matters are only

available to guiding and lineage parents. The Office also circulates internal materials that are not available to the general membership.

Within the Office, there are also priestly manuals and handbooks that can only be handled or seen by qualified male staff members (largely in keeping with Shingon traditions, Shinsō and Shinrei being exceptions) who are selected by their male superiors to undertake formal priestly training in Shingon ritual procedures. The highly exclusive training paradigm for male staff members follows the structure of Shinjō's own training, reworked into a new system called Shinnyo Samaya (*shinnyo sanmaya* 真如三昧耶). Once a staff member has completed Chiryū Gakuin, received initiation (*denjū* 伝受), and undergone ordination (*tokudō jūkai* 得道授戒), he may be given permission to begin “fourfold preparatory training” (*shido kegyō* 四度加行). Until that point he might be allowed to perform menial tasks related to cleaning the altar. This may be followed by elements of the Ein Samaya lineage training (*shichidanpō* 七壇法; the “rite of seven altars”) such as the Bezaiten Rite (*bezaiten bō* 弁才天法), elements of training that involve the Diamond and Womb World mandalas, fire offerings (*goma* 護摩), and others. Although they have been slightly reinterpreted and adjusted according to Shinjō's beliefs, all of these practices are kept almost completely secret and follow the traditions of Shingon very closely. The general membership, however, is given hints that Office staff members engage in these practices, thereby further legitimizing Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality.

## 2.5 Summary

Through both ceremony and media, Shinnyo-en presents itself as a modern form of esoteric Buddhism and does not publically emphasize its central idiosyncrasy—the charismatic founding family and the culture of devotion to them. The former comprises Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality, while the latter its idiosyncratic modality. Shinnyo-en members move through both modalities as they move through Shinnyo-en's religious space, with normative emphasis being placed on movement *toward* the Itōs, who are at the center of the Garden of Truth.

### 3 SHINNYO-EN'S IDIOSYNCRATIC MODALITY

As a member grows comfortable within Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality where the Itōs are presented as Buddhist teachers, she can then be introduced to the possibility that the Itōs are also something more. The Shinnyo-en community, its unique practices, and its efficacy exist only because the Itōs existed; Shinnyo-en is contingent upon the Itōs' historical existence, and their continued spiritual potency and charismatic appeal. Through ritual experiences that can only take place inside Shinnyo-en temples, members are guided to an understanding that the Itōs are immortal spiritual beings who watch over every member and are the source of their salvation. Ritual is a medium for communication, and it is able to nonverbally convey affect, emotion, and other compelling impressions, including the values of Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic modality.<sup>56</sup> Members who embrace and experience the affect (the emotional or behavioral influence) of these rituals learn to transform themselves by mapping every detail of the Itōs' lives onto every detail of their own. The idiosyncratic modality is a function of that which is particular to Shinnyo-en—the powers extended by the charismatic founding family, and the culture of devotion among their followers.

Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic modality is experienced through rituals and ceremonies primarily intended for members. The last chapter called attention to ceremonies and publications that highlight Shinnyo-en's contiguity with Buddhism. This chapter examines Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic modality *vis-à-vis* rituals in which most active members participate: *sesshin* training, *eza*, and ceremonies at the temple. The next chapter will focus on how three organizational hierarchies synthesize Shinnyo-en's Buddhist and idiosyncratic modalities.

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<sup>56</sup> Joseph Bulbulia describes rituals as 'amplification technology' that "act as platforms through which agents prompt, express, and amplify the emotional states that identify god-commitments" (2008, 158).

### 3.1 Sesshin Training

The form of meditation practiced in Shinnyo-en is called *sesshin* 接心 (“to touch the heart”)<sup>57</sup> and was invented by the Itōs. Publications present *sesshin* as an idiosyncratic form of meditation carefully engineered by the founders, rather than as a practice inherited from Daigoji (*The Path of Oneness* 2009, 195–96). The form and content of *sesshin* is concealed from nonmembers and beginners. One pamphlet for nonmembers describes Shinnyo-en as follows:

Shinnyo-en has its own unique form of meditation, called *sesshin* (“touching the essence”). It is performed with the aid of other followers who have trained enough to become spiritual guides (*reinoshas*) and act as spiritual mirrors for trainees in meditation. In short, *sesshin* helps people to look into themselves and strip away the greed, anger and ignorance that may be clouding their Buddha-nature and preventing them from aspiring higher and developing themselves further. (*What Is Shinnyo-En?* 2003, 9)

Another pamphlet, intended for consumption by members, explains the role of the Itōs in creating *sesshin* and the spiritual faculty that enables its practice:

The Shinnyo spiritual faculty activated in Shojuin-sama<sup>58</sup> worked as a key to unlock the door to the spiritual world. When Kyoshu-sama<sup>59</sup> and Shojuin-sama embarked on the religious path, both positive and negative forces flowed in as a result. However, with the passing of Kyodoin-sama,<sup>60</sup> their first son, the negative forces came to be embraced. He went into a spiritual wilderness, and created an environment in which positive spiritual forces could manifest more easily to guide people. Later, after the passing of Sooya-sama’s<sup>61</sup> second son, Shindoin-sama,<sup>62</sup> the conveyance of such spiritual power became much easier...Kyodoin-sama forged the path and made communication between this world and the spiritual world possible, and Shindoin-sama further enhanced and strengthened that path. (*A Walk Through the Garden: Foundations of Shinnyo-En* 1999, 2:44)

In contrast to the pamphlet for nonmembers, this selection emphasizes the spiritual role the Itōs play in *sesshin*: their importance for its creation and continuing function, and the implication that the Itōs were endowed with extraordinary abilities that enabled them, and only them, to do so. *Sesshin* is presented here not so much as

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<sup>57</sup> Not to be confused with a Zen practice of the same name.

<sup>58</sup> Tomoji

<sup>59</sup> Shinjō

<sup>60</sup> Chibun

<sup>61</sup> Shinjō and Tomoji

<sup>62</sup> Yūichi

Buddhist meditation as a technique involving the afterlife, positive and negative spiritual forces, and communication between this world and the spiritual world, all of which are ontologically and soteriologically tied to the Itōs.

I highlight *sesshin* as an example of Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic modality because it focuses on the founding family less as Buddhist masters, and more as eternal spiritual beings who extend salvation and spiritual assistance from another realm. In the following brief survey of the development of *sesshin*, we see that the practice itself, as well as the sacred biographical stories that explain its function and effectiveness are both tied directly to the Itōs' spiritual abilities, their personal sacrifices, and their idiosyncratic role in Shinnyo-en as representations of ultimate reality and the qualities of buddhahood.

There are in fact two different types of *sesshin*. "Formal *sesshin*" (*usō sesshin* 有相接心) involves a spiritual guide (*reinōsha* 靈能者) and occurs at the temple. "Formless *sesshin*" (*musō sesshin* 無相接心) is daily contemplation and reflection inspired by what one learns in formal, or structured *sesshin*. The formal type of *sesshin* is conducted with a spiritual guide and is a ritual experience through which Shinnyo-en communicates esoteric oral teachings related to Buddhist practice and the charismatic founding family. The experience of *sesshin* is believed to be tailored to the individual trainee through the spiritual guide's indescribable sympathetic intuitions perceived while in a state of "spiritual communion" (*nyūshin* 入神). *Sesshin* is always conducted after ceremonies at the temple. Anyone hoping to receive *sesshin* on a given day must arrive at least fifteen or twenty minutes before the ceremony to purchase a *sesshin* ticket from the Office. Without a ticket, or without attending the ceremony, *sesshin* is usually not possible. A typical ceremony (described in greater detail below) includes videos, chanting, and sermons that center on the Itōs in the context of that ceremony's theme or special meaning.

The guidance one receives before and during *sesshin* training always refers to the Itō family and encourages the trainee to grow closer to the Itōs, feel gratitude toward them, emulate them, and tell other people about them. The practice of

*sesshin* is completely unique to Shinnyo-en, although it incorporates Buddhist, Shugendō, and shamanic concepts and practices.

