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Pure Land Buddhist Hermeneutics: Hōnen's Interpretation of *Nembutsu*¹

by Allan A. Andrews

I. Introduction

How do Buddhists understand and interpret the *dharma*? Several recent studies have explored this question. Robert A. F. Thurman, in his article "Buddhist Hermeneutics,"² correctly notes,

One can hardly set out to win liberation and enlightenment, or even to live properly in an ethical sense, until one has decided which of these teachings [of the Buddha] is right, and what ways lead to their realization. Thus, it is clear that the hermeneutical enterprise in the [Buddhist] tradition is an essential part of *praxis* on whatever level, an essential vehicle on the way of enlightenment. We should note that since the various scriptural passages are contradictory on the surface, scriptural authority alone will not fully settle the hermeneutical questions, since the scriptures are in a sense the basis of discussion (Thurman 1978, 23).³

Thurman then claims, and attempts to substantiate on the basis of the Mādhyamika philosophical views of the Tibetan master Tsong Kha pa (1357-1419), that,

In the final analysis, rationality (*yukti*), inference (*anumāna*), or philosophic logic (*nyāya*) becomes the highest authority (*pramāṇa*) for deciding which scriptural passage is ultimately valid (Thurman 1978, 23).

In a response entitled, "Chinese Buddhist Hermeneutics: The Case of Hua-yen", Peter N. Gregory points out that Chinese Buddhists relied less on logic for their hermeneutics, especially the Mādhyamika logic of negation, and more on the construction

of hierarchical classifications of scriptures (*p'an-chiao, hangyō*), which served their need to interpret in affirmative terms which teachings were more valid than others (Gregory 1983, 231–34).

In this paper I propose to look at an instance of interpretation in the Japanese Buddhist tradition. The instance is Hōnen's interpretation of the value of the Pure Land scriptures and especially his view of the *nembutsu* teachings of the *Sūtra on the Buddha of Limitless Life*.⁴ I hope to demonstrate that although Hōnen's hermeneutics embrace a wide range of principles, ultimately they were based on neither reason nor on a doctrinal classification, but upon the authority of a revered teacher, and in the final analysis on Hōnen's own experience of certainty of salvation achieved through the guidance of that teacher.

II. Hōnen's Use of Doctrinal Analysis

Hōnen's interpretation of the Pure Land scriptures is to be found in his *Senchaku hongan nembutsu shū* (*Senchaku shū* or *Senjyaku shū*),⁵ "Treatise on the *Nembutsu* Selected by the Original Vow", composed in 1198. Hōnen opens this work with a sweeping doctrinal analysis segregating all scriptures and doctrines into two categories, the *dharma*-gate of the sages and the Pure Land *dharma*-gate⁶ (Ōhashi 1971, 88–93). Unlike schemata based on stages in the teaching career of Śākyamuni Buddha which had dominated Chinese Buddhist hermeneutics (Thurman 1978, 29–31; Gregory 1983, 232–33),⁷ this analysis is founded on an historical view of the flowering and decline of the Buddhist faith; that is, on the widely accepted doctrine of the three periods of the *dharma*—the ages of perfect *dharma*, superficial *dharma*, and degenerate *dharma*.⁸ Hōnen maintains that the world has entered the age of degenerate *dharma*, when the true teachings have largely been lost and the spiritual capacities of sentient beings have deteriorated as well, and therefore that the scriptures and doctrines on gaining enlightenment through learning and discipline—that is, the *dharma*-gate of the sages—are no longer applicable and only the teachings on Pure Land rebirth—i.e., those of the Pure Land *dharma*-gate, which were intended by Śākyamuni for the age of degenerate *dharma*—remain valid.⁹

Thus Hōnen's hermeneutical principle for designating the

Pure Land teachings and scriptures as more effective (though not truer) than all others was a doctrinal classification which, similar to those that had dominated Chinese Buddhist hermeneutics (and indeed Japanese hermeneutics until Hōnen's time), asserted on the basis of a Buddhist view of history that some scriptures were more appropriate to the age and efficacious than others.

