

Parallel Recognitions of Honen and Rennyo in the Development of the Pure Land Movement in Japan

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The year 1998-99 marks turning points for Pure Land teaching in two important periods in Japanese history. The first instance is the 800th anniversary of the composition of the Senchaku-hongan-nembutsu-shu which is also considered the founding of the Jodo denomination by Honen Shonin (1133-1212). The second is the 500th anniversary of the death of Rennyo Shonin (1415-99), the eighth Abbot of the Jodo-shinshu, a denomination founded by Shinran Shonin (1173-1263), a disciple of Honen Shonin. Honen founded the popular, independent movement of Pure Land teaching, while Rennyo, as a successor of Shinran, inspired the growth of Pure Land teaching religiously and socially in Muromachi Japan.

Despite the differing historical and religious contexts of these two figures, they represent the enormous influence on Japanese religion and society inspired by the work of Honen Shonin. This brief essay will focus on Honen Shonin's achievement which became the basis for the spread of Nembutsu teaching among the masses. The popular impact of Honen Shonin's teaching infuriated Nichiren who complained of its spread among all levels of society. He went so far as to declare that the practice of Nembutsu would doom a person to eternal hell. Myoe Shonin criticised Honen's teaching as a betrayal of Buddhism and an erroneous interpretation of scriptures and the teaching of Nembutsu. Dogen criticized the recitation of Nembutsu as so much chirping of frogs. However, in spite of all the criticisms of elitist monks, the teaching gave consolation and hope to the masses.

The achievement of Rennyo Shonin can be traced back to the influence of Honen Shonin as it took shape mediated historically through Shinran Shonin's thought. Rennyo's preaching and letters inspired the peasants and farmers of the Muromachi period to free themselves from the domination of the Daimyo and Lord of the great manors through their active faith in the Nembutsu and their consequent rejection of the magical folk religion which added spiritual oppression to the political. In its simplest expression of faith in Nembutsu and rebirth into the Pure Land, the Pure Land teaching has largely been viewed as an otherworldly faith focused on the afterlife. For an ancient people, living in an unpredictable world of wars, famines, natural disasters and the exactions of despotic rulers, the prospects of a future life of bliss was very attractive.

For those who could not enjoy the tranquility of monasteries to pursue enlightenment the easy practice of Nembutsu offered an inviting alternative which helped make a difficult life bearable. The path of Nembutsu faith also made unnecessary the wealthy, ornate temples and rituals sponsored by the nobility. The establishment of magnificent temples such as the Byodoin were chiefly to secure a blessed hereafter for the nobility. Ordinary people could, in effect, carry Amida Buddha with them in the recitation of his name and receive all the benefits of the Pure Land through their simple faith, even while they worked in their fields or while hunting and fishing. Many stories told in sutras and popular tales told of the efficacy of the Nembutsu to bring about rebirth for all people.

Prior to Honen Shonin's appearance there had been efforts to promote the Nembutsu more widely. Kuya Shonin and Ryonin are noted for their efforts to help ordinary people. There were aristocratic fraternities of aristocratic lay people devoted to the Pure Land teaching which had been organized by the Abbot Genshin on Mount Hiei. Nembutsu saints (hijiri) also carried the practice faith throughout Japan, preparing the way for the success of Honen Shonin and his disciples.

The Pure Land movement initiated by Honen Shonin provided persuasive doctrinal support for the Nembutsu as the practice specifically designed by Amida Buddha in His Vows for the suffering masses in the degenerate, corrupt last age (mappo). An important factor in this development was the composition of the Senchaku-hongan-nembutsu-shu (abbrev. Senchakushu) by Honen Shonin in 1198, ostensibly at the request of Kujo Kanezane. Kanezane had requested Honen Shonin to explain the basis of his teaching.

Responding to Kanezane's request, Honen Shonin created a manifesto of the Pure Land teaching which aroused hatred among his opponents when they learned of it and the devotion of his followers who found liberation through it. Since this author is most familiar with Shinran Shonin, we offer him as example of the devotion inspired by Honen Shonin's work. Shinran Shonin had struggled to gain enlightenment on Mount Hiei for 20 years from the age of 9 years. Unable to attain his goal and despairing of his future destiny, he turned to Honen Shonin whose teaching gave him an assurance that, evil as he might be, he could be saved by the Nembutsu grounded in Amida Buddha's Vow.

Shinran Shonin testifies in his Kyogyoshinsho to the sense of release and relief he experienced: "I, Gutoku Shinran, disciple of Sakyamuni, discarded sundry practices and took refuge in the Primal Vow in 1201. "Also: "How joyous I am, my heart and mind being rooted in the Buddha-ground of the universal Vow, and my thoughts and feelings flowing within the dharma ocean, which is beyond comprehension! I am deeply aware of the Tathagata's immense compassion, and I sincerely revere the benevolent care behind the master's teaching activity. My joy grows ever fuller, my gratitude and indebtedness ever more compelling."