Today, *sesshin* is available to new members after they have attended a certain number of ceremonies, have watched a preparatory video, and have the approval of their guiding parent (*michibiki oya* 導き親; more on guiding parents in chapter four). There are five types or levels of *sesshin* available that differ in purpose, cost, and the skill of the spiritual guide. The five levels are “regular” (*kōjō* 向上; lit. “elevation”<sup>64</sup>), “regular consultative” (*kōjō sōdan* 向上相談; lit. “elevation consultation”), “consultative” (*sōdan* 相談), “special consultative” (*tokubetsu sōdan* 特別相談), and “decision-assessment” (*kantei* 鑑定; lit. “judgement” or “appraisal”). Regular *sesshin* is for elevating one’s buddha nature and consists of three to five minutes of general guidance. In regular consultative *sesshin* one is allowed to ask the spiritual guide a question related to the three practices.<sup>65</sup> For example, one may ask about how best to approach a potential member, or about how to prepare for a volunteer role at an upcoming ceremony. The next three levels of *sesshin* are conducted in small private rooms. In consultative and special consultative *sesshin*, one may ask the spiritual guide about any matter. The only differences between these two levels are the price and the nature of the guidance; special consultative *sesshin* yields deeper insight into the spiritual nature of the trainee’s question. Decision-assessment *sesshin* is conducted when one is faced with a very serious decision and the spiritual guide uses both Shinjō’s *byōzeishō* technique and the spiritual faculty to provide guidance.

Physical religious space is of central importance for the practice of formal *sesshin*, which can only take place inside a ritually consecrated area, such as a Shinnyo-en temple. Formal *sesshin* can only be conducted with the assistance of a spiritual guide who has been authorized to give *sesshin* by Shinsō herself. All spiritual guides are required to attend special monthly meetings that are completely restricted to spiritual guides. They must also periodically travel to the Shinnyo-en

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<sup>64</sup> Elevation (*kōjō* 向上) here refers specifically to the elevation of one’s aspiration for enlightenment (*bodai* 菩提; Skt. *bodhicitta*).

<sup>65</sup> *Mittsu no ayumi* 三つの歩み; “donating” (*kangi* 歡喜), “volunteering” (*gohōshi* ご奉仕), and “proselytizing” (*otasuke* お助け); see *The Path of Oneness* 2009, 541.

headquarters in Tachikawa (at least once per year) and consistently offer *sesshin* after ceremonies or they will not be allowed to give *sesshin* until they have been retrained. Spiritual guides are strictly forbidden to use the spiritual faculty to conduct *sesshin* outside the temple. Jay Sakashita (1998) and Hiroko Shiramizu (1979) have commented that these tight restrictions have been successful in limiting the charismatic abilities of individual spiritual guides, and in preventing schism.

*Sesshin* has evolved and changed according to events in the Itōs' lives and changes in Shinnyo-en's size and structure. When Shinnyo-en was small in the 1930s, *sesshin* was long and included paranormal activity, but as Shinnyo-en grew, *sesshin* became relatively calm and much shorter. The following traces the evolution of *sesshin* according to the sacred biography of the charismatic founding family.

During 1935 Shinjō and Tomoji began searching for a Buddhist statue to enshrine in their home as a focal point for the group of followers who were accumulating around them. On December 28 of that year, they acquired and enshrined a small statue of Acala with the help of a Buddhist priest. Several days later, after the new year, the Itōs and some of their more enthusiastic followers began a month-long period of ascetic practices that included sleep deprivation, ritual ablutions with ice water, dietary restriction, long periods of chanting, and frenzied shamanic phenomena.

Around midnight on February 4, 1936, after completing their winter training, Tomoji spontaneously entered into a trance. Her aunt Tamae, herself a medium, was present and confirmed Tomoji's newly unlocked abilities, saying, "Seek beyond the exoteric into the esoteric, master the way correctly, and for the sake of people and the world, carry through to the very end" (*The Path of Oneness* 2009, 372). From that point forward, Tomoji began guiding individual followers while in what Shinjō and his mentor Hōkai Urano 法海浦野 declared to be a state of "interpenetration" (*nyū ga ga nyū* 入我我入) with the spiritual powers contained in their Acala image. This state of interpenetration was initially understood to be similar to that of a Buddhist priest while conducting an esoteric rite.

Four months later, the Itōs' first son, Chibun, suddenly passed away. This was an incredibly difficult time for the Itōs, who faced criticism from their local community and from their own followers. Some people felt that Shinjō's inability to prevent his own son's death was proof that he was a charlatan and that his group of followers was indeed a corrupt and inauthentic new religion. Other people, however, believed that the two year-old Chibun had passed away because he accepted their negative karma and evil spirits upon himself. Tomoji also had visions of Chibun journeying alone into the spiritual realm, and pulling followers' ancestors out of a volcano. Gradually, members began to have miraculous experiences of healings or problems being solved thanks to Chibun, whom they saw in dreams and visions. Years later, Shinjō reflected on Chibun's passing:

As I look back, I can't help but feel that our spiritual community really started with Kyodoin's departure for the next realm. It was just after we established the sangha that he left this world to forge a path for us. Though young, Kyodoin was spiritually gifted. Through this special ability, he helped us in guiding each person to awaken to true faith. His short life was devoted to helping us, and his departure opened a spiritual pathway between the physical and spiritual dimensions of existence. The result was practitioners could take their practice and faith to a deeper level. That happened because his devotion led to the further development of sesshin training and the beginning of the spiritual support we call *bakku-daiju*. This built the foundation for the sangha to become what it is today. (Itō, June 9, 1988)

Chibun's passing also enhanced his mother's spiritual abilities, allowing her to enter into spiritual communion more quickly and to provide clear verbal guidance to trainees. When the Itōs' second son, Yūichi passed away in 1952, there was again an enhancement in what had come to be known as the "Shinnyo spiritual faculty." *Sesshin* became more subdued, spiritual guides could instantly enter into and emerge from spiritual communion, and the verbal guidance became clearer as some guides experienced enhanced clairvoyant abilities. The lattermost are said to be caused by Yūichi uniting with the "heavenly" spiritual forces (generally associated with visual spiritual perceptions), while his brother Chibun had united with the "earthly" spiritual forces (generally associated with tactile spiritual perceptions). These two polarities are related to Shinjō and Tomoji's hereditary

spiritual abilities, and to the two chief protective deities that watch over Shinnyo-en.<sup>66</sup>

After the end of WWII, Tomoji began passing this ability to other people.<sup>67</sup> These are trained individuals who, in a state of spiritual communion are purportedly able to reflect the inner condition of the trainee's mind and provide verbal guidance, allowing the trainee to examine herself from an objective point of view. The cultivation of the spiritual faculty depends largely on the depth of one's connection to the Itōs. Shiramizu and Hubbard explore some of the ways in which a spiritual guide's abilities depend on the charismatic founding family.

Today, the most common form of *sesshin* takes place immediately after a ceremony and is only conducted inside Shinnyo-en temples or consecrated spaces. A ticket to participate in the formal practice costs between \$5 and \$50 (depending on the type of *sesshin*), and one is usually encouraged to "receive" *sesshin* at least once per month. If one does not do so, he is to inform the spiritual guide of the amount of time that has passed since last receiving *sesshin*, and will then receive guidance that may either admonish him to practice more consistently, or perhaps encourage him by pointing out that the Itōs or his own ancestors were watching over him all along and are so happy that he has returned to receive *sesshin* again.<sup>68</sup> Many forms of guidance may be given, but in any case members are reminded to ideally receive *sesshin* every month if circumstances permit.

After the ceremony is over, trainees receiving regular or regular consultative *sesshin* are arranged into large squares of around thirty people and sit with their legs tucked underneath them in *seiza* position (正座; chairs and other seated positions are gradually becoming more acceptable). The space inside the square is left empty for spiritual guides to seat themselves, enter into spiritual communion,

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<sup>66</sup> Shinjō's hereditary spiritual abilities constitute the "heavenly spiritual lineage" (*tenreikei* 天靈系) while Tomoji's constitute the "earthly spiritual lineage" (*chireikei* 地靈系). Shinnyo-en's two protective deities, Bezaiten and Kasanori, are associated with these lineages respectively, and they are "harmonized" by a third divinity, Seiryō Daigongen 清瀧大権現.