III. Hōnen's Interpretation of the Nembutsu of the Eighteenth Vow

As is well known, Hōnen interpreted the *nembutsu* of the *Sūtra on the Buddha of Limitless Life's* eighteenth vow, the "original vow", as invocational *nembutsu*, that is, as calling upon the name of Amida Buddha with the utterance, "namu Amida Butsu". Moreover, Hōnen interpreted this *nembutsu* as sufficient by itself for achieving salvation through rebirth into Amida Buddha's pure buddha-land. This interpretation and its logic are revealed most clearly in the third chapter of the *Senchaku shū*, entitled "Passages Showing that Amida Tathāgata Made *Nembutsu*, and No Other Works, the Practice of the Rebirth Original Vow". Hōnen opens this chapter with the citation of three proof texts, the first of which is the "rebirth original vow", the eighteenth vow of the *Sūtra on the Buddha of Limitless Life*:

When I become a Buddha, if there should be sentient beings anywhere in the ten regions of the universe having sincere and deep faith and aspiration to be reborn into my buddha-land and who, by making even ten reflections [on me], are not reborn there, then I will not accept perfect enlightenment (Ōhashi 1971, 101).¹⁰

This scriptural passage has been considered by Pure Land Buddhists since Hōnen as the most important Buddha-*dharma* of all. They see it as the supreme expression of Buddha wisdom and compassion and as a virtual guarantee of the eventual salvation of all sentient beings. Of course what was at issue for Hōnen in this passage was the meaning of "reflections" (i.e., Buddha-reflections), because he saw this term as defining the practice by means of which beings could gain rebirth in the

Pure Land. The original term, *nen* (Chinese, *nien*) is rather ambiguous.¹¹ It can mean “to recollect”, “keep in mind”, “think about”, and even “one instant”. My English rendering is intended to convey this ambiguity. Although Hōnen’s understanding of the meaning of this term is implied in the two other proof texts with which he opens this chapter (citations of the Chinese Pure Land master Shan-tao), before considering these passages let us first examine Hōnen’s explicit, unequivocal interpretation of the eighteenth vow as invocational *nembutsu*.

In order to clarify the meaning of the *nembutsu* of the eighteenth vow as invocational *nembutsu*, Hōnen examines several of the *sūtra*’s forty-eight vows to show that with each vow Dharmākara Bodhisattva (i.e., Amida Buddha during his *bodhisattva* career) selected from among the qualities of countless buddha-lands only the pure qualities or characteristics which he wanted his buddha-land to possess. Hōnen maintains:

As for the eighteenth, the *Nembutsu* Rebirth Vow, we find that among all those buddha-lands there were some for which the rebirth-practice was generosity, some for which it was moral conduct, some for which it was patience and humility, some for which it was tireless effort, some for which it was meditation and some for which it was wisdom (such as faith in the highest truth). . . Or there were various lands for each of which there were several practices, such as erecting reliquaries and dedicating images, supporting monks, or even being filial to parents and revering teachers and elders. . . Yet all the above practices from generosity and moral conduct to filial piety were rejected and only the exclusive utterance of the Buddha’s name was chosen. . . (Ōhashi 1971, 104).

With the phrase “exclusive utterance of the Buddha’s name”¹² Hōnen leaves no doubt that in his view the meaning of *nen* in the eighteenth vow, and therefore the practice Amida Buddha (Dharmākara) selected for earning Pure Land rebirth, is invocational *nembutsu* alone, and not some kind of meditation upon the Buddha.

IV. Contemporary Views of Nembutsu

This interpretation of *nembutsu* as solely sufficient invoca-

tion of the Buddha's name was widely at variance with the generally accepted view of *nembutsu* in Hōnen's time. The prevailing view was based on the tenth century Tendai treatise on *nembutsu*, the *Essentials of Pure Land Rebirth*.¹³ This work attempted to integrate the Tendai meditative form of *nembutsu* based upon the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*¹⁴ of Tendai (T'ien-t'ai) founder Chih-i (538–597), with the devotional forms of *nembutsu* found in the popular Pure Land scripture, *Sūtra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Limitless Life*¹⁵ (Andrews 1973, 107–20). The *Essentials* maintained that authentic *nembutsu* is contemplative *nembutsu*, a rigorous exercise consisting of visualizing the magnificent form of Amida Buddha in order to achieve *nembutsu samādhi*, a deep enlightenment experience. Invocational *nembutsu*, calling upon the name of Amida Buddha, was considered a practice which should accompany contemplative *nembutsu* in order to bring about a more intense meditative state. As an independent practice, the *Essentials* considered invocational *nembutsu* as suitable for only the least spiritually capable of persons, and especially as a sort of last resort for such people as a way to gain rebirth into the Pure Land of Amida when they are about to die and fall into hell or some other painful transmigratory state.¹⁶ Moreover, while the *Essentials* acknowledged *nembutsu* as the best of all practices for achieving Pure Land rebirth, it taught that *nembutsu* was most effective when accompanied by other practices such as performance of good deeds and observance of monastic precepts (Andrews 1973, 72–75, 90–91).