He then relates how Honen Shonin allowed him to copy the Senchakushu: "In 1205 Master Genku, out of his benevolence, granted me permission to copy his Passages on the Nembutsu Selected in the Primal Vow." "In the same year, on the fourteenth day of the fourth month, the master inscribed [the copy] in his own hand with an inside title, "Passages on the Nembutsu Selected in the Primal Vow," with the words, "Namu-amida-butsu: as the act that leads to birth in the Pure Land, the Nembutsu is taken to be fundamental, and with [the name he had bestowed on me,] "Shakku, disciple of Sakyamuni."

Shinran gave a very high evaluation to the Senchakushu which had changed his life: "The crucial elements of the true essence of the Pure Land way and the inner significance of the Nembutsu have been gathered into this work, which is easily understood by those who read it. It is a truly luminous writing, rare and excellent; a treasured scripture, supreme and profound. Over the days and years, myriads of people received the master's teaching, but whether they were closely associated with him or remained more distant, very few gained the opportunity to read and copy this book."

Eventually the teacher and disciple were separated by exile, never to meet again. Shinran writes concerning these events: "The emperor and his ministers, acting against the dharma and violating human rectitude, became enraged and embittered. As a result, Master Genku, the eminent founder who had enabled the true essence of the Pure Land way to spread vigorously [in Japan] and a number of his followers, without receiving any deliberation of their [alleged] crimes, were summarily sentenced to death or were dispossessed of their monkhood, given [secular] names, and consigned to distant banishment... Master Genku and his disciples, being banished to the provinces in different directions, passed a period of five years [in exile]. On the seventeenth day of the eleventh month, 1211, during the reign of the emperor Sado-no-in, Genku received an imperial pardon and returned to Kyoto."

Throughout his writings, Shinran Shonin revered Honen Shonin and particularly extolled him in his poetry on the great teachers of Pure Land tradition:

"When Genku was alive He emanated a golden light, Which the Chancellor, an ordained layman, Saw before him... Genku appeared as Mahasthamaprapta, And also as Amida. Emperors and ministers venerated him, And the ordinary people in the capital and the countryside revered him,

"When the time came for the Buddhas' guidance through skillful means, They appeared as Master Genku And, teaching supreme shinjin, Opened the gateway to nirvana.

"To encounter a true teacher Is difficult even among difficult things; There is no cause for endlessly turning in transmigration Greater than the hindrance of doubt.

"Genku emanated a radiance Which he always revealed to his followers, Without discriminating between the wise and ignorant Or between those of high station and low.

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"Born on isolated islands scattered like millet in the sea, He spread the teaching of the Nembutsu; In order to guide sentient beings, He came into this world many times.

"Amida Tathagata, manifesting form in this world, Appeared as our teacher Genku; The conditions for teaching having run their course, He returned to the Pure Land. At the death of our teacher Genku, Radiant light shone in the sky like purple clouds; Music sounded, subtle and elegant, And the air was fragrant with rare perfumes.

"The death of our teacher Genku Came in 1212, in early spring; On the twenty-fifth day of the first month, He returned to the Pure Land."

The inspiration Shinran Shonin received from Honen Shonin continued throughout his life to motivate his own efforts to propagate Pure Land teaching in the distant eastern provinces of Japan and in later life in Kyoto where he retired. During his long life Shinran repeatedly testified to the unconditional compassion of Amida Buddha which he had first learned from Honen. If we look into the Senchakushu for the clues to the devotion given to Honen Shonin by Shinran and Honen Shonin's other leading disciples, we can see several points of significance:

1. Honen Shonin made a clear effort to place the Pure Land teaching among the Mahayana sects by developing a critical classification of doctrine. The formation of such a classification of teaching was essential for establishing an independent sect within the diversity of Mahayana Buddhism. There were numerous terms that had grown up through Pure Land history which came to distinguish the teaching from others. These include path of easy practice-difficult practice (derived from Nagarjuna), self-power and Other-Power, (T'an-luan), the Pure Gate (teaching), and the Saintly Path teaching (Tao-ch'o), and Shan-tao's distinction of sole devotion to Amida versus the supportive mixed or miscellaneous practices.

The recitation of the Name of Amida Buddha became the clear focus for Pure Land faith and practice. In the Senchakushu Honen Shonin brought all these distinctions together to proclaim that Pure Land teaching was the sole vehicle for salvation in the last age (mappo) for all people, whether common people or elite monks. The Nembutsu was universal and within the capacity of any person, while all other practices required some special ability, physical or mental or even financial. Standing on the shoulders of the cumulative, pervasive but unorganized tradition of Pure Land teaching, Honen Shonin gave it definition as a distinctive sect among the traditionally accepted Buddhist institutions of Japan. Honen Shonin's disciples carried on their teacher's perspective, each developing his own style of teaching and practice.

2. A second significant aspect related to the issue of critical classification of doctrine is the concept of senchaku which describes the process of selection and rejection which Honen Shonin observed in Bodhisattva Dharmakara's effort to survey all Buddha Lands and universes in order to construct his own ideal world where all beings could achieve enlightenment and spiritual liberation.

