

Honen Shonin's Religious and Social Significance in the Pure Land Tradition

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Pure Land Buddhism is becoming more widely recognized as a significant stream of Buddhist teaching, one which may hold the destiny of Buddhism in the modern world, because it is a religion designed for the ordinary person, providing spiritual support for all dimensions of life.

There are two major teachers who brought Pure Land teaching to the masses in an effective and enduring way. In recent years (1998) there has been seen the 800th anniversary of the composition of the Senchaku-hongan-nembutsu-shu or the "The Treatise on the Nembutsu of the Select Primal Vow," which is also considered the founding manifesto of the Jodo denomination by Honen Shonin (1133-1212). The second is the 500th anniversary of the death of Rennyo Shonin (1415-99) in 1999. He was the eighth Abbot of the Jodo-shinshu denomination founded by Shinran Shonin (1173-1262), a disciple of Honen.

Honen established 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. Myoe Shonin criticized Honen's teaching as a betrayal of Buddhism and an erroneous interpretation. The achievement of Rennyo Shonin can be traced back to the influence of Honen Shonin as it took shape in 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 that 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 that 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 the 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. 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 lay people devoted to the Pure Land teaching that had been organized by the Abbot Genshin on Mount Hiei. Nembutsu saints (*hijiri*) also carried the

Nembutsu 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 that 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 nine 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* (*Teaching, Practice, Faith and Realization*) to the sense of release and relief he experienced. He describes the compassion of Honen Shonin in permitting Shinran to copy the *Senchakushu*.

Eventually, the teacher and disciple were separated by exile, never to meet again. Nevertheless, Shinran Shonin continued to be inspired by Honen Shonin's spirit. It became the motivation for his own effort to propagate the teaching of Amida Buddha's unconditional compassion and wisdom. In his verses (*wasan*) Shinran Shonin exalted Honen Shonin, regarding him as the source of his own teaching.

If we look into the *Senchakushu* for the clues to the devotion given to Honen Shonin, 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 distinguished 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 Sainly 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* that describes the process of selection and rejection 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 also 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 that 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, 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 exterior 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 or her life.

3. The social implication of Honen Shonin's thought is eloquently expressed in the passage that describes the real intent of Amida Buddha's Vows. Honen has stated it clearly in his own words in the *Senchakushu* 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 that offers a social critique of the elites of his time, Honen Shonin is making it abundantly clear 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 Singleminded (*ikko*) peasant revolts in the time of Rennyō.

In our modern age, we often call 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, in later times, broadened 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 in the afterlife that modern people need, but a direction for their everyday lives, lived in the awareness of Amida Buddha's compassionate embrace, made concrete in the Nembutsu whose recitation focuses our minds and hearts on the very basis of our lives.