This view of the true meaning and proper use of *nembutsu* is reflected in an interesting document contemporary with Hōnen, the *Kōfukuji sōjō*, or *Kōfukuji Temple Petition for the Suppression of Sole Nembutsu Practice*, submitted to the throne in protest of Hōnen's movement in 1205. It includes a criticism of Hōnen's interpretation of *nembutsu* typical of the view of establishment Buddhism in that age. In Article Seven of the *Petition*, "The Error of Misunderstanding *Nembutsu*", we find the following charge:

First, the Buddha reflected upon has a name and a person. With regard to the person there is the phenomenal and the noumenal aspects. With regard to the *nembutsu* itself, there is vocal *nembutsu* and mental *nembutsu*. The mental *nembutsu* includes both reflection upon and contemplation of the Buddha. Contemplation can

be either non-meditative or meditative, performed with either deluded or enlightened mind. The degrees of shallowness and depth are manifold; the shallow is inferior, the deep superior. Thus to invoke the name orally is neither contemplative nor meditative *nembutsu*; it is inferior and superficial *nembutsu*. . . . Concerning the passage, “even ten reflections”, of that [eighteenth] vow, this is provided for the most inferior beings. With contemplative *nembutsu* as the foundation, yet extending all the way down to invocational *nembutsu*, with many Buddha-reflections as the primary teaching, yet not discarding even ten reflections, this shows the great compassion and power of the Buddha. The way of easy guidance and sure rebirth is by contemplative *nembutsu* and many Buddha-reflections (Kamata and Tanaka 1971, 38–39).¹⁷

For the author of the *Kōfukuji Petition*,¹⁸ as for most contemporary clerics, *nembutsu* was primarily a meditative practice. Invocational *nembutsu*—calling upon the name of a Buddha—was considered merely an aid to meditation on the Buddha’s form (“phenomenal aspect”) or essence (“noumenal aspect”). By itself, invocation was considered a practice suitable only for those most burdened with bad *karma*, and then only marginally effective for their Pure Land rebirth in certain circumstances. To totally reject the efficacy of other practices as Hōnen did in the *Senchaku shū* was considered by establishment Buddhism of the time as absolutely blasphemous and heretical. Hōnen’s position was therefore audacious and even foolhardy.¹⁹

V. Hōnen’s Hermeneutics: The Appeal to Reason

What was the basis of Hōnen’s bold reinterpretation of *nembutsu* as solely invocation and sufficient for Pure Land rebirth?²⁰ In other words, what were his hermeneutical principles? As we indicated above, in the final analysis Hōnen had recourse to the authority of a revered teacher for his different and challenging interpretation of *nembutsu*. Yet he does not dispense with reason entirely as a means of discovering the Buddha’s meaning. The initial justification we find in the *Senchaku shū* for his interpretation is based on reason. Following his assertion, which we have examined above, that Amida choose only *nembutsu* as the practice

of the original vow, Hōnen poses this question from a hypothetical interlocutor:

It seems correct to survey the various vows, applying the principle of [Amida's] rejecting the gross and evil and choosing the good and refined. But why in the case of the eighteenth vow did Dharmākara [i.e., Amida Buddha] reject all the other practices and exclusively choose only the single practice of *nembutsu* as that of the rebirth original vow?

Hōnen responds:

The holy one's²¹ intentions are difficult to fathom and not easy to set out, but I will attempt to explain them by means of two principles—(1) that of superiority versus inferiority and (2) that of ease versus difficulty.

First, with respect to superiority versus inferiority, *nembutsu* is superior while the other practices are inferior because the Buddha's name is the bearer of infinite karmic merits. All of Amida Buddha's inner meritorious qualities, such as his four kinds of wisdom, three Buddha-bodies, ten powers of comprehension, and four certainties, and all of his outer meritorious functions, such as his Buddha-marks, his brilliance, his *dharma*-preaching and his saving of sentient beings, each and every one of these resides in Amida's name. Thus the karmic merit of his name is superior. The other practices are not like this. Each practice has only its own merit. Thus the other practices are inferior. . . .

Thus, is it not because the karmic merit of the Buddha's name is superior to the merits of the other practices that the inferior practices were rejected and the superior adopted as the practice of the original vow? (Ōhashi 1971, 104–05)

Although Hōnen is literally telling us why he thinks Amida Buddha choose the invocation of his name as the original vow's *practice* for Pure Land rebirth, he is also revealing some of the reasoning he pursued in coming to the conclusion that *nen* of the eighteenth vow meant only calling upon Amida's name. He reasoned that to call upon Amida's name gains for the cultivator all the karmic merit of Amida himself—all the merit implied in his Buddha-wisdom and compassion and all the merit achieved in Amida's use of these as well. Other practices, reasoned Hōnen,

merely earn for the cultivator a limited amount of merit from the cultivator's performance of that particular meritorious deed or act itself.

