

What is Meant by Sonomama in Asahara Saichi's Poems

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Asahara

Saichi (1850-1932) was a Shin Buddhist devotee of the kind we call myokonin. The Japanese word "myokonin" is not in fact a proper noun but a term used to refer to certain people in the Shin Buddhist tradition who lived their lives with pure faith in Amida Buddha.

Generally speaking myokonin were characterized by their piousness, un-worldliness, liveliness, good-heartedness and profound spirituality. According to the records of myokonin such as *The Biographies of Myokonin* and *The Further Biographies of Myokonin*, published in the late Edo Period, most of the myokonin were illiterate. Despite their lack of formal education, however, or perhaps even because of it, their spirit was pure and unaffected. They expressed directly what they had innerly experienced. When they tried to express themselves, whether in words or actions, what they said or did came straight from their innermost hearts and pointed directly to the truth of what they had experienced.

Influenced

by the successful publication of *The Biographies of Myokonin* and *The Further Biographies of Myokonin* that recorded the words and deeds of some 150 myokonin, there later appeared other biographies, principally in the form of booklets, such as *The Record of the Way of Life of Shoma* (Shoma arinomama no ki).

These

biographies, however, were compiled by Shin Buddhist priests on the basis of interviews and secondary reports. Since the compilers' own commentaries and interpretations are mixed up with the descriptions of the words and deeds of the myokonin, it is not easy for us to achieve any kind of contact with the living personalities of the myokonin themselves.

It is in this

respect that the diaries of Asahara Saichi are of such particular value, providing as they do a personal record of his own spiritual insights written by himself day after day over a period of eighteen years, from the autumn of 1913 until his death early in 1932. The poems he entered in his diaries are estimated to number upward of ten thousand. Saichi is believed to have been composing verses at an average of two a day throughout the last seventeen years of his life.

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title=Konomama - Sonomama&heading=Konomama - Sonomama}Among the existing thousands of verses composed by Saichi there are a number of poems that refer to the naturalness of the Shin Buddhist faith-experience by using the Japanese words konomama ("just as I am") and sonomama ("just as you are"). Apparently Saichi was aware of the difference between these two adverbial terms, understanding sonomama as

pointing to something higher than konomama. The only one exception is a poem assumed, according to my own textual analysis of the special combination of Japanese letters and Chinese characters used by Saichi himself, to have been written before May 1917. Only in this poem is konomama used to represent a very elevated state of mind. Saichi says:

Though I pronounce konomama ("just as I am") with my mouth,
I comprehend it not.
For anyone who doesn't comprehend konomama,
Konomama will not exist.
One who listens to the Dharma carelessly
Will not understand konomama,
For he has a false view.
It is none other than I, Saichi, who has a false view.

(From one of the notebooks written before May of 1917)

The Myokonin Asahara Saichi shu, p.289

As far as this verse is concerned, the word konomama is used positively to point to something superior. Certainly there is some justification for such usage, konomama being a living expression uttered at the very moment of innermost faith-experience, when the devotee is embraced by the great compassion of Amida Buddha.

As regards this special word, konomama, Saichi's feeling for the word underwent a considerable change and before long became quite negative as a result of the deep introspection occasioned in him by his faith-experience itself.

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title=Later Poems&heading=Later Poems}I would like to give some examples of this change taken from poems he composed at a later date.

Deceived by my own mind

That thinks I will be saved konomama ("just as I am"),

I don't know the mind of Namu-Amida-Butsu.

Following the voice of Namu-Amida-Butsu:

"Trust me,"

Entrust yourself to Namu-Amida-Butsu.

(From one of the notebooks written before May of 1917)

The Myokonin Asahara Saichi shu, p. 322

Thinking I could be here

In this village konomama ("just as I am")

Cleared me of all doubt.

It is impossible, however,

For ordinary people [like me]

To maintain the state of mind called konomama.

When I have received the Compassion of Oya (Amida Buddha) just as it works on me

And look back at the way I received the Compassion,

I always find Oya's Compassion has the initiative.

How grateful I am for such kindness!

(From one of the notes written before May of 1917)

The Myokonin Asahara Saichi shu, p. 211

Don't say anything wrong!

[The reality of faith-experience] is not konomama ("just as I am").

Although the word sounds good,

The root of self-power remains therein.

Do meet the true teaching as soon as possible!

(From one of the notebooks written after May of 1917)

The Myokonin Asahara Saichi shu, p. 418

If you understand

Birth will be attained konomama ("just as I am"),

You are mistaken.