<sup>67</sup> The first person to inherit the spiritual faculty from Tomoji was Joshin Kuriyama in 1946 (*The Path of Oneness*, 2009, 208–10).

<sup>68</sup> An exploration of supernatural monitoring in Shinnyo-en in terms of group formation and prosociality is a promising area of future study.

and move around the square. Wherever possible, the lights in the room are dimmed, and a staff member provides instructions while the participants and spiritual guides get settled. While waiting for *sesshin* to begin, trainees must sit completely still with their eyes closed, forming a particular meditation hand gesture, mentally repeating the names of the Itōs and visualizing them. For several minutes an Office staff member leads a kind of guided meditation, usually by reminding the attendees of important themes from that day's ceremony, upcoming large events, or stories about the Itōs. When the staff member sees that everyone is settled and the spiritual guides are in place, he signals for the spiritual guides to execute the *goshinjinpō* 護身神法 (“Divine Rite to Protect the Body”), an obscure esoteric apotropaic rite that includes several mudra, or hand gestures.<sup>69</sup> The spiritual guides then enter into spiritual communion with seemingly involuntary grunts and movements before they begin to circulate among the trainees.

Those receiving consultative *sesshin* and above move to a waiting room and wait for their ticket number to be called before entering a small, private room, where they can consult with a spiritual guide and then receive *sesshin*. These private forms of *sesshin* require a larger fee, last slightly longer than regular and regular consultative *sesshin*, and allow the trainee to ask a specific question about personal matters. One is also permitted to request a particular spiritual guide for an additional fee.

In each type of *sesshin* the spiritual guide will sit about one foot in front of the trainee and usually begins speaking after the trainee places their ticket in the spiritual guide's shirt or apron pocket. The spiritual guide may make various gestures, sounds, or movements while giving guidance called “spiritual words” (*goreigen* ご霊言) to each trainee. The guidance usually lasts about three to five minutes. The guidance can seem very personal and gradually builds in intensity. The experience is often emotionally charged, and it is not uncommon for people to cry or

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<sup>69</sup> Shinjō discovered the *goshinjinpō* among papers he found in 1941 while acting as the head priest of Jōhōin, a Daigōji branch temple that had fallen into dilapidation after the Meiji government's 1868 edict to separate Shintō and Buddhism (Shin Butsu Hanzen Rei 神仏判然例). Shinjō adopted the *goshinjinpō* and taught it to Tomoji and advanced disciples for protection while in a state of spiritual communion.

even sob during *sesshin*. The guidance commonly exhorts the trainee to adopt a more understanding attitude towards others, to feel more gratitude, to become aware of a positive or negative spiritual influence on one's circumstances, or to practice more intently, all contextualized with reference to the founding family.<sup>70</sup>

### 3.2 Spiritual Elevation Training

*Sesshin* has been described in several academic papers, and is even shown briefly in Jamie Hubbard's film *The Yamaguchi Story*. Shinnyo-en's spiritual faculty is also used in "spiritual elevation sittings" (*eza* 会座), during which members may obtain a higher spiritual level. This practice, too, is part of Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic modality—it does not have an analogous practice in Shingon Buddhism, although it is likened to the ten stages of bodhisattvahood.<sup>71</sup> The next chapter expands on the organizational aspect of the *eza* system, which is described here as a practice created by Shinjō and Tomoji and focused on inculcating idiosyncratic devotion to them.

There are currently five levels: *shōjō* 小乘 ("small vehicle"), *daijō* 大乘 ("great vehicle"), *kangi* 歡喜 ("joy"), *daikangi* 大歡喜 ("great joy"), and *reinō* 靈能 ("spiritual faculty"). Members may advance from one level to the next over the course of five to thirty years or more as they fulfill recruitment quotas. Once a member has attained *reinō*, she undergoes one to two years of special training before providing *sesshin* to the general membership. Spiritual guides are distinguished by the level of *sesshin* they are allowed to perform, and it can typically take five to ten years for a spiritual guide to elevate from one level to the next.

Spiritual elevation sittings are similar to *sesshin* in that trainees receive verbal guidance from spiritual guides who are using the spiritual faculty, however

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<sup>70</sup> For more information on *sesshin* and examples of the kinds of guidance one receives, refer to "Organizational Mediums" by Shiramizu Hiroko. Some of the information in her essay is, however, now out of date. Jamie Hubbard expanded on Shiramizu's generalizations by discussing her article with Shinnyo-en's Bishop Yonemura in 1995. See Hubbard 1998, 74–75.

<sup>71</sup> For example, *kangi* is sometimes explained as being equivalent to the first stage, "joy" (Skt. *pramuditā*), and *daikangi* to the eighth stage, "immovability" (Skt. *acala*) (*The Path of Oneness* 2009, 121–28).

*eza* usually lasts for two to three hours and is an occasion of more intense focus. Only during these sittings is it possible for a member to “elevate” their spiritual level. After chanting, trainees begin to meditate in long rows, rather than squares, with a space between the rows for spiritual guides to move around. As the trainees begin to meditate, a group of high-ranking spiritual guides (almost entirely composed of current and retired Office staff members) enters spiritual communion and begins a “spiritual dialogue” (*reigeki* 霊劇). During the dialogue, the senior guides take turns speaking, usually on topics related to current or upcoming events in the Shinnyo-en calendar, insecurities or neuroses that are believed to hamper one’s spiritual elevation, and on devotion to one’s Shinnyo-en practice and the charismatic founding family. This dialogue is believed to reflect the collective spiritual condition of the trainees in attendance and is meant to help focus their meditation on the soteriological core and goal of Shinnyo-en: the Itōs.

Next, trainees are “screened” by guides who are in communion with protective deities (*gohōzenshin* 護法善神). If the depth and condition of one’s meditation and recent practice are accepted by these divinities, elevation may be possible and is indicated with a colored tag placed in front of the trainee (this procedure is not consistently followed, and trainees who do not receive such tags sometimes do elevate). During the rest of the *eza* most trainees receive spiritual guidance once or twice. Many people may sob, moan, sweat, or shake during portions of the training. Much like *sesshin*, *eza* is not an especially peaceful practice; the general atmosphere is one of intense exertion, endurance, and admonishment.

Those who elevate are moved to the front of the room, while everyone else is asked to sit behind them in rows, usually behind a tape or rope on the floor. After the *eza* is completely over, the names of people who elevated are announced, and they might be presented with a new lapel pin, depending on the level attained.

The *eza* system is discussed in terms of hierarchy in the next chapter. The above description, however, presents *eza* as a second example of Shinnyo-en’s idiosyncratic ritual practices. While *eza* might be indirectly likened to some esoteric initiatory practices of Shingon, its form and content are unique to Shinnyo-en and

center on its charismatic founding family. As with *sesshin*, the Itōs invented the *eza* system and enabled its operation through their spiritual abilities.

### 3.3 Ceremonies

Shinnyo-en temple ceremonies also function within the idiosyncratic modality. These ceremonies direct the participant toward the charismatic family, both as Buddhist teachers and as beings of a higher order, immortal, and imbued with special abilities that can benefit active members. The ceremonies described below, like Shinnyo-en's large-scale religious events, contain a ceremonial component that generally follows Shingon ritual procedures. Ceremonies are also the most common occasion for a member to experience Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic modality. Ceremonies at the temple are almost always viewed on large television screens on either side of the main altar, as described in chapter one. Members watch a video or satellite broadcast of the service being performed by Shinsō in Japan. These videos standardize members' ritual experience and provide the same religious and institutional information to the entire group.