To return to Hōnen's reasoning:

Regarding the principle of ease versus difficulty, *nembutsu* is easy to cultivate while all other practices are difficult to cultivate. . . . Because *nembutsu* is easy it can be used by all sentient beings, but because all other practices are difficult, they cannot be used by all those with various spiritual abilities. And thus was it not for the purpose of bringing about the universal rebirth of all sentient beings that the difficult practices were rejected and the easy adopted as the practice of the original vow?

Let us suppose that donating images and founding temples had been made the practices of the original vow. Then those in poverty would have no hope of rebirth. But the poor and lowly are much more numerous than the rich and high-born. If wisdom and intelligence had been made the condition of the original vow, then the dull and foolish would have no hope of rebirth. Yet the dull and foolish are much more numerous than the intelligent. If wide learning and experience had been made the condition of the original vow, then those with little learning and experience would have no hope of rebirth. Yet the unlearned are much more numerous than the learned. If moral conduct and observance of the precepts had been made the practices of the original vow, then those who violate or who have not adopted the precepts would have no hope of rebirth. Yet those who violate the precepts are much more numerous than those who observe them. We should see that it is the same with the various other practices. It is important to understand that if any of those practices had been made the condition of the original vow, then those gaining rebirth would be few and those not reborn would probably be many.

Thus it was that Amida Tathāgata, conceiving in the distant past when he was the monk Dharmākara a great and universal compassion, in order to embrace all sentient beings selected not the donation of images, the founding of temples or any other of the sundry practices for his rebirth original vow, but only the single practice of the *nembutsu* of calling upon his name (Ōhashi 1971, 105–06).

We find here once again that although Hōnen is ostensibly explaining why Amida decided to select invocational *nembutsu*

as the practice for rebirth, he is revealing as well the reasoning that went into his own decision to interpret the *nembutsu* of the vow as easy invocation of the name. In short, Hōnen reasoned that the compassion of Amida would not exclude even the least spiritually capable of sentient beings, those capable of no other good deed than to call upon Amida Buddha in total reliance. This passage is justly famous for affirming the universality of Pure Land salvation. It is also a remarkable expression of Hōnen's insight in discerning this breadth and of his courage in teaching it.

VI. Hōnen's Hermeneutics: The Appeal to Scripture

Recourse to reason was not the only way in which Hōnen arrived at and justified his interpretation of the eighteenth vow. In fact, reason was for him and his contemporaries a rather unreliable tool. As Hōnen says, "the holy one's intentions are difficult to fathom and not easy to set out. . . ." A more reliable criterion for interpreting scripture was recourse to alternative scripture. Toward the end of the third chapter of the *Senchaku shū* Hōnen poses this hypothetical question:

The *Sūtra [on the Buddha of Limitless Life]* says "ten reflections", while the interpretations [of the *Sūtra*]²² have "ten utterances". What is the difference between reflections and utterances (Ōhashi 1971, 108)?

He responds:

The terms reflection and utterance²³ are one and the same. How do we know this? In the section of the *Contemplation Sūtra*²⁴ on the lower rebirth of the lower grade of beings it says, "Urged to call unceasingly, he completes ten reflections; when he calls 'namu Amida Butsu', by calling on the Buddha's name he sets aside with each reflection the evil deeds generated during eight billion eons of transmigration". According to this passage it is clear that utterance is the same as reflection and reflection the same as utterance.

What is happening here is that Hōnen is interpreting one

passage of scripture on the basis of another. Both constituted for him Buddha-preachments,²⁵ and therefore true *Buddhadharma*. The passage in question is the eighteenth vow of the *Sūtra on the Buddha of Limitless Life*; the passage being used as a guide to its meaning is that on the rebirth of the worst of sentient beings²⁶ as described in the *Contemplation Sūtra*. The *Contemplation Sūtra* describes how such a person, even though he is destined for hell because of extremely bad *karma*, gains salvation on his death bed by calling upon the Buddha ten times. In this passage the term “reflection” (*nen*) is clearly used in such a way as to mean invocational *nembutsu*, in for example, “urged to call unceasingly he completes ten reflections”, and “by calling on the Buddha’s name he sets aside with each reflection. . . .” By justifying his interpretation in this way, Hōnen reveals one of the bases for this interpretation—the authority of an alternative scripture.

