

Notions of Secrecy in a New Religious Movement in Japan: A study of Shinnyo-en

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Introduction

In this article, I shall introduce a modern form of Buddhist esotericism that is found in Shinnyo-en 真如苑, a Japanese new religious movement. In the first part, I will outline the main characteristics of esotericism in Shinnyo-en as presented by the group itself. The way in which the group relates to traditional Buddhist esotericism reveals some basic elements of its self-understanding as a modern Buddhist movement. Thus, the first part focuses on notions of secrecy in doctrine and practice of Shinnyo-en. The second part deals with the functions of the so-called *shinnyo* esotericism. In particular, I want to draw attention to its impact on the social structure of the Shinnyo-en community by linking the concepts of secrecy to the social organization and interaction within the group.

Shinnyo-en was founded by Itō Shinjō 伊藤真乗 (1906-89) and his wife Tomoji 友司 (1912-67). Itō worked for an aeronautical construction company in Tachikawa before he and his wife turned to religious activities in the 1930s. These activities were based on the divination method practiced in Shinjō's family and the spiritual faculties his wife had inherited from her grandmother and aunt.¹ The two founded a religious association that was institutionally linked to the Daigo-branch of Shingon Buddhism. They engaged in a form of practical salvation work by using their respective abilities to help people overcome illness and suffering.² Soon after, Shinjō started his training at Daigo-ji 醍醐寺, reaching the rank of *dai-ajari* 大阿闍梨. He received the initiations of *e'in kanjō* 恵印灌頂 and *kontai ryōbu denpō kanjō* 金胎两部灌頂 in 1939 and in 1941. After World War II, the group separated from Shingon and became an independent religious organization called "Makoto Kyōdan" まこと教団. Its main characteristic was a meditation practice called *makoto shugyō yōtei* (まこと修行要諦, "the secret of the true religious practice"). A modified style of that meditation is still the central element of religious practice in Shinnyo-en today.³ The group was

1 Itō Shinjō, *Ichinyo no michi*, (Tachikawa: Shinnyoen kyōgakubu, 1997² [1957]), 166, 345-348. See also AKIBA Yutaka, „Shinnyo reinō to reii kōjō”, in SHIOBARA Tsutomu, ed., *Shūkyō kōdō to shakaiteki nettowāku, Gendai Nihon ni okeru nettowāku no kenkyū* (Kyōto: Kōrosha, 1992), 231f.

2 Itō, *Ichinyo*, 355-358.

3 Itō, *Ichinyo*, 368-374.

renamed “Shinnyo-en” 真如苑 (“Garden of Suchness”) when it received the status of a religious corporation (*shūkyō hōjin* 宗教法人) in 1953.⁴

Shinnyo-en emphasizes the fundamental meaning of Shingon thought and ritual in its religious life. At the same time, it claims to complement and surpass the existing esotericism of Shingon Buddhism (*tōmitsu* 東密) and Tendai Buddhism (*taimitsu* 台密) by incorporating the so-called “*shinnyo* esotericism” (*shinnyo mitsu* 真如密), its own set of teachings and practice. The concept of *shinnyo* esotericism was developed by Itō Shinjō and is supposed to “have brought new life to esoteric Buddhism”⁵ by offering a way to enlightenment that is open to all. The group sees its main difference to ‘traditional’ esoteric Buddhism in the intention to disclose the secret teachings of the ‘dharma body’ (*hosshin* 法身) of Buddha to all people.⁶

Shinnyo esotericism

Shinnyo esotericism is claimed to rest on three pillars:

1. Particular spiritual faculties (*reinō* 靈能) that are used in the meditation practice of *sesshin shugyō* 接心修行;
2. the adaptation of Shingon teachings and practice (*hōryū ketsumyaku* 法流血脈);
3. a specific textual foundation, namely the sutra *Daihatsu nehanyō* 大般涅槃經 (*Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*).⁷

Paradoxically, *shinnyo* esotericism is depicted in official self-introductions as a combination of exoteric and esoteric elements. For example, Itō Shinjō appreciated the sutra *Daihatsu nehanyō* as an “*exoteric* explanation for *esoteric* principles”.⁸ The following introduction of *shinnyo* esotericism will focus on the concept of salvation and the path to salvation as two topics in which secrecy plays an important role.