Shinnyo-en members mainly visit the temple either to attend or volunteer at a service. These ceremonies last for around one hour and are often followed by *sesshin*. Life as a member of Shinnyo-en follows a cycle of monthly and annual ceremonies that are punctuated by large-scale occasions events such as the public events mentioned in chapter one. The calendric cycle of ceremonies also provides the Shinnyo-en community with a cyclic retelling of the charismatic founding family's sacred biography.<sup>72</sup>

#### 3.3.1 Monthly Ceremonies

Each month, ceremonies are held on specific dates related to specific deities.<sup>73</sup> On these dates, members will ideally arrive at the temple early, register for *sesshin* by purchasing a ticket, and then spend time preparing themselves and anyone

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<sup>72</sup> See Appendix 2

<sup>73</sup> *ennichi* 縁日— The 4<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 24<sup>th</sup> are appropriate for spiritual consolation ceremonies (*segaki* 施餓鬼); the 8<sup>th</sup> is dedicated to the protective deity Bezaiten; the 11<sup>th</sup> to Eleven-Faced Āvalokiteśvara; the 15<sup>th</sup> commemorates Śākyamuni's *parinirvāna*; the 20<sup>th</sup> to the protective deity Kasanori; and a fire offering (*goma* 護摩) dedicated to Acala is held on the 28<sup>th</sup>.

accompanying them for the service. A video provides a simple explanation of the service's meaning, typically referring to Buddhist themes and iconography, and concludes with references to the Itō family as role models for how to understand and expand the ritual experience into daily life. The service begins with around fifteen to twenty minutes of chanting (often accompanying a video of the same service held in Japan one year prior), and then moves on to testimonies, dharma talks, sermons, announcements, and finally *sesshin*.

The liturgy and ritual paraphernalia of a Shinnyo-en ceremony are nearly identical to what can be encountered in Shingon temples, except that the founding family is inserted into the roles usually occupied by Buddhist patriarchs and founders. During chanting, for example, the posthumous names of Shinjō, Tomoji, Chibun, and Yūichi are chanted along with those of other figures in Shinnyo-en's dharma lineage.<sup>74</sup> The same are also ritually invoked by the officiating priest in the same liturgical context as would be the case for invoking Kūkai in a Shingon ritual.

Another idiosyncrasy of Shinnyo-en's rituals is the placement of large golden busts of the charismatic founding family on the main altar. Although this practice began during Shinjō's lifetime with busts of his deceased sons and later his wife, the golden busts seem to have only recently become a permanent, and prominent, fixture on Shinnyo-en altars under Shinsō's direction. Due to a renovation project at Oyasono that began in 2009, busts of the family were relocated and later displayed. After touring Shinnyo-en temples around the world, these busts began to appear perennially installed around the main altar, forming what Shinsō calls a kind of "*shinnyo* mandala." Shinnyo-en was aware of possible criticism for this idiosyncratic iconographic veneration of its charismatic founders. The Office points out, however, that nearly every sect of Japanese Buddhism places statues or paintings of its founders on or around its altar arrangements. The difference, of course, is that the deceased founders of modern and established Buddhist schools are not considered to be the source and goal of salvation in quite the same way as are the Itōs.

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<sup>74</sup> *Namu Kyōdōin, Namu Shindōin, Namu Shōjushinin, Namu Shinnyo Kyōshu*. Shinjō included Kūkai 空海 (the founder of Shingon Buddhism), Shōbō 聖宝 (the founder of Daigoji), En no Gyoja 役行者 (the semi-historical founder of Shugendō), and others.

Dharma talks and sermons also relate to the themes of the particular monthly service, but they do so through reference to the charismatic founding family. A dharma talk given at a “Feast of Compassion” (Shōrin-e 正輪会, dedicated to Āvalokiteśvara and held on the 11<sup>th</sup> of each month) in September may refer to an anecdote of the Itōs’ caring for a member and to the dedication of the Shinnyo Samaya Hall (Shinnyo Sanmaya Dō 真如三昧耶堂) at Daigoji on September 11, 1997. Dharma talks usually begin with passing reference to a Buddhist theme or concept and then move into stories about the charismatic founding family, testimonies of personal growth or miracles, and end with admonishments to feel gratitude for, and vow to repay, the Itōs’ efforts through one’s lifelong practice.

### 3.3.2 The Shinnyo-en Calendric Cycle

The yearly ceremonies function within Shinnyo-en’s Buddhist modality, but they also provide more examples of idiosyncrasy, especially in their focus on minute details from the lives of the founding family. Shinnyo-en conducts annual rituals that were inherited from Daigoji (e.g. *hoshi ku* 星供, *saito goma* 齊燈護摩), Buddhist ceremonies (e.g. Śākyamuṇi’s birth, enlightenment, and passing), and other occasions observed widely in Japan (e.g. New Year’s, *setsubun* 節分, *higan* 彼岸, *bon* 盆). Members engage with and participate in these ceremonies through the medium of the charismatic founding family. Biographical details or places of intersection between the lives of the founders and each ceremony provide guideposts for members’ understanding. These traditional ceremonies are interspersed with memorial services, “days of gratitude” (*kansha no hi* 感謝の日), and “grand festivals” (*taisai* 大祭) dedicated to the founding family.

The calendar becomes a medium for rehearsing the Itōs’ sacred biography and inculcating devotion to them.<sup>76</sup> The year is also divided according to monthly themes based on significant life events for the founders. January is associated with the Itōs’ first winter training in 1936 and with emulating their determination; April with Yūichi’s birth; June with Chibun’s death; August with Tomoji’s death; and so

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<sup>76</sup> See Appendix 2

forth. These themes are repeated year after year during monthly ceremonies, during *sesshin*, at meetings, and in publications. In April, for example, members might be encouraged to renew their determination and strive to become the Itōs' successors, just as Yūichi had hoped to do during his short lifetime. The result is a way to remind members about the Itōs every day of the year, and in almost any situation.

### **3.3.3 Idiosyncratic Ceremonies**

The yearly liturgical and sacred biographic cycle also includes idiosyncratic memorial services marking the births and deaths of the founders, and several key events in Shinnyo-en history. Shinjō's birthday, March 28, is marked with a service called the "Festival of the Ever-Present" (*jōjū sai* 常住祭). The dates of the Two Dōjis' deaths are styled as ceremonies of gratitude for the spiritual powers that Chibun and Yūichi manifest from the spiritual world. Each month on the 19<sup>th</sup>, a service is held to collectively memorialize the Itōs, especially Shinjō who passed away on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July.

Holding memorial services (sometimes called *hōonkō* 報恩講) for sectarian founders is a widely-observed practice in Japanese Buddhism. The idiosyncrasy we observe in Shinnyo-en is that these ceremonies are not held for the founders of Shingon (Kūkai) or Daigoji (Shōbō), but for the Itōs who are also more than just sectarian founders to members. Shinnyo-en does hold a service on the 15<sup>th</sup> of each month to mark Śākyamuṇi's passing, but until *sesshin* recently came to be offered on that day it was one of the least-attended ceremonies of the month. These ceremonies dedicated to religiously significant members of the Itō family began during Shinjō and Tomoji's lifetime, which suggests that they perceived themselves and their deceased sons as worthy of such treatment, or as founders of an independent (i.e. idiosyncratic) Buddhist sect, as evidenced in chapter two.

### **3.4 The Itōs' Ever-Presence**

In addition to constantly reminding members of the Itōs at the temple, in *sesshin*, in publications, and through the clock and calendar, Shinnyo-en also teaches members to see the Itōs everywhere, all the time. Ideally, reminders of the charismatic

founding family reach beyond the rituals and ceremonies of the temple into one's daily life. Just as a Shingon initiate trains himself to understand everything in the phenomenal world as a manifestation of Mahāvairocana's body, speech, and mind, Shinnyo-en members learn to perceive the founding family's "ever-presence" (*jōjū* 常住) in a variety of ways, especially through a kind of free association exercise constructed in terms of mindfulness and gratitude and tied to "formless *sesshin*" (*muso sesshin* 無相接心). Dates and the time of day, flowers, colors, numbers, songs, objects, and even shapes in the clouds can all trigger a feeling of the Itōs' presence or spiritual blessings. These reminders constitute another significant portion of Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic modality because they are ubiquitous to a member. These reminders (called *riburai*, derived from the English word "reply") have not been examined in detail because they are largely part of an oral tradition and are extraordinarily extensive. Shinnyo-en's private Facebook page ("Shinnyo Sangha International") provides glimpses of how members train each other to see the Itōs in the clouds, in the numbers on their movie tickets, or in a color.