VII. Hōnen’s Hermeneutics: *The Appeal to the Teachings of a Revered Master*

What were Hōnen’s hermeneutical criteria? On what basis did he interpret the all important *nembutsu* of the eighteenth vow as invocation? We have already seen that he had recourse to several criteria—the use of his own limited human reason and the authority of an alternative Pure Land scripture. As his most important hermeneutical criterion, however, Hōnen used a quite different standard—the judgement of an authoritative teacher. In the final analysis Hōnen based his interpretation of the eighteenth vow upon the teachings of the T’ang Chinese Pure Land master, Shan-tao (Jap. Zendō, 613–681).

As we have mentioned, Chapter Three of the *Senchaku shū* opens with three scriptural citations, the eighteenth vow of the *Sūtra on the Buddha of Limitless Life* (which we have already examined), and two quotations, actually paraphrases, of this vow by Shan-tao. Here is the way Hōnen presents these:

In the first volume of the *Sūtra on the Buddha of Limitless Life* it is written: “When I become a Buddha, if there should be sentient beings anywhere in the ten regions of the universe having

sincere and deep faith and aspiration to be reborn into my buddha-land and who, by making even ten reflections [on me], are not reborn there, then I will not accept perfect enlightenment”.

Quoting this passage, the *Amida Buddha Contemplation Method*²⁷ has: “When I become a Buddha, if there should be sentient beings anywhere in the ten regions of the universe aspiring to be reborn into my buddha-land who call upon my name with at least ten utterances, in dependence on the power of my vow, and are not reborn into my land, then I will not accept perfect enlightenment”.

Quoting the same passage, the *Hymns to Rebirth*²⁸ has: “When I become a Buddha, if there should be sentient beings anywhere in the ten regions of the universe who call on my name with at least ten utterances and are not reborn [into my land], then I will not accept perfect enlightenment.” That Buddha, having perfected buddhahood, now resides in his land. Thus we should know that the vows he originally made were not in vain, and that sentient beings who call upon him will assuredly be reborn into his land (Ōhashi 1971, 101).

Having presented these three proof texts, Hōnen does not comment upon the relationship of the second and third of these (the two passages by Shan-tao) to the first (the eighteenth vow) until the end of Chapter Three, where he poses the question and answer we examined above about the discrepancy between “reflection” and “utterance”. We have seen that he considered the former to mean the latter, that is, Buddha-reflection to mean utterance of the name of the Buddha. However, there at the beginning of Chapter Three we see that it is strongly implied in this juxtaposition of the text of the eighteenth vow with these paraphrases of it by Shan-tao that *based upon Shan-tao’s rendering* Hōnen had already interpreted the *nembutsu* of the eighteenth vow as invocation.

Who was this Shan-tao whose understanding of the eighteenth vow Hōnen seemed to value so highly? Shan-tao was a prominent Pure Land master of the early T’ang period (618–907) who taught and evangelized in the vicinity of the capital, Changan. Although he was a specialist in Buddha contemplation, having composed the important treatise *Amida Buddha Contemplation Method* (cited above) on the subject of this demanding

discipline, he was also concerned with the salvation of the average, karmically burdened lay person. Especially important for Hōnen's thought and for us, he was the first Pure Land Buddhist thinker to explicitly relate the eighteenth vow to the *Contemplation Sūtra's* passage on the rebirth of the worst of beings, and thus the first not only to interpret explicitly and unequivocally the *nembutsu* of the vow as invocation, but also to assert that every instance of this invocation, every utterance of the name of Amida Buddha, is therefore endowed with the compassionate, saving power of Amida's vow.

We have already seen two important passages in which this position was set out. The first of the two passages by Shan-tao which Hōnen cites at the beginning of Chapter Three has,

...if there are sentient beings. . .who call on my name with at least ten utterances *in dependence on the power of my vow*. . . .

The emphasized phrase (my emphasis of course) is not literally stated in the vow, but is Shan-tao's contribution. The second of the two passages concludes, as we have seen, in this fashion:

That Buddha, having perfected buddhahood, now resides in his land. Thus we should know that the vows he originally made were not in vain, and that sentient beings who call upon him will assuredly be reborn into his land.