Salvation

Salvation in Shinnyo-en is perceived in the following terms: It is described as becoming aware of one’s inherent Buddha nature (*bussō* 佛性) and realizing the unity with Buddha and the truth he embodies (*shinnyo ichinyo* 真如一如). Besides, it is characterized as realizing the state of nirvana and enjoying its four virtues: permanence, bliss, self and purity (*jō-raku-ga-jō* 常樂我淨).⁹

4 Itō, *Ichinyo*, 368-372, 390-393.

5 *Budda saigo no oshie. Shinnyoen – Nehanyō ni ikiru hitobito*, (Tōkyō: Mainichi Shinbunsha, 2001), 21.

6 *A Walk Through the Garden. Shinnyo-en From Different Perspectives*, (Tachikawa: International Affairs Department of Shinnyo-en, 1998), 36; Itō, *Ichinyo*, 163.

7 *A Walk*, 31.

8 *A Walk*, 36.

9 Itō, *Ichinyo*, 253, 292.

In its concept of salvation, Shinnyo-en clearly refers to the notion of secrecy in esoteric Buddhism. In Japanese Buddhism, the term *mikkyō* 密教 (“secret teachings”) as opposed to *kyōgyō* 顯教 (“exoteric teachings”) depicts those teachings of Buddha that have not been revealed in words. Instead, they can only be perceived by experiencing one’s unity (or: identity) with Buddha. The means to achieve this aim is the so-called *sanmitsu kaji* 三密加持¹⁰, the fusion of the three secrets (*sanmitsu*) of the dharma body (*hosshin* 法身) of Buddha with the practices of body, mouth and mind engaged in by the practitioner. In Shingon-Buddhism, the practitioner strives to unite with the secret teachings of the universal Buddha Dainichi nyorai (大日如来; skt. Mahāvairocana) as revealed through his body, mouth and mind by forming a specific hand gesture (*in* 印; skt. *mudrā*), invoking secret verses (*shingon* 真言; skt. *mantra*) and immersing into meditation. Doing so, the practitioner’s aspiration to realize his Buddhahood meets Dainichi’s desire to reveal truth – or “suchness” (*shinnyo* 真如) – to the practitioner. In Kūkai’s words, Buddha’s compassion is fused with the practitioner’s faith.¹¹

Whereas in Shingon Buddhism, the dharma body is personified in Dainichi nyorai, Shinnyo-en equates it with the so-called Kuon jōjū shakamuni nyorai 久遠常住釈迦牟尼, the “Buddha Śākyamuni of eternal existence”. This Buddha is a neologism created by Itō Shinjō. By combining the name of the historical Buddha with the terms *kuon* and *jōjū*, he wanted to stress the immeasurable duration of Śākyamuni’s salvation work and existence in nirvana.

In order to legitimize the importance he attributes to this Buddha, Itō refers to the sutra *Daihatsu nehanyō* and its assertion of the beginning- and endlessness of the dharma body. The sutra stresses the meaning of the dharma body as the real essence of Buddha and its contribution to the salvation of all people by working as their inherent Buddha nature.¹²

Kuon jōjū shakamuni nyorai is regarded as surpassing all other Buddhas, as they are all included in his teachings. It is argued that the teachings about *nirvāṇa* in the *sūtra Daihatsu nehanyō* (*Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*) – conceived as Śākyamuni’s final words – comprise all other esoteric teachings and practices. Consequently, they also include the teaching on Dainichi nyorai and all other Buddhas. Without Śākyamuni’s teaching, it is claimed, there would be no concept of Dainichi nyorai.¹³