It is not in the way of konomama

That you can attain Birth in the Pure Land;

The cause of Birth [in the Pure Land] is

Nothing other than your 'Namu' ("taking refuge in" [Amida]).

(From one of the notebooks written in 1922)

The Myokonin Asahara Saichi shu, p. 157

In contrast to the first poem, these four later ones reveal a negative attitude to the notion of konomama. Why did this change come about?

As mentioned before, Saichi used not only konomama but also another word, sonomama, to give expression to the naturalness of his faith-experience. In Saichi's poems both konomama and sonomama are used to refer to the relationship between Saichi and Amida Buddha, konomama meaning "just as I am," and sonomama, "just as you are," as if Amida Buddha were directly talking to him.

To express the naturalness of our religious experience there is another similar word, arinomama. This is a rather more objective expression. Whilst the other two words are used to express faith-experience personally, arinomama describes the religious experience objectively.

Of these three words standing for the Sanskrit tathA and also the Chinese character ju, (Jp. nyo), arinomama is the most objective. This Buddhist notion of naturalness is usually translated into English as Suchness or Thusness and sometimes as 'as-it-isness.' Both konomama and sonomama appear in Saichi's poems to show how the devotee is involved in his relationship with Amida Buddha. If arinomama can be translated as as-it-isness, konomama may be rendered as "as I am," meaning salvation of me just as I am, and sonomama, as "as you are," meaning salvation of you just as you are.

Even if you have attained pure faith in Amida Buddha, if you try to repeat konomama, thinking I am embraced in Amida's compassion "just as I am," then you are deceiving yourself. Konomama is a living religious expression only if it is uttered at the very moment of salvation. After losing the feeling of unity with Amida Buddha, however, konomama will turn into an empty word and sound vain and pretentious. Self-affirmation in terms of konomama is a self-centred interpretation of the reality of faith-experience.

In contrast to this
sonomama is always a dynamic living expression, a message addressed to
the devotee from Amida Buddha himself. Sonomama is Amida's voice:
"Entrust yourself just as you are." It is a message of unconditional
love addressed to us from Amida Buddha. Saichi says:

Oya-sama who calls me to come sonomama ("just as you are")

Is Amida Buddha that was enlightened countless eons ago,
Namu-Amida-Butsu as the oneness of the self and the Dharma.

(From one of the notebooks written in 1915)

The Myokonin Asahara Saichi shu, p. 60

Outside the [compassionate] mind of sonomama ("just as you are")

There is no other mind to speak about.

It is Amida's compassion to take you [to the Pure Land] sonomama.

On the part of those who receive [the compassion]

We realise how false-viewed we are.

We come to realise both the Dharma and the self.

If you realise them you can't miss [the crucial point].

The oneness of the self and the Dharma is nothing other than this.

Those who fail to understand this

Will eventually be destined to suffer in hell for a long, long time.

[What you do] Now is important.

Now you can decide [which direction to take] as you like.

Why don't you listen to the Dharma seriously?

How regrettable it is!

(From one of the notebooks written before May of 1917)

The Myokonin Asahara Saichi shu, pp. 240-241

What is the reason for Saichi's fondness of the word sonomama? It is because sonomama is the voice of Amida that Saichi heard directly addressed to him.

Despite his lack of schooling, Saichi succeeded in expressing in words the subtle difference between konomama and sonomama with wisdom gained through his faith-experience. It is indeed a marvellous fact.

If you take careful account of the dates those poems were composed, it becomes immediately clear that Saichi's awareness of the difference between konomama and sonomama came about at some very early stage in his long history of composing religious poems, probably sometime after the autumn of 1913 and before the spring of 1915.

To conclude my talk I would like to draw your attention for a few minutes to the notion of naturalness in Shin Buddhism. Shin Buddhists talk about three kinds of naturalness: 1) The Naturalness of Karma, 2) The Naturalness of Non-doing (content of Enlightenment), 3) The Naturalness of the Power of the Original Prayer. All that I can really do here, however, is give you an idea of how to understand Saichi's words, konomama and sonomama. What I would like to say very briefly is that konomama ("as I am"), arinomama ("as it is") and sonomama ("as you are") can be understood as pertaining respectively to the naturalness of karma, to the naturalness of Non-doing and to the naturalness of the Power of the Original Prayer. In short Saichi's sonomama represents the essence of Shin Buddhism, the naturalness of the Power of Original

Prayer, the naturalness in other words of Other Power itself.

Thank you.

Kemmyo Taira Sato