### 3.5 Summary

I have asserted that Shinnyo-en possesses two distinct modalities, one "Buddhist" and another that is idiosyncratic. *Sesshin* and *eza* are innovated rituals unique to Shinnyo-en. The presence of busts, chanting of founders' posthumous names, memorial services, and *ennichi* related to historical founding figures are not novel or uncommon practices in Japanese Buddhism. The recurring difference, here as elsewhere in the space of Shinnyo-en belief and practice, is that the Itōs are venerated in place of other founding figures. I would also argue that the strong, constant emphasis on the charismatic family overwhelmingly surpasses corresponding practices in other Japanese Buddhist religious spaces. It is this primacy of the Itōs sacrality, their soteriological preeminence for Shinnyo-en members, and perpetual reference to them in idiosyncratic rituals, publications, and temple ceremonies that constitute Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic modality.

## 4 SHINNYO-EN'S HIERARCHIES

Conceiving of Shinnyo-en as a polysemic religious space allows for an understanding of its hybrid Buddhist and idiosyncratic modalities, and of how a member experiences both modalities as she moves from the periphery to the center of the Garden of Truth. The organizational hierarchies that structure a member's goals and values within Shinnyo-en are also based on the sacred biography of the Itōs and grant them ultimate authority as the pinnacle of each hierarchy. This chapter covers the three primary organizational hierarchies of Shinnyo-en: the lineage system, spiritual elevation, and advancement in Chiryū Gakuin as a lay priest, which are based on the Itōs as mentors, as charismatic individuals endowed with exceptional spiritual powers, and as Buddhist masters possessing the highest priestly ranks that Shingon Buddhism can bestow.

The charismatic founding family binds both modalities together—the Buddhist and the idiosyncratic—through their attainment of Buddhist credentials and their hardships (Stalker 2008, 12), and through the practices they innovated. The Itōs' charisma is the bond that unites Shinnyo-en's two modalities, allowing the religious space they created to be simultaneously Buddhist and something unique. The Itōs' charisma is the justification for and object of their followers' devotion. Their "ever-presence" is quite literally a constant reinforcement that materializes throughout Shinnyo-en religious space, in both modalities. Shinnyo-en is a space for Buddhist-derived practices and goals, enabled and made sensible by the Itōs. Shinnyo-en is also a space for novel practices anchored to Tomoji's unique abilities and her sons' sacrifices. Both of these are fundamentally predicated on an acceptance of what Roy Rappaport might label the unquestionable ultimate sacred postulate<sup>77</sup> of the Itōs' hierarchical centrality, supremacy, and authority, which manifest in Shinnyo-en as organizational hierarchies. Shinnyo-en's ultimate sacred

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<sup>77</sup> "In sum, the expressions I have called 'Ultimate Sacred Postulates,' those crowning bodies of religious discourse, typically possess certain peculiar features. On the one hand they can be falsified neither logically nor empirically. On the other hand they can be verified neither objectively nor logically. And yet they are taken to be unquestionable. I take this characteristic to be of the essence, defining sanctity as the quality of unquestionableness imputed by congregations to postulates in their nature objectively unverifiable and absolutely unfalsifiable" (Rappaport 1999, 302).

postulate is that the religiously significant members of the Itō family are endowed with charismatic and spiritual powers, and are omniscient, omnipresent, and eternal. This sacred value is supported by the structure of the Shinnyo-en community, which is variously understood as a kind of Buddhist *sangha*, or *śāsana*<sup>78</sup> of the Itōs, and as an extended family, of which the Itōs are the “Shinnyo Parents” (*shinnyo sōoya sama* 真如双親様).

Shinnyo-en’s own explanations of its hierarchies map onto the two modalities explored in the previous two chapters. Each hierarchy is explained in terms of Buddhist lineage succession, often referring to the “dharma stream” (*hōryū* 法流). The concept of dharma stream is also expressed as a “bloodline” (*kechimyaku* 血脈) in China, Korea, and Japan, providing a metaphor of inheritance and kinship with the Buddha and the patriarchs. This bridges Shinnyo-en’s two modalities, taking a Buddhist concept and anchoring it to the idiosyncratic centrality of the Itōs. It implies that a more advanced or devoted Shinnyo-en member is spatially *closer* to the Itōs, and in a sense related to them as inheritors of their religious convictions and spiritual orientation.

#### 4.1 Lineage

The first hierarchy a member enters into is the lineage. Every member of Shinnyo-en joins through an existing member and is placed under his or her guidance. This mentor is called a “guiding parent” (*michibiki oya* 導き親), and the junior member is called their “guiding child” (*michibiki no ko* 導きの子). Guiding parents themselves have guiding parents, who also have guiding parents, and so forth. All of these members belong to a “lineage” (*suji* 経) under the leadership of a “lineage parent” (*suji oya* 経親). Several lineages are organized into “divisions” (*bukai* 部会), which are in turn organized into “districts” (*kyōku* 教区). This system establishes members

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<sup>78</sup> A *śāsana* is the particular “dispensation” or community of a buddha.

within a fictive kin relationship with the founding family and the lineage hierarchy through the notions of dharma stream and dharma bloodline.<sup>79</sup>

This hierarchical system is predicated on the practice of *otasuke* お助け (lit. “helping”), or “guiding” new members into the religion and encouraging their consistent practice and participation—that is, proselytization. All members are encouraged to advance in their efforts at *otasuke* until they become lineage parents themselves. While Shinnyo-en encourages donations, volunteer activities, and a number of other forms of practice, no one is allowed to advance in the lineage system—or any other hierarchy—without performing *otasuke*, which is seen as the height of compassionate or altruistic behavior. Before one is allowed to become a lineage parent, one must have “connected” a specific number of people to Shinnyo-en, and continued advancement requires that those people in turn connect new members as well.

The lineage system is an extension of the role that the Itōs themselves fulfilled as spiritual advisors when Shinnyo-en was still small enough for them to provide each member with individual guidance and attention. Connecting a person to Shinnyo-en means to take on the role of the Shinnyo Parents as a mentor and guide to the Garden of Truth. Any experience that one encounters—talking to others about Shinnyo-en, encouraging them to practice, trying to teach them about Shinnyo-en—gains context and meaning in terms of the Itōs’ own experiences performing those same tasks. Such stories from the Itōs’ sacred biography are recorded and constantly retold in Shinnyo-en publications.<sup>80</sup> Spiritual guides remind members during *sesshin* and *eza* of the Itōs hardships in guiding people to the Shinnyo-en teachings, tacitly admonishing the trainee to make similar efforts. This same theme is elaborated in dharma talks, sermons, Chiryū Gakuin lectures, and at informal home meetings. Even the clock becomes a reminder of the charismatic founding family’s sacred biography and each member’s continuous

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<sup>79</sup> For more information on the psychology of fictive kinship in religion see: Norenzayan 2013, 116, 138; and Nesse 1999.

<sup>80</sup> For example *The Path of Oneness* (2009) and *A Wisteria Cluster* (1992)

participation in it.<sup>81</sup> This constant repetition preserves the charisma of the founding family, and reinforces the lineage hierarchy.

The amount of influence that guiding and lineage parents have over one's practice in Shinnyo-en (and life in general) cannot be overstated, and the power imbalance inherent in the relationship is apparent in the fictive kinship terms themselves. Not only does the guiding parent have authority over how the guiding child understands and engages with Shinnyo-en practices and activities (their signature or at least their verbal permission is required for any number of activities). The guiding parent is also a kind of counselor for the guiding child. *Sesshin* encourages members to consult with their guiding parent about all types of matters: Shinnyo-en practice, doubts, hardships, questions, etc. The guiding parent (whose age or other relationships with the guiding child do not matter in Shinnyo-en religious space) is called upon to fulfill the role of the Itōs as a guide, mentor, and "spiritual friend" (Skt. *kalyāṇamitra*). The authority of one's guiding and lineage parents reinforces a hierarchy that is modeled upon and harkens back to the charisma of the Itōs at the very beginning of Shinnyo-en. Situating the charismatic founding family thus makes them the prototypical guiding parents, of whom active members become replicas.<sup>83</sup>

This first hierarchy may be considered primarily a function of the idiosyncratic modality. Advancement and attainment in the lineage system (i.e. by becoming a lineage parent) is only indirectly tied to Buddhism or to morality. However, Buddhist explanations for the structure of the lineage hierarchy, and explanations based on the roles of the Itōs also pull these institutional practices into a Buddhist context. The lineage system is sometimes likened to senior monks guiding novices in early Buddhism, but the fact remains that a lay hierarchy of the kind found in Shinnyo-en is idiosyncratic and contingent upon the charismatic

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<sup>81</sup> Members are encouraged to note the times of day when the Itōs passed away. Any time a member notices a number associated with one of the Itōs, it reminds her of them and the many metaphorical associations each family member holds. For example, seeing a numeral 2 reminds one of the second son, Yūichi, who died on July 2, 1952. Seeing 12:23 appear on the clock reminds one of Shinjō who passed away at that time on July 19, 1989.