Another particularity can be seen in the understanding of *sanmitsu kaji*. Shinnyo-en describes the ritual requirements for realizing one’s Buddha nature and unity with Buddha in accordance with Shingon-Buddhism: the forming of a

10 On *sanmitsu kaji* see for example KIYOTA Minoru, *Shingon Buddhism: Theory and Practice*, (Los Angeles; Tōkyō: Buddhist Books International, 1978), 69-71. An easy to understand, but nevertheless detailed description can be found in HANAYAMA Shōyū, *Mikkyō no subete. All about Esoteric Buddhism*, (Tōkyō: Kōbunsha, 1999 [1998]), 59-70.

11 KIYOTA, *Shingon Buddhism*, 69f.

12 See for example SŌGŌ BUKKYŌ DAIJITEN HENSHŪ IINKAI, ed., *Sōgō bukkyō daijiten II*, (Kyōto: Hōzōkan 1987), 1133f.

13 “Yasashii kyōgaku: Kuon jōjū shakamuni nyorai”, in *Naigai Jihō* 594, (2001), 8.

hand gesture, the invoking of secret verses and the meditation.¹⁴ Still, rather than focusing on the ritual or “phenomenal” (*usō* 有相) aspects of *sanmitsu kaji*, Shinnyo-en stresses the moral or “non-phenomenal” (*musō* 無相) dimension of the concept, namely its application to the deeds of body, mouth and mind in everyday life. The believers are encouraged to perfect their conduct, speech and attitude in order to merge with the three mysteries of Buddha. Itō Shinjō, his wife and their two sons are portrayed as models who have succeeded in realizing this ideal.¹⁵

In regard to notions of secrecy, the concept of salvation in Shinnyo-en demonstrates a tendency towards disclosure of secrecy: In order to make the secret teachings of Buddha accessible to as many people as possible, the ritual requirements for achieving that goal are *devaluated* in favour of a *reevaluation* of the moral requirements. A similar tendency can be observed in the path to salvation as it is taught by the group.

Path to salvation

As we have seen, salvation in Shinnyo-en is identified with enlightenment and the state of nirvana. In order to achieve enlightenment, the believers are expected to constantly improve their spiritual and moral state. This kind of individual development is supported by the meditation practice of *sesshin shugyō*, the core of religious practice in Shinnyo-en.

Sesshin shugyō is a practice that combines meditation with a spiritual mediation between the believers and the so-called “Shinnyo spirit world” (*shinnyo reikai* 真如靈界). The mediators (*reinōsha* 靈能者) as well as the residents of the spirit world – Itō Shinjō, his wife Tomoji and their two deceased sons Chibun 智文 (who is called Kyōdōin 教導院 by the believers) and Yūichi 友一 (whose posthumous name is Shindōin 真導院) – are assumed to guide and assist the believers’ progress by means of their spiritual faculties (*reinō* 靈能). The mediation of the media (*reinōsha*) links the believers to the spirit world. The residents of the spirit world, on the other hand, serve as mediators to the world of Buddha and that of ancestral spirits.

The roots of these spiritual faculties are traced back to the spiritual inheritance of Shinjō and Tomoji as mentioned above. While Shinjō’s spirituality is characterized as connecting to the heavenly spirits, Tomoji’s spirituality is a link to the earthly spirits. These are still the two types of spiritual faculties in Shinnyo-en: Everybody who possesses these faculties – the *reinōsha* – belongs to one of these types. They manifest themselves in the way spiritual messages are received and transmitted: while the connection to the heavenly spirits is described as a rational and analytical mode of communication, the earthly spirituality finds its expression in a more emotional and impulsive way.¹⁶

14 “Yasashii kyōgaku: sanmitsu kaji”, in *Naigai Jihō* 620, (2003), 8.

15 “Yasashii kyōgaku: sanmitsu kaji”, in *Naigai Jihō* 620, (2003), 8.