The assertion here is that because Amida's vow has been fulfilled in his acceptance of perfect enlightenment, the condition of that acceptance—rebirth for all those who call upon Amida—has also been fulfilled.²⁹

Hōnen first encountered Shan-tao's writings in Genshin's *Essentials of Pure Land Rebirth*. Later he found Shan-tao's detailed commentary on the *Contemplation Sūtra*³⁰ and there discovered his teachings on the unfailing efficacy of the invocational *nembutsu* of the original vow (Tamura, 1972, 90–92). This discovery, in 1175, was crucial to Hōnen's teachings and career, for it brought about his conversion to the Pure Land path. In the conclusion to the *Senchaku shū* Hōnen reveals:

A long time ago in my own humble searchings when I first

opened this scripture [of Shan-tao's *Commentary on the Contemplation Sūtra*] and came generally to comprehend its fundamental truths, I immediately ceased cultivation of other practices and took refuge in *nembutsu*. From that day to this, whether for my own practice or for teaching others, I have made *nembutsu* my sole concern (Ōhashi 1971, 162).

Here we have Hōnen's own confession that it was in Shan-tao's teachings that he found the true meaning of the original vow, and moreover a powerful influence upon his subsequent career.

Hōnen openly admits that his reliance upon Shan-tao was total. In answer to the following hypothetical question:

the various masters of the Kegon, Tendai, Shingon, Zen, Sanron and Hossō schools have written many works on the Pure Land *dharma*. Why do you rely exclusively on the one master Shan-tao and not on these other masters?

Hōnen responds:

Even though these other masters have composed Pure Land works, they do not base themselves upon the Pure Land way, but rather only upon the way of the sages.³¹ Thus I do not rely on them. Master Shan-tao bases himself exclusively on the Pure Land way and not upon the way of the Sages. Thus I rely solely upon Shan-tao (Ōhashi 1971, 158).³²

Finally, so profound for Hōnen were the teachings on *nembutsu* of Shan-tao, so impressive the impact of these upon him, that he was convinced that Shan-tao had been a very manifestation, an *avatāra*, of Amida Buddha himself.³³ In the conclusion of the *Senchaku shū* we find this eulogy:

When we reverently seek the fundamental reality we realize that it is the Dharma Prince of the forty-eight vows [Amida Buddha]. The teaching arising from his ten eons-long path to perfect enlightenment is reliance on the *nembutsu*. When we humbly search for the derived manifestation we find that it is the Path Master of sole *nembutsu* practice [Shan-tao]. The message of his perfectly realized *samādhi* is complete faith in Pure Land rebirth. Though the fundamental reality and the derived manifestation³⁴ are not identical, their guidance to emancipation is one (Ōhashi 1971, 162).

In the final analysis, the “ten reflections” of the eighteenth vow meant to Hōnen ten utterances of that prayer of homage to Amida Buddha because, many years before he had composed the *Senchaku shū*, Hōnen realized in utterance of that prayer of homage the fulfillment of his own personal search for an assured means of rebirth into the Pure Land.³⁵

VIII. Conclusions

To summarize, we have seen several hermeneutical principles at work in Hōnen’s reinterpretation of the nature and power of *nembutsu*: 1) A doctrinal analysis based upon a Buddhist view of history; 2) recourse to imperfect but helpful human reason; 3) the use of scriptural authority; 4) reliance upon the authority of an enlightened teacher; and 5) the weight of personal religious experience—an experience of certain salvation. One may question whether Hōnen’s personal experience was a hermeneutical principle or merely a compelling influence upon his views. I would suggest that in so far as Hōnen advances this experience as evidence of the correctness of his interpretation, as we have seen him do above, it becomes for him a criterion of interpretation, that is, a hermeneutical principle.

In conclusion, although Hōnen does use reason to justify his interpretations, reason is much less important and reliable in his eyes than scriptural authority or the teachings of an enlightened master. In general, there seems to be little concern here for the rational inference and philosophical logic which Robert Thurman sees as the highest authority for deciding scriptural validity. Doctrinal analysis of the kind Peter Gregory finds typical of Chinese Buddhist hermeneutics is important for Hōnen, but only to establish the priority of Pure Land teachings and scriptures in general. It is clear that Hōnen relies most heavily upon the authority of an enlightened master, a master whose teachings were instrumental in his own conversion to the Pure Land path and to his own assurance of salvation. And though we have examined only one instance of interpretation by Hōnen, this interpretation was his major contribution to his age and to Japanese religious history.