<sup>83</sup> For more information on conceptual web theory and the prototype effect, particularly as these ideas apply to religion in Japan, see Josephson 2012, 74–79.

founding family. The lineage system is thus both an organizational particularity and idiosyncratic feature of Shinnyo-en.

#### 4.2 Priestly Level

After a person has been a Shinnyo-en member for one year and is a guiding parent themselves, he may apply to begin Chiryū Gakuin classes with their guiding and lineage parents' approval. As the member progresses through the three levels of the course, he is given a badge to wear on his surplice (*kesa* 袈裟) indicating his rank. Once all three levels have been completed, he is given another badge delineating his status as an “associate dharma teacher” (*kyōshi ho* 教師補), and after additional practices and initiations have been completed, he receives a “dharma teacher” (*kyōshi* 教師) badge. All of these stages are marked with ceremonies where Chiryū Gakuin students are reminded as they advance that they are following in the footsteps of the Itōs themselves.

Upon becoming a dharma teacher, the member receives the rank of “Deputy Vinaya Master” (*gon risshi* 權律師), the lowest of fifteen priestly ranks (*sōkai* 僧階) conferred in Shingon. This rank can be upgraded depending on how many people the member proselytizes from year to year, and on other requirements that the Office does not make transparent to the general membership. The badge of an ordinary *kyōshi* is octagonal and is made of brass-colored metal. Higher ranks are given round or golden badges, indicating that they have “polished” a few of their rough edges by guiding new people into Shinnyo-en and encouraging them in their practice. Some of the requirements for the higher ranks may involve becoming a lineage parent and then having guiding children who connect enough people to start their own lineages.

Once a member becomes a dharma teacher, he becomes eligible to receive lay ordination (*tokudō jukai* 得度受戒). A person may wait years until he is invited to Japan for this special ceremony currently conducted by Shinsō. Unqualified individuals are barred from entering the temple on the days these ceremonies are held, and once a person has been ordained he is allowed to wear Buddhist

vestments during certain important ceremonies during the year. As a person's priestly rank is upgraded, the color of this robe changes according to conventions used at Daigoji and throughout most of the Shingon denominations.

This hierarchy of lay priests within Shinnyo-en is positioned within both the Buddhist and idiosyncratic modalities of Shinnyo-en through the polysemous roles of the charismatic founding family. Whereas the lineage system is primarily idiosyncratic, this second hierarchy primarily operates within Shinnyo-en's Buddhist modality. Attainment here is likened to following in the footsteps of the Itōs, who themselves underwent Buddhist training and as Buddhist masters magnanimously allow their disciples to engage in priestly activities as laypeople.

The process of advancing in Chiryū Gakuin, however, is not based on one's understanding of Buddhist concepts. Lecture topics include the history of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* and its various versions, the meanings of ritual implements, and Buddhist iconography, but while interesting, these subjects are generally considered too cerebral and less important than the details of the Itōs' sacred biography. Exams at each level, for example, require memorization of Shinsō's annual slogans, or might ask for the date of the Itōs' wedding, the times of their deaths, or other information specific to the charismatic founding family. In Shinnyo-en, biographical information about the Itōs is understood as Buddhist knowledge; the Itō-centric content of Chiryū Gakuin is Shinnyo-en's idiosyncratic dharma.

### **4.3 Spiritual Level**

The final and perhaps most important hierarchy within Shinnyo-en is related to *sesshin* and the spiritual training program known as *eza* 会座 (lit. "assembly sitting," but usually translated as "spiritual elevation," from *rei-i kōjō* 靈位向上). Shinnyo-en classifies its members roughly into five categories based on the spiritual level they have attained through *eza* training. These five levels are *shōjō* 小乘 ("small vehicle"), *daijō* 大乘 ("large vehicle"), *kangi* 歡喜 ("joy"), *daikangi* 大歡喜 ("great joy"), and *reinō* 靈能 ("spiritual faculty"). When a new member joins, they begin at *shōjō*. After being a member for a year, engaging in *sesshin* and other required practices

including connecting the prescribed number of people, and receiving the approval of her lineage and guiding parents, a member is allowed to apply for *eza*. The Office evaluates these applications and may issue the member an *eza* card, which entitles her to attend *eza*. After attending several preliminary sessions called *shoza* 初座 (“preliminary sitting”), the member is then allowed to attend *eza*.

The general *eza* procedure for *daijō*, *kangi*, *daikangi* is described briefly in chapter two. While the details of the system and the meditational practices it involves are fascinating, my point in referring to it here is to point out that practice itself is another hierarchy focused on the charisma and authority of the Itōs. The *eza* system, like *sesshin*, underwent numerous changes during the lives of the Itōs (who created the system itself), and it continues to change slightly to this day. What has remained constant is the Itō-centric orientation of the practice, and the focus on the Itōs’ sacrality. The *eza* hierarchy is a compelling process with difficult but reachable goals for each member, providing a sense of advancement and catharsis as each level is reached. These levels are intended to reflect an individual’s advancement from a self-centered spirituality to a one that is concerned with other people’s salvation, and a growing desire to communicate widely the salvific benefits of Shinnyo-en and its charismatic founding family.

Members are discouraged from thinking of *eza* as a kind of test, or lording their spiritual level (*rei-i* 靈位) over others. Instead, people are asked to feel that their spiritual elevation represents an increasing capacity to embody the “heart” of the charismatic founding family, which is synonymous with *shinnyo* or buddhahood. The fourth stage, *reinō*—literally “spiritual faculty”—involves inheriting or “activating”<sup>84</sup> a spiritual ability given meaning by the lives, deaths, and afterlives of the Ito family. This ability is unique to Shinnyo-en and can at this time only be imparted and ratified by Shinsō herself.

The *eza* hierarchy is an idiosyncratic feature of Shinnyo-en, innovated by the charismatic founding family, but it is also imbued with Buddhist meaning, and so it

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<sup>84</sup> Elevation to *reinō* takes place during special *eza* sittings called *reinō hatsudō* 靈能発動 (lit. “spiritual faculty activation”), during which Shinsō conveys the “spiritual breath” (*rei kokyū* 靈呼吸) to advanced trainees who have passed several meditational “screenings” (*bodai-e* 菩提会).

too is polysemic. Shinjō explained that *reinō* is a form of spiritual power (*jintsū* 神通; Skt. *abhijñā*) that is not unlike those described in even the earliest Buddhist sutras (*The Path of Oneness* 2009, 38, 201). The Buddha and several of his disciples, most notably Maudgalyāyana, are said to have possessed and used psychic abilities, and Shinjō cites the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, which also promises miraculous powers to those who read and uphold the Buddha's final teachings (Itō 2001, 102–5; *The Path of Oneness* 2009, 75, 201–4). It is the Itōs' hereditary spiritual abilities, however, that are at the pinnacle of the *eza* hierarchy. The concealment and mystery surrounding spiritual guides and their activities, rituals, and abilities confers upon them respect, power, and status that is theirs alone within Shinnyo-en (Shiramizu 1979).

#### **4.4 Women in Shinnyo-en**

The hierarchies of Shinnyo-en are also tied to sociological questions of gendered social roles and how they manifest in NRMs. Atsuko Usui (2003) has written on Shinnyo-en's appeal to women, particularly through the image of Shinsō and Tomoji as modern female Buddhist leaders, and the personally empowering opportunities to assume leadership roles in Shinnyo-en's hierarchies. Usui argues that women's involvement in Shinnyo-en avoids what other scholars have suggested to be an ironic perpetuation of their own subordination to male-dominated religious structures (2003, 217). My own research and experience suggests, however, that this is not the case. Although this subject requires further attention, it is worth mentioning here because it is related to Shinnyo-en's hierarchies, and because the role of women in Shinnyo-en is closely tied to the Itōs, especially Tomoji.