16 ITŌ, *Ichinyo*, 166; AKIBA, “Shinnyo reinō”, 232.

The spirituality of Shinjō and Tomoji is believed to be complemented by the miraculous powers exercised by their two sons since their deaths as children. After the first son Chibun (Kyōdōin) died at less than two years of age in 1936, he is supposed to have opened the connection to the spirits of ancestors through the spiritual faculties of his mother.¹⁷ It is said that when his brother Yūichi (Shindōin) died in 1952 at the age of fifteen, the two combined their spiritual powers in order to assist in the salvation of the believers by taking their sufferings on themselves (*bakku daiju* 拔苦代受).¹⁸ They perform this kind of practical salvation work from the Shinnyo spirit world (*shinnyo reikai* 真如靈界) that was established with their deaths. Their beneficial work is interpreted as the mediated effect of Buddha's compassion. Besides, it is seen as a necessary and initial step on the path to enlightenment, as only those who are not distracted by sufferings are able to concentrate on religious practice.¹⁹

Although the provision of such "practical benefits" is one function of the meditation practice *sesshin shugyō*, its main intention is to guide the believers to enlightenment by removing the layers of delusion (*bonnō* 煩惱) that cover their Buddha nature.

The mediators (*reinōsha*) contribute to that goal by opening the practitioners' eyes to their karmic situation. In a regular meditation, up to fifty or sixty followers will gather in a room, sit in a circle and meditate. They are faced by five to ten *reinōsha* who are also in meditation. After a while, the media start to experience some kind of intuitive cognition. It is interpreted as something "indicated" (*shimesareta* 示された) to them from the spirit world. They transform this cognition into words – the so-called "spiritual words" (*reigen* 靈言) – and transmit them to the person they are directed at. Often, these are rather abstract phrases, but usually the listener can relate them to a certain situation or problem he is coping with.²⁰ The medium who transmits the words does not necessarily understand their practical meaning – sometimes he or she has to inquire about the biographical background or present situation of the person who receives them. The words might hint at attitudes, habits or behaviour that are judged as guising the Buddha nature and accumulating bad karma. The followers who receive spiritual words are expected to apply them to their attitude and moral conduct in everyday life. Only then is the meditation practice complete. In addition to the regular *sesshin*, there are also special counseling *sesshin* that offer individual advice and support as a follower deals with a particular problem.²¹

17 ITŌ, *Ichinyo*, 431. According to a representative of Shinnyo-en, the connection to the ancestors is realized by *kannō dōkō* 感応道交, a kind of communication between Buddha and human beings. It brings about "the simultaneity of the two worlds" (quotation from a private notice) which is called *ken'yū ichinyo* 顯幽一如。

18 ITŌ, *Ichinyo*, 442 ff; AKIBA, "Shinnyo reinō", 232.

19 AKIBA, "Shinnyo reinō", 232.

20 Examples of "spiritual words" are given by NAGAI Mikiko in "Shinnyo-en ni okeru reinō sōshō", *Tōkyō Daigaku shūkyōgaku nenpō* IX, (1991), 106-108.

21 AKIBA, "Shinnyo reinō", 56 ff. I also rely on the description and explanation of *sesshin shugyō* given to me in several interviews with *reinōsha* and practitioners at the Shinnyo-en headquarters (*sōhonbu*) in Tachikawa (June / July 2003). The ethical aspect of the practice

The mediators do not only hint at moral ‘deficiencies’. They are also believed to reveal karmic ties to spirits of the deceased that might hinder the individual’s spiritual development. On the basis of these insights into their “self”, the practitioners are expected to engage actively in improving their karmic situation.

Obviously, the meditation practice is a strong means of moral guidance. Often, the spiritual messages call for a certain conduct, like listening to other people’s opinion and considering their views. It might be called a specific form of moral instruction that derives its authority from the supposition that the spiritual words are messages from the world of Buddha, transmitted to the believers by the means of spiritual faculties.