Honen Shonin connected the critical classification of doctrine to the myth of Dharmakara, giving the Pure Land teaching a stronger scriptural basis. It was no longer simply a convenient device given by the Buddha to weak and ignorant people. Rather, it became the central and sole means whereby all people, the elite as well as the common, person could ultimately attain enlightenment. It all came about through the selection or choice made by the Bodhisattva. This interpretation of the myth implies that a decisive element in religious consciousness is choice.

Religious faith always involves choosing. It is the choice of the most universal, and deepest understanding of, or approach to, reality. It also expresses the exclusivism or centrality of commitment which lays the basis for a strong religious personality. This can be seen in Honen Shonin himself, as well as his disciples, some of whom were executed, and in Shinran Shonin, as well as the later Ippen Shonin and Rennyo Shonin.

Pure Land teaching is often associated with weak personality because of the stress on Other-Power, understood as an external power. However, confidence in Other-Power as the essence of life can be the basis for firm dedication and devotion, when one believes that reality, Amida Buddha, has embraced his life.

3. The social implication of Honen Shonin's thought is eloquently expressed in the passage which describes the real intent of Amida Buddha's Vows. Honen has stated it clearly in his own words to which we can add little:

"In the next place, if we look at it from the standpoint of difficulty and ease, the Nembutsu is easily practiced, while it is very hard to practice all the other disciplines. For the above reasons thus briefly stated, we may say that the Nembutsu being so easily practiced, is of universal application..... If the Original Vow required the making of images and the building of pagodas, then the poor and destitute could have no hope of attaining it. But the fact is that the wealthy and noble are few in number, whereas the number of the poor and ignoble is extremely large.

If the Original Vow required wisdom and great talents, there would be no hope of that birth for the foolish and ignorant at all; but the wise are few in number, while the foolish are very many..... We conclude therefore, that Amida Nyorai, when He was a priest by the name of Hozo (Dharmakara) ages ago, in His compassion for all sentient beings alike, and in His effort for the salvation of all, did not vow to require the making of images or the building of pagodas conditions for birth into the Pure Land, but only the one act of calling upon His sacred name."

In this remarkable passage which offers a social critique of the elites of his time, Honen Shonin is making it abundantly clear that there is no discrimination in Amida's Vow based on the accidents of birth, abilities or social standing. Shinran also affirmed this critique in his "Kyogyoshinsho:"

"In reflecting on the ocean of great shinjin (faith), I realize that there is no discrimination between noble and humble or black-robed monks and white-clothed laity, no differentiation between man and woman, old and young. The amount of evil one has committed is not considered, the duration of any performance of religious practices is of no concern. It is a matter of neither practice nor good acts, neither sudden attainment nor gradual attainment,

neither meditative practice nor non-meditative practice, neither right contemplation nor wrong contemplation, neither thought or no-thought, neither daily life nor the moment of death, neither once-calling nor many-calling. It is simply shinjin that is inconceivable, inexplicable and indescribable. It is like the medicine that eradicates all poisons. The medicine of the Tathagata's Vow destroys the poisons of our wisdom and foolishness."

It is probably this aspect of Honen Shonin's teaching that most threatened the established Buddhist Orders and led to the proscription of his movement in accord with the Kofukuji appeal to the Court. This appeal led to the exile of Honen and his chief disciples. The appeal accused Honen Shonin of starting a new sect without government permission, subverting society by rejecting the kami and abandoning all other good deeds and practices other than Nembutsu. According to the entreaty, Honen Shonin's movement resulted in the decline of other sects which were based on the union of Buddhism and the State.

4. Another implication of the text which is not explicitly stated is the emancipation of Pure Land followers from the garden of magic. Honen Shonin makes no mention of material or worldly benefits in his text nor of the role of the kami in support of his teaching. The outcome of this emancipation from spiritual oppression, based on the fear of batchi or divine retribution by the people on the land, if they did not heed the demands of their overlords, the temples, shrines and daimyo, led to the ikko ikki in the time of Rennyō. In our modern age, we often called striking and influential teachings revolutionary.

Although this term may be too strong when we reflect on the nature of modern revolutions, nevertheless, we may apply the term to Honen Shonin's work and the Senchakushū, because even his enemies saw its potential in transforming the religious situation in Japan. Consequently, they reacted vehemently and violently. At a later time the monks of Mount Hiei violated Honen Shonin's grave and burned copies of his work. While Honen Shonin was the pioneer, the implications of his thought worked out in later times, broadening the boundaries of hope for all people.

In our present day, it is important to rekindle the spirit that motivated Honen Shonin and his critical insight and attitude to society, if the ordinary person is to find meaning and hope in the desolate wasteland of modern secular society. It is not only Honen Shonin's message of hope afterlife that modern people need, but a direction for their everyday lives, lived in the awareness of Amida Buddha's embrace, made concrete in the Nembutsu whose recitation focuses our minds and hearts on the very basis of our lives.