While it is true that women occupy positions of leadership in Shinnyo-en (as guiding and lineage parents), traditional gender roles from the early and mid-nineteenth century, and demeaning views of women that are preserved in Buddhism, color women's experience of Shinnyo-en. Within the last two decades, Shinnyo-en had to adjust a set of Tomoji's teachings called her "kitchen sermons," which included her "seventeen teachings for women." Tomoji is portrayed as a humble, industrious, kind-but-strict woman who was a mother, a wife, her

husband's closest disciple, a medium, and by extension a mother to all the members of Shinnyo-en. Her white apron is a visible reminder of the domestic image that accreted around her, and stories of her cleaning toilets, shoes, and a muddied car are believed to capture her humble character. She is also portrayed as a longsuffering mother and wife, forgoing meals so that her husband or children can eat. Of course the loss of her two sons is also incorporated into a particular, gendered pathos that becomes the normative model especially for female members. Before being revised, Tomoji's "seventeen teachings" included "Bring out your virtues as a woman," "Don't forget your woman's strengths and weaknesses," and other gendered exhortations regarding gossip, purity, and modesty (*The Path of Oneness* 2009, 487).

Relatively innocuous in their current English form, these and other gendered teachings from Tomoji effect female members of Shinnyo-en in ways that perpetuate conservative Japanese gender roles. For example, female spiritual guides wear a white apron while giving *sesshin*, both to emulate Tomoji who wore one, and out of a concern for modesty. Female *sesshin* trainees often place a handkerchief on their lap for the same reasons. Men are not required to wear any extra garment while performing *sesshin*. Within the Office, female staff (with the exception of the Itōs' daughters) are not allowed to engage in priestly training, as men are. Female staff members who reside in the Office's dormitory were not allowed to carry cellphones until only recently, and they are made to wear ill-fitting uniforms. Female staff members are not allowed to touch or clean the altar, although they have been allowed to offer flowers to a Buddhist deity named Uchūṣma *vidya-rāja* (Ususama Myōō 烏枢沙摩明王), who is enshrined in the washrooms of Shinnyo-en temples. Although these conventions are beginning to change, they do challenge Usui's assessment of Shinnyo-en as egalitarian. Nevertheless, it must be noted that gendered social and religious roles (or the treatment of non-Japanese members, sexual minorities, and others) in Shinnyo-en are not disconnected from the teachings of the Itōs or from the lessons inculcated through their sacred biography.

#### **4.5 Summary**

The organizational hierarchies of Shinnyo-en were innovated by the Itōs and later shaped by Shinsō and the Office to direct the devotion of members toward the charismatic founding family. Each hierarchy provides the member with a new family and an almost endless possibility of advancement, but positions the Itōs at an unattainable height in their identity as charismatic founders. These hierarchies direct members toward the Itōs in terms of Shinnyo-en's religious space—one is guided towards them, moves closer to them, and in fact comes to feel intimately related to them by aspiring to progress through many levels of advancement.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The statue of Acala that the Itōs enshrined in 1935 is rumored to be the work of Unkei 運慶 (d. 1223), a prominent Buddhist artist of the Kamakura period (1185–1333).<sup>85</sup> Typically, Acala is depicted with one eye looking up and the other looking down, but the one that came into the Itōs' possession was different in that both eyes look straight forward. When the young Shinjō told other Shingon novices that his Acala statue had normal eyes, some thought he was lying and others congratulated him for encountering something so auspicious. One monk pointed out that Kakuban 覺鑊 (1094–1193)—Shingon reformer and founder of the “New Shingon School” (Shingi Shingon-shū 新義真言宗)—possessed an Acala statue with normal eyes. The monk told Shinjō that whoever comes into possession of an Acala image with normal eyes is destined to become the founder of a new sect, just as Kakuban had:

As a rule, the teachings that are attributed to Achala are not linked with the Nirvana Sutra, but the intense spiritual nature of our Achala image—what might be called his dharma nature—was such that we were eventually led to become independent of the Shingon tradition, and start our own. There is no doubt that our Achala ensured that this would happen. (Itō 1965, 1–2)

Shinjō obviously felt from the beginning that his role and mission were Buddhist in nature, and that his teachings were contiguous with Shingon esoteric teachings.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, however, Shinjō was aware that he was founding a new tradition that offered unique practices anchored to the sacred biography of his family.

...[N]ow that Shojushinin<sup>87</sup> and I have established this path of *shinnyo* and opened it up, I believe others should be able to walk it without going through the hardships we experienced. The foundation laid by Kyodoin<sup>88</sup> and Shindoin,<sup>89</sup> together with the spirit of embracement embodied by Shojushinin, now manifests as support from the spiritual realm. A path to *shinnyo* has been cleared, and I would like all of you to walk it so that you may find joy in your life and assist others to do the same. (Itō 2012)

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<sup>85</sup> Mason 2005, 188

<sup>86</sup> Excerpts from Shinjō's personal diaries provide clear evidence for his Buddhist self-understanding, and can be found in *House of Resolve* 2001, 9–24.

<sup>87</sup> Tomoji

<sup>88</sup> Chibun

<sup>89</sup> Yūichi

The relationship between Shingon and Shinnyo-en—established and “new”—is a function of the two modalities that exist simultaneously within the Garden of Truth. In chapter two, we saw how Shinnyo-en conceives of and presents itself as Buddhist in its ceremonies and media. Chapter three introduced Shinnyo-en’s idiosyncratic modality, most clearly represented by novel practices such as *sesshin* and spiritual elevation. Chapter four analyzed how both modalities are built into the structure of Shinnyo-en’s organizational hierarchies. Members can experience both modalities together within Shinnyo-en’s conceptual religious space, and gradually move from the Buddhist to the idiosyncratic modality as they walk deeper into the Garden of Truth, toward the Itōs who are at its center.

Shinnyo-en and other Buddhist-derived movements arose within a century of the emergence of modern religion in Japan, and this certainly affects the topography of Shinnyo-en—its organization, its beliefs, and its values. In *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, Jason Josephson tracks the creation of “religion” (*shūkyō* 宗教) in modern Japan as part of a diplomatic process involving Japanese thinkers’ and lawmakers’ interactions with Europeans and Americans in the latter half of the nineteenth century (2012, 256–59). The values of secularism and Buddhist modernism, as well as the challenges of rapid modernization all combined to make a movement such as Shinnyo-en possible. However, Shinnyo-en is distinguished from both traditional Buddhism and modernist Buddhism by its idiosyncratic devotion to the charismatic founding family and practices involving the internalization of their sacred biography.

The creation of secular spaces has also been associated with the disappearance of religion from the public sphere (Araki 2003, 220), and the simultaneous creation of multiple alternative spaces to fill that vacuum. Charles Taylor argues that secularity causes a change in the conditions of religious belief in that alternatives (including secular humanism) become thinkable, viable conceptual spaces for people to inhabit (2007, 26–27). The creation of the “Shinto Secular” in Japan was one such alternative constructed in the modern period (Josephson 2012, 133), which substituted nationalism for its version of human fulfillment. The NRMs

of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Japan are other examples of alternative religious spaces that became thinkable and viable only during the last two centuries. The changes Japan underwent during that time necessitated new frameworks and models for human fulfillment. Therefore, while I have argued that the NRM category is problematic, it does embrace a group of movements that had their beginnings during a time when established religious frameworks were being reevaluated and rebuilt. Due to reforms that rendered certain theories, beliefs, and experiences of the world too naïve and no longer valid, and due to the introduction of alternatives like secularism, NRMs arose as alternatives in their own right. NRMs were reformulations of belief that accommodated considerations that simply had not existed or been previously possible. NRMs locate human fulfillment in terms suited to the modern and the secular (Taylor 2007, 15). They include combinations of old “spaces” and introduce idiosyncratic adjustments and innovations that made sense to their founders and followers. The transmission of charisma through those innovations is a kind of renewable source of inspiration that drives evolution and expansion in successful NRMs.

The “nova effect” of Japanese NRMs bursting into existence can be understood as part of an era—emerging during an era—characterized by a legal assurance of freedom of religion (Taylor 2007, 423). Secularism allows for alternatives characterized by their idiosyncrasy, hybridity, and blurring of boundaries. Such religions were, in a bygone era, suppressed as “heresies.” NRMs are religious spaces that offer peculiar or idiosyncratic alternatives to their neighboring conceptual spaces—secular space, modern social space, the spaces of “established” religions. I believe similar cases can be made for Christianity in first century Palestine, Mormonism in nineteenth century America, Nichiren Buddhism in thirteenth century Japan, or Quakerism in seventeenth century England. Each began within a parent tradition by introducing idiosyncrasy or innovation based on historical contingencies and particularities of belief or practice. Understanding religions in this way makes much more sense in terms of cultural evolution; regarding NRMs otherwise would entail a kind of “creationist” theory of religion that fails to explain religions and how they change over time.

Approaching Shinnyo-en as a non-locative or conceptual space has allowed us to analyze two modalities (of which members are not necessarily aware). It also provides us with a model and a metaphor for understanding how a member experiences the Garden of Truth. Before entering this garden, Shinnyo-en appears somewhat mysterious—parts of the garden are concealed and cannot be seen from outside. Voices from within (members, films, publications) explain that Shinnyo-en is a place of Buddhist training and point out specific landmarks to prove that this is the case: Shinjō’s Buddhist training, Buddhist iconography, Shingon ritual paraphernalia, and a positive relationship with Daigoji monastery. After having a look around in this part of the garden, the new member’s many “guides” might lead her deeper into Shinnyo-en, encouraging her to walk the path of the Itōs in order to solve her problems, become a better person, or obtain higher spiritual attainment by “guiding” other people. New landmarks are introduced as the member begins to move toward the center of Shinnyo-en—monuments to the charismatic founding family line her path, and each step she takes is another personal experience of reflecting on, appreciating, and internalizing those monuments. As she continues to explore the Garden of Truth, the member moves through a number of structures built by the Itōs. These are the idiosyncratic beliefs, practices, and hierarchies of Shinnyo-en: lineage, priestly level, and spiritual level. At the center of the garden, the member finds golden busts of the charismatic founders. They are lifeless but speak to her in the voice of her own experiences and imagined familiarity, made real as she moved from outside Shinnyo-en to its very center, experiencing both its Buddhist and idiosyncratic modalities along the way.

What I have presented here is only an overture to the work that remains to be done on Shinnyo-en. A closer look at Shinnyo-en rituals in terms of their “costliness” to participants, their frequency and intensity may obtain to explaining why Shinnyo-en has been so successful among the many Japanese Buddhist-derived NRMs.<sup>90</sup> Shinjō crafted the doctrines, practices, and culture of Shinnyo-en with great precision over a period of more than fifty years, leaving scholars with a tremendous

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<sup>90</sup> For more on costly signaling in religious ritual, see Whitehouse 2004.

task in the way of trying to better understand the Itōs and the religion they inspired. Shinnyo-en practices and beliefs not covered in this paper will in the future contribute to the scholarly understanding of Buddhist-derived NRMs.

The spatial model I have proposed based on the case of Shinnyo-en offers insight into how Buddhist-derived NRMs can be tied to *and* distinct from established traditions. This model is also a framework for understanding how adherents move through and inhabit their religion. After internalizing the Itōs' sacred biography and learning to perceive their constant presence, one's entire life—the entire world—can be incorporated into the Garden of Truth, which is perhaps Shinnyo-en's way of re-enchanting the world.

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## Appendix 1 — The Itōs

### The Shinnyo Parents (Sōoya-sama 双親様)

Shinjō (born Fumiaki Itō 文明伊藤)

March 28, 1906 – July 19, 1989

Priestly name: Shinjō 真乗

Posthumous name: Shinnyo Kyōshu Kongōshin'in Jōjū Guhō Shinjō Dai Hon-i  
真如教主金剛身院常住救鳳真乗大本位

Titles: Master (*kyōshū* 教主), Founder/Patriarch (*kaisō* 開祖)

Known in Shinnyo-en as: Kyōshū-sama 教主様

Tomoji (born Tomoji Uchida 友司内田)

May 9, 1912 – August 6, 1967

Priestly name: Shinnyo 真如

Posthumous name: Shinnyo Reisō Shōjushin'in Tomoji Jiō Daisōjō  
真如靈祖撰受心院友司慈風大僧正

Titles: Head of Shinnyo-en (*enshū* 苑主), Spiritual Source (*reisō* 靈祖)

Known in Shinnyo-en as: Shōjushin'in-sama 撰受心院様, Enshu-sama 苑主様 (1951–1967)

### The Two Dōjis (Ryōdōji-sama 兩童子様)

Chibun 智文

July 29, 1934 – June 9, 1936

Posthumous name: Kyōdōin Chibun Zendōji 教導院智文善童子

Known in Shinnyo-en as: Kyōdōin-sama 教導院様

Yūichi 友一

April 8, 1937 – July 2, 1952

Posthumous name: Shindōin Yūichi Honbushō-i 真導院友一本不生位

Known in Shinnyo-en as: Shindōin-sama 真導院様

### The Two Dharma Successors (Ryōhosshi 兩法嗣) or the Two Ever Wise Ones (Ryōjōe 兩常慧)\*

Shinsō (born Masako Itō 真砂子伊藤)

b. April 25, 1942

Priestly name: Shinnyo Keishū Kongōhōin Shinsō Daisōjō 真如繼主金剛寶院真聰大僧正

Titles: Head of Shinnyo-en (*enshū* 苑主), Successor (*keishū* 繼主)

Known in Shinnyo-en as: Keishū-sama 繼主様

Shinrei (born Shizuko Itō 志づ子伊藤)

b. October 5, 1943

Priestly name: Shinrei 真玲 (longer version unknown)

Titles: currently nominal titles only

Known in Shinnyo-en as: Shinrei-sama 真玲様, Yōshu-sama 雍主 (only until the mid-1990s)

\* These titles are from a particular era in Shinnyo-en history and were only used from the 1980s until the mid-1990s when Shinrei was stripped of all religious duties. Today, only Shinsō carries charismatic authority for Shinnyo-en. On March 29, 2013, Shinsō announced that Takashi Torikai 尚之鳥飼 will be her successor.

\*\* Information on this page was gathered from *The Path of Oneness*, *The Naigai Jiho* 内外時報 1991, 9, and *In the Brilliant Light*, 5.

## Appendix 2 — The Shinnyo-en Calendric Cycle

### January

- 1 — New Year's
- 4 — Year's First Spiritual Consolatory Service
- 20 — Annual Training Begins

### February

- 2 — Annual Training Ends
- 3 — Setsubun 節分
- 8 — Day to Mark the Founding of the Shinnyo Teaching
- 15 — Feast of Nirvāṇa

### March

- 20 — Spring Higan (*shunki higan* 春季彼岸)
- 28 — Festival of the Ever-Present (Shinjō's birthday)

### April

- 8 — Festival of the Buddha's Birth (and Yūichi's birthday)

### May

- 9 — Ogen Festival (Tomoji's birthday)
- Hawai'i Lanter Floating (Memorial Day, USA)

### June

- 9 — Memorial for Chibun

### July

- 2 — Memorial for Yūichi
- 15 — Ullambana (*urabon e* 盂蘭盆会)
- 19 — Memorial for Shinjō

### August

- 6 — Memorial for Tomoji
- 15 — Water Consolatory Service

### September

- 23 — Autumn Higan (*shūki higan* 秋季彼岸)

### October

- 4 — Saitō Homa 齊燈護摩

### November

- 3 — Festival of Oneness (*ichinyo matsuri* 一如祭)

### December

- 8 — Feast of Enlightenment
- 21 — Star Ritual (*hoshiku* 星供)
- 28 — Year-end Homa

The date of *saisho goma* 濟撰護摩 varies.

\* In fact, almost every day of the year is associated with an event in Shinnyo-en history that refers members to the charismatic founding family.

### Important Times of Day

- 12:23 AM — the time of Shinjō's death
- 2:05 AM — the time of Chibun's death
- 6:55 AM — the time of Yūichi's death
- 5:10 PM — the time of Tomoji's death