Although the origin of these spiritual faculties is traced back to the family of the founder, they are interpreted in a Buddhist way. Itō refers to the seventh chapter of the *Daihatsu nehanyō* in order to identify them with the extraordinary powers and miraculous abilities to change shape (*jintsū henge* 神通變化) that are attributed to the eternal Buddha and the Bodhisattvas who dwell in nirvana. As the *reinōsha* are assumed to have achieved unity with Buddha, it is argued that they can convey these supernatural powers and cause miraculous phenomena to appear.²² In other words: The *reinōsha* apply the mysterious powers of the eternal Buddha to reveal the karmic situation of the practitioners.²³

Secrecy occurs on two levels in *shinnyo* esotericism as outlined above. For one thing, it determines the idea of enlightenment. Enlightenment is understood as becoming aware of the unrevealed, ultimate truth embodied by the eternal Buddha. For that reason the path to salvation is directed at achieving union with that Buddha. Because this path is claimed to be accessible to anybody, the religious practice emphasizes individual moral effort rather than ritual practice. The ritual practice serves to provide practical benefits like recovery from illness, success in profession and studies etc. Besides, it helps to direct and motivate the moral effort of the believers. In order to fulfill these tasks, spiritual powers are used. Consequently, there are two complementary notions of secrecy in *shinnyo* esotericism: On the one hand, secret *knowledge* that defines the goal towards which religious practice is directed. On the other hand, secret *powers* or secret *action* that serves as a means to guide the believers to that goal.

Functions of secrecy

In order to discuss the functions of secrecy, some notes on the relevant terminology might be helpful.

has been especially emphasized by NAGAI Mikiko in „Magic and Self-Cultivation in a New Religion: The Case of Shinnyoen“, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22.3-4, (1995), 301-320 and in *Nenpō shakaigaku ronshū. The Annual Review of Sociology* 6, (1993), 167-178.

22 ITŌ, *Ichinyo*, 175 f.

23 See also HIROTA Mio, *Ruporūtāju Shinnyo-en. Sono gendaisei to kakushinsei o saguru*, (Tōkyō: Chijinkan, 1990), 106f.

In general, the term “secret” tends to be defined as a formal category, that is, independent of any specific field it might be attributed to. As it is derived from the Latin word *secretum*, its literal meaning is “that which is secluded”. Usually it is understood in the sense of *knowledge*, that is, withheld knowledge that is only accessible to qualified people.²⁴ Aleida und Jan Assman differentiate “secret” from “mystery”. They characterize “mystery” as inaccessible knowledge, that is not amenable to revelation. Thus, it constitutes an insurmountable borderline.²⁵ Naturally, the acknowledgement of such secrets within a community will have a strong impact on the social structure of that group, as it creates the distinction between those who have access to the secret and those who have not.

In a similar way as “secret”, “esotericism” often is described as secret knowledge or as a mode of action resulting from that knowledge, which is accessible only to a limited group of initiated or otherwise qualified people. It differs from “secret” in that it is usually related to the realm of religion.²⁶

The concept of “esotericism” has been further differentiated by Shaul Shaked, a scholar on Jewish religion. He asserts that there are two types of esotericism: absolute and relative esotericism. According to him, they differ in the distinction between incommunicable secrets and secrets that are allowed to be communicated, and in their respective motivation. Hence, in the case of absolute esotericism, secrecy is regarded as a prerequisite for the effectiveness of the mysterious religious object or idea: If it were to lose its secret character it would not have its particular effect anymore. As the most prominent example of this type he mentions magic practices. Consequently, the motivation of the esotericism is to preserve that efficacy. Absolute esotericism rests on the idea of “mystery” in the definition presented above, that is, inaccessible knowledge.

Relative esotericism, on the other hand, manages the selection of those who are not excluded from the secret and those who are. It focuses more on the people related to a secret and the methods of accessing it than on the secret itself.²⁷

These categories might serve as the framework for the following considerations on the functions of *shinnyo* esotericism. As we have seen, the two secrets of *shinnyo* esotericism are the secret knowledge or cognition of Buddha’s teaching and the secret action of the spiritual faculties.

24 See for example Aleida und Jan ASSMANN, “Das Geheimnis und die Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation. Einführende Bemerkungen”, in: *Geheimnis und Öffentlichkeit, Schleier und Schwelle. Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation, V.1*, hg. von Aleida und Jan ASSMANN et al., (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1997), 10.

25 A. und J. ASSMANN, “Geheimnis”, 8-10.

26 Hubert CANKI, “Esoterik”, in: *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe II*, hg. von Hubert CANKI, Burkhard GLADIGOW, Matthias LAUBSCHER, (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1990), 345f. Hubert KNOBLAUCH, “Esoterik / New Age”, in: *Metzler Lexikon Religion. Gegenwart – Alltag – Medien I*, hg. von Christoph AUFFAHR, Jutta BERNARD, Hubert MOHR, (Stuttgart: Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1999), 293-300.

27 Shaul SHAKED, “Two Types of Esotericism”, in: *Geheimnis und Öffentlichkeit, Schleier und Schwelle. Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation, V.1*, hg. von Aleida und Jan ASSMANN et al., (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1997), 221-233.

Both belong to the category of “relative esotericism” in the sense just described. Buddha’s secret teaching is not beyond human realization; one can share it by merging with Buddha’s “three mysteries”. The same applies to the spiritual faculties: They are regarded as mysterious abilities that can be mastered by anybody who strives for that mastery. The relativity, or the accessibility of these secrets determines the particular religious practice of the group. It is a practice of permanent self-improvement; by raising their spiritual and moral state the believers are supposed to achieve salvation, a salvation that is brought about by awareness of ultimate reality.

The level one has reached in this process is indicated by means of spiritual ranks. A *reinōsha* explained these as the gradual realization of an altruistic way of living. According to him, a believer on the first level, *daijō* 大乘, is determined to consider the well-being of others, but tends to forget that ideal when its realization becomes difficult. The believers on the next level, *kangi* 歡喜, are more steadfast and reliable in their effort to care for others. The following grade, *dai-kangi* 大歡喜, is characterized by the constant practice of altruism, notwithstanding difficulties and sufferings that might be caused by it.²⁸ Finally, at the stage of *reinō* 靈能, the believer has perfected his selflessness and can be trained to receive messages from the spirit world. These ranks are not a matter of subjective judgement. Instead, they are granted in a special meditation gathering (*eza* 會座) in which the mediators – who have already reached the highest level – evaluate the degree of spiritual development (or: “elevation”, to use the terminology of Shinnyo-en) of the aspirant.

The main instruments of spiritual advancement are the meditation gatherings (*sesshin shugyō*), combined with moral effort. Every believer is supposed to participate in a meditation at least once a month. They contribute to the practitioners’ improvement by making them realize how they are and how they should be. In order to gain these insights, the practitioners rely on the guidance of the mediators, who initiate the process of self-reflection by giving the practitioner messages, that are allegedly spiritual, to reflect upon.

Thus, the ritual practice establishes a system of *guided self-improvement*: The practitioners’ spiritual and moral development is directed by those who are spiritually advanced, namely by the founding couple, their deceased sons and their mediators. In this way the esoteric teaching gives authority to a ritual practice that relies on a spiritual hierarchy.

The same hierarchy can be seen in the moral dimension of religious practice. The believers are expected to apply what has been “indicated” (*shimesareta*) to them in the meditation gatherings to their conduct and attitude in everyday life. Again, they receive guidance in their effort to perfect their moral performance. Every believer is the “guided child” (*shozoku* 所屬) of a “guiding parent” (*michibiki oya* 導親), who is the person who introduced him or her to Shinnyo-en. The guiding parents take care of their ‘children’ whenever necessary – often in a

²⁸ Interview with a *reinōsha* and employee of Shinnyo-en in July 2003.

very personal way. They support them in any kind of crisis, give moral guidance and advise them in personal problems or religious doubts.

