

Senchakushū English Translation Project (transl. & ed.),  
*Hōnen's Senchakushū: Passages on the Selection of the Nembutsu in the  
 Original Vow* (Senchaku Hongan Nembutsu Shū).  
 Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, and Tokyo: Sōgō Bukkyō  
 Kenkyūjo, Taishō University. 1998.

Hōnen-bō Genkū 法然房源空 (1133-1212), the first and in many ways the most radical leader of the so-called "New Kamakura Buddhism," has long stood in the shadow of his disciple Shinran 親鸞 and others who, following in his footsteps, propagated a simplified method for salvation by selecting only one single and easy practice. Despite the vast amount of works on Hōnen in Japanese, books on the so-called founder of the Pure Land school (Jōdo-shū 淨土宗) in western languages are still extremely rare. However, in recent years the historical importance of Hōnen and his doctrine of the single-minded and exclusive practice of the nembutsu (*ikkō senju nembutsu* 一向專修念佛) has gradually begun to attract the attention it deserves. One major obstacle for the study of Hōnen's thought in the West has been the lack of accessible and reliable translations of his works in a European language. The first who undertook the arduous task of translating Hōnen's *magnum opus*, the *Senchaku hongan nembutsu shū* 選擇本願念佛集, were Morris J. Augustine and Kondō Tesshō. Their translation was published serially in the journal *The Pure Land* (1983-1987), and thus failed to gain a wider circulation. The complete translation was again published as volume 104-II by the Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research in 1997. Why, then, should another translation be published only one year later by the Kuroda Institute? First of all, two translations of a classