Honen's Waka Verse
– W.S. Yokoyama and Yukie Dan, Trans.

1 spring

saerarenu hikari mo aru wo woshinahete
hetate kaho naru asakasumi kana

Just as I was talking about the unhindered Light,
In rolled the morning fog which,
to my utter surprise,
blocked out everything in sight!

2 summer

ware ha tata hotoke ni itsuka afuhi kusa
kokoro no tsuma ni kakenu hi so naki

We are like the hollyhock that will one day
gaze upon the face of the Buddha,
[And so] never let a day go by without strumming
[the strings] of the heart
[to the tune of Namu amida butsu].

3 autumn

amita butsu ni somuru kokoro no iro ni te ha
aki no kosuye no takuhi nara mashi

As to the color of the heart steeped in
[Namu] amida butsu,
Let it aspire to autumn ablaze
on the fringes of the trees.

4 winter

yuki no uchi ni butsu no mina wo tonafure ha
tsumoreru tsumi so yagate kienuru

As we trudge through the falling snow,
chant the Name of [Amida] Buddha,
For the drifts of sin that pile up [on our shoulders]
shall in short order surely disappear.

5 on giving one's life for the buddha dharma

karisome no iro no yukari no koi nita ni
afu ni ha mi wo mo oshimi ya ha suru

It is like the urgent desire one feels when swept up
in a passionate relationship
in this world of swiftly changing colors:
So too would one [passionately] give anything, even one's life, when one encounters [the Buddhist teaching].

6 at kachio ji temple

shiha no to ni akekure kakaru shirakumo wo
itsu murasaki no iro ni minasan

Those white clouds that perch upon
my thatched gate morning and night---
When will I see them change into the purple clouds
[of the Pure Land]?

7 the nembutsu of the original vow as the activity resulting in birth in gokuraku, the land of bliss, is far superior to all other practices

amita butsu toiu yori hoka ha tsu no kuni no
naniha no koto mo ashikarinu heshi

Practices other than [Namu] amida butsu
may have currency in the land of Tsu,
Where, in Naniwa, everything one does amounts to
harvesting the reeds of evil.

8 untitled

gokuraku he tsutomete hayaku ite tata ha
mi no ohari ni ha mairi tsuki nan

It stands to reason to turn your attention to
the Land of Bliss early on,
So that at life's end, you would be assured of
making the round there.

9 untitled [in nembutsu samadhi]

amita butsu to kokoro ha nishi ni utsusemi no
monuke hate taru koye so susushiki

With [Namu] amida butsu this heart of mine
[has been ushered] to the West[ern land],
At last free of this shell,
how coolly the voicing [of Namu amida butsu] fills the void!

10 the light reaching everywhere in this world is the heart of nembutsu gathering living beings, bar none

tsuki kake no itaranu sato ha nakere tomo
nakamuru hito no kokoro ni so sumu
There is no land where the moonlight does not reach,
Finding a place in the hearts of those
who would abide in its light.

11 to have the sincere understanding of the triple mind

ajo ha yo ni yasukere to miru hito no
makoto no kokoro nakute koso senu

That people see the [assurance of] Birth [in the Pure Land]
as a way to live carefree in this world
Reveals their lack of a true understanding [of these matters].

12 on saying the ten thoughts before retiring at night

amita butsu to ju koye wo tonahete ma toro mamu
nakaki nemuri ni narimo koso sure

It's always best to say ten voicings of
[Namu] amida butsu before dropping off at night,
For who knows: this just might be the night
that one falls into that long sleep.

13 these waka were written by honen in his own hand.

chitose furu komatsu no moto wo sumikani te
muryoju butsu no mukae wo somatsu

Sitting at leisure at the foot of Komatsu pine
[whose boughs] have weighed a thousand years,
I wait in anticipation of the time I will be welcomed
[to the Pure Land] by the Buddha of Infinite Life.

14 untitled

ohotsu kana tareka ihiken komatsu to ha
kumo wo sasafuru takamatsu no eda

Once a small and insignificant Komatsu pine
that people would pass by without comment,
Now a tall Takamatsu pine whose branches
would seem to support the very clouds.

15 untitled

ike no mitsu hito no kokoro ni nitari keri
nikori sumu koto satame nakere ha

The human heart is like the waters of a pond:
It has to be settled for it to be clear.
16 untitled

*mumare te ha matsu omoiden furusato ni chikiri-shi to mono fukaki makoto wo*


17 untitled

*amida butsu to mosu hakari wo tsutome ni te jodo no sogon miru so ureshiki*

What inspires me to say [Namu] amida butsu all the time Is the thought I may one day see the wonders of the Pure Land [with my own eyes]!

18 [in response to kanejitsu’s waka as honen departs in exile to sanuki, third month, sixth day, ken’ei 2 (1207)]

*kanejitsu’s waka
furisutete yuku ha wakare no hashi nare to fumi watasu heki koto woshi-so omou*

When the time comes for me to be left behind at that bridge of parting, It will rend my heart to see you step cross, though cross you must.

*honen’s waka
ro no mi ha koko kashiko ni te kienu tomo kokoro ha onashi hana noute na so*

With bodies as enduring as mist, vanish we must when our own time comes; Yet with hearts as close [as yours to mine], surely we'll be together again when we attain Birth on the flowers [of the Pure Land].

19 untitled

*kore wo mimu oriori koto ni omohi tete namu amida butsu to tsune ni tonah-e yo*

Failing to see this, [you are at the mercy of your delusions as] all kinds of thoughts come to mind one after another.
What you need to do is to constantly give voice to Namu amida butsu.

20 as I am now

ikera ha nembutsu no ku tsumori
shina ha jodo he mairi nan
totemo kakutemo kono mi ha,
omohi watsurafu koto-so naki

All I've sought to achieve in life was the work of nembutsu,
That in death I would make the round to the Pure Land.
Whatever fate befell me personally,
come what may,
Never once did I lose my concentration
[or put my goal in jeopardy].

NOTE:

Based on the text supplied in the entry on waka in Jodoshu jiten III. 512-13. For a previous English translation, see "Honen the Buddhist Saint: His Life and Teaching," trans. H. H. Coates and R. Ishizuka (Kyoto: Chion'in, 1925), pp. 542-45, where rhymes are made of seventeen of the waka.