Moral orientation is also given in the so-called “home meetings” (*katei shūkai* 家庭集會), regular gatherings of the believers of a local area. Usually, they are organized by the local “parent” (*suji oya* 經親) and led by the head of a regional unit (*buchō* 部長). On that occasion, the believers can talk about problems or thoughts they are coping with, and the leader of the meeting gives them advice or initiates a group discussion. In doing so, he or she helps them to apply the teachings to their individual life.

The following conclusions may be drawn from these observations:

- 1) Obviously, one social impact of *shinnyo* esotericism is its *legitimizing function*: It legitimizes the hierarchical structure that underlies the religious practices. Ritualistic as well as moral practice in Shinnyo-en are dominated by vertical relationships that are constantly reaffirmed by the guidance given by the spiritually superior to the less advanced believers. In particular, the religious authority of Itō Shinjō, his wife and his two sons, even after their death, is legitimized by their unparalleled closeness to Buddha’s secret teaching and their mastery of the spiritual faculties. The guidance they give from their transcendental existence serves as a permanent consolidation of that authority.
- 2) The effects of this spiritual hierarchy are not limited to the realm of religious practice. They extend to the organizational and administrative structure: Positions like head of a local or regional unit, or head of a department in the administrative system, require a certain spiritual rank. Thus, the doctrinal claim of secrecy legitimates not only spiritual, but also institutional authority.
- 3) In accordance with this influence on the social structure of the group, *shinnyo* esotericism also has an impact on the institutionalized mode of interaction between the believers. This might be characterized by the principle of “guidance” (*michibiku* 導く): the “guiding parent” guides his “child”, the “parent” of a local group guides his flock, assisted by the head of the region, the Itō couple guides all believers who ask for their help. This kind of vertical interaction intends to lead as many people as possible to salvation. The authority to guide derives from the spiritual hierarchy described above. Obviously, *shinnyo* esotericism is also a decisive factor in shaping the prevalent official communication mode of the religious community.
- 4) Although *shinnyo* esotericism serves to provide the legitimization of the hierarchical social structure of the group, it is also the basis for the openness of the structure. Every believer can reach any level of spirituality. The social distinction is not an essential one but a distinction in degrees. All believers are encouraged to rise on the spiritual and social hierarchy. Theoretically, this encouragement is founded in the belief that every being has an inherent Buddha nature, as is explained in the *Daihatsu nehanyō*.

On a more practical level, it is an important incentive to motivate the believers in two ways. They are motivated not only to improve their own moral and spiritual state as a means of social rise; they are also motivated to engage in mission work in order to lead all people to salvation. Doing so will automatically raise their social position, as they will become the “guiding parent” of a “guided child”.

- 5) Finally, the mysterious work of the spiritual faculties seems to add considerably to the attractiveness of Shinnyo-en. According to Aleida and Jan Assmann, secrets are a necessary and logical result of human curiosity. The premise for this assumption is that curiosity is an anthropological need that can only be satisfied by the maintenance of secret areas in human life.²⁹ From this premise one might conclude that secrets or mysteries in religious teachings and practice increase the attractiveness of that religion. At the same time, a religion would lose its fascination if the secrets were revealed to its curious members.

In Shinnyo-en, this dimension is manifest in what I call the “fascination of the miraculous” (*fushigi no miryoku* 不思議の魅力). Miraculous phenomena are part of the teaching and practice, but they are interpreted in a Buddhist way as manifestations of the supernatural powers of those residing in nirvana. Practical benefits (*go-riyaku* ご利益) like recovery from illness, traffic safety, success in studies or profession, or the ending of family disputes, are seen as initial and necessary steps on the path to salvation. By explicitly offering such benefits, the group makes use of the “fascination of the miraculous” as a strategy to attract members. They complement the more difficult way of moral self-improvement. Although interpreted as a simple means to a superior end, this aspect might well be one of the main attractions of the group for many of its believers.

²⁹ A. und J. ASSMANN, “Geheimnis”, 10.