We cannot generalize any farther from this single instance

with any confidence, yet the important place of patriarchal authority and personal experience in Hōnen's thinking raises a number of questions. Is a preference for these hermeneutical principles peculiar to Hōnen, to the new Buddhism of which Hōnen was precursor, to Japanese Buddhism in general, to the Pure Land tradition as a whole? Would close examination of important interpretations of other Buddhist thinkers reveal a similar hermeneutics? We would like to suggest that the case of Hōnen is not exceptional. The more we know about the career of a Buddhist thinker, especially the nature of his or her crucial religious experiences, the more clearly would we see that such experiences were central to that figure's thinking, and in particular to his or her interpretation of scripture.

In the religious life we find again and again that human reason must give way before sacred power, or that at best, reason is but a means to try and make understandable what is ultimately beyond reason.

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NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered to the Japan-American Buddhist Studies Conference commemorating one hundred years of Buddhism in Hawaii held in Honolulu, July, 1985.

2. Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation, especially of the meaning of scripture. The term ultimately derives from the name of the Greek deity, Hermes, messenger of the gods.

3. Bracketed additions are mine.

4. T. 360 (*Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* text no.), *Fo-shuo Wu-liang-shou ching* (Jap., *Bussetsu Muryōju kyō*), the most influential Chinese version of the larger *Sukkhāvati-vyūha-sūtra*.

5. T. 2608. We will use the version annotated by Ōhashi Toshio (Ōhashi 1971).

6. *Shōdō mon* and *Jōdo mon*, respectively.

7. This method of evaluation assumed that the *sūtras* which Śākyamuni had presumably delivered later in his teaching career (such as, for example, the *Lotus Sūtra*) contained more advanced doctrines for more advanced disciples. Each school tended, naturally, to place its texts at the end of this progression, that is at the end of the Buddha's life or teaching career, and claim that its doctrines were therefore truer than those of other schools. One of the most influential of Chinese schemata, that of the T'ien-t'ai master Chih-i (538–597), was accepted by much of Japanese Buddhism in Hōnen's day.

8. *Shōbō, zōhō* and *mappō*, respectively.

9. As Hōnen acknowledges, this analysis was actually developed by the Chinese Pure Land master Tao-ch'o (Jap., Dōshaku, 562–645).

10. It is interesting and significant that Hōnen omits from his citation of this vow its last phrase, "excepting those who have committed the five irredeemable evils and slandered the true *Dharma*" (T. 360, XII, 268a).

11. Extant Sanskrit versions of the *Sūtra on the Buddha of Limitless Life* indicate that *nien* is a translation of *citta*, "mind", "thought", "consciousness", (Nakamura et al. 1963, I, 283, n. 136). Of course Hōnen had no access to Sanskrit originals.

12. *Mōppara shō Butsugō*.

13. T. 2682, *Ōjō yōshū*.

14. T. 1911, Jap., *Maka shikan*, "Great Quiescence and Insight".

15. T. 365, *Fo-shuo kuan Wu-liang-shou-fo ching* (Jap., *Bussetsu kan Muryōju Butsu kyō*).

16. This view of the function of invocational *nembutsu* was based upon a passage of the *Sūtra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Limitless Life* describing the rebirth of an extremely evil person by calling upon the name of Amida Buddha (see treatment below, p. 11). One tendency of the *Essentials of Pure Land Rebirth*, however, was to consider almost everybody then living to be such a person because Śākyamuni's buddha-world had by then entered the age of degenerate *dharma* (Andrews 1973, 44–45).

17. For an alternative rendering see Morrell 1983, 30–31.

18. The Hossō priest Jōkei, 1155–1213 (Morrell 1983, 7–15).

19. He was of course exiled for this stand in 1207. As Morrell noted, the one intolerable religious attitude in this eclectic age was intolerance (1983, 13).

20. Hōnen's interpretation was undoubtedly influenced by the growing popularity of invocational *nembutsu*. However, here we will be concerned with how Hōnen himself justified his interpretation of scripture, rather than with the historical influences at work upon him.

21. Amida Buddha's.

22. Interpretations of the eighteenth vow of the *sūtra* by Chinese master Shan-tao. See below.

23. *Nen* and *shō*, respectively.

24. *Sūtra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Limitless Life*. See ns. 15 and 16.

25. Both the *Sūtra on the Buddha of Limitless Life* (which presents Amida's eighteenth vow) and the *Contemplation Sūtra* are considered sermons of Śākyamuni Buddha.

26. This passage, called *gebon geshō*, “lowest rebirth of the lowest class”, in Pure Land doctrinal discussions, is possibly the most important passage for the history of Pure Land Buddhism next to the eighteenth vow itself. For the text see T. 365, XII, 346.

27. T. 1959, *Kuan-nien A-mi-t'o-fo hsiang-hai san-mei kung-te fa-men* (Jap., *Kannen Amida Butsu sōkai sammai kudoku hōmon*). See the translation of Inagaki (1966 and 1984).

28. T. 1980, *Wang-sheng li-tsan chieh* (Jap., *Ōjō raisan ge*).

29. See also Shan-tao's *Commentary on the Sūtra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Limitless Life*, T. 1753, section four on non-meditative practices, XXXVII, 272a-b and 277 a-c.

30. T. 1753, *Kuan Wu-liang-shou-fo-ching shu* (Jap., *Kan Muryōjubutsu kyō sho*).

31. The reference here is to the *dharma-gate* of the sages and the Pure Land *dharma-gate* discussed above.

32. We should note that in the first chapter of the *Senchaku shū* Hōnen specified Shan-tao as one of the patriarchs of his Pure Land School (Ōhashi 1971, 93).

33. This view of Shan-tao did not originate with Hōnen, but had apparently been current in China (Mochizuki 1942, 182–83).

34. *Honji* and *suijaku*, respectively.

35. There is evidence of an even closer nexus between Hōnen and Shan-tao. Hōnen's biographies, including those compiled shortly after his death, relate that after his conversion experience in 1175 Shan-tao appeared to him in a dream and commended him for propagating the exclusive cultivation of *nembutsu*. Such an event would have meant to Hōnen a personal transmission of the *dharma* from master to disciple and a clear mandate to interpret the *nembutsu* of the original vow as he did. This episode is related in, for example, the *Genkū shōnin Shinikki* (Teihon Shinran 1976, V, 177) and the *Ichigo monogatari* (Ikawa 1967, 774a), both composed before 1227, and of course in the forty-eight chapter biography (Coates and Ishizuka 1925, 205–06). Another early text, the *Mukan shōsō ki*, records that the dream occurred in 1198 (Ishii 1955, 862). The *Shinikki* (“The Private Life of Saint Genkū”) has:

After considering carefully for awhile this [discovery of Shan-tao's teachings], while sleeping he had a dream. . . . He climbed a high mountain and immediately saw the living Shan-tao. From the hips down he was golden, from the hips up [he appeared] as usual. The eminent priest said, “Even though you are of humble status, the *nembutsu* has arisen everywhere under the heavens. Because you will spread the sole invocation of the name to all sentient beings, I have come. I am Shan-tao”. Because of this, he propagated this *dharma* and year by year it came to flourish more and more until there was nowhere to which it had not spread (Teihon Shinran, V, 177).

Tamura (1956, 248–56) argues against the actual occurrence of this event, proposing that it was invented to generate a patriarchal line of transmission between Hōnen and Shan-tao for the developing Pure Land School, but Shigematsu (1964, 447–87) and Akamatsu (1966, 204–05) consider the account credible.

Japanese and Chinese Terms

Chih-i 智顛

Fo-shuo kuan Wu-liang-shou-fo ching (Bussetsu Kan

Muryōju Butsu kyō) 仙說觀無量壽仙經

Fo-shuo Wu-liang-shou ching

(Bussetsu Muryōju kyō) 仙說無量壽經

Gebon geshō 下品下生

Genkū Shōnin shinikki 源空上人私日記

Genshin 源信

Hōnen 法然

Honji, suijaku 本地重迹

Ichigo monogatari 一期物語

Jōkei 貞慶 興福寺奏狀

Kōfukuji sōjō

Kuan-nien A-mi-t'o-fo hsiang-hai san-mei kung-te fa-men (Kanen

Amida Butsu sōkai sammāi kudoku hōmon)

觀念阿彌陀仙相海三昧功德法門

Kuan Wu-liang-shou-fo-ching shu

(Kan Muryōjubutsukyō sho) 觀無量壽仙經疏

Mo-ho chih-kuan (Maka shikan) 摩訶止觀

Moppara shō Butsugō 摩訶仙号

Mukan shōsō ki 夢感聖相記

Namu Amida Butsu 南無阿彌陀仙

Nembutsu 念仙

Nen (nien) 念

Nen, shō 念生

Ōjō yōshū 往生要集

P'an-chiao (hangyō) 判教

Senchaku hongan nembutsu shū 選扶本願念仙集

Shan-tao (Zendō) 善導

Shōbō, zōhō, mappō 正法、像法、末法

Shōdō mon, Jōdo mon 聖道門, 淨土門

Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經

Tao-ch'o (Dōshaku) 道綽

Tendai (T'ien-t'ai) 天台

Wang-sheng li-tsan chieh (Ōjō raisan ge) 往生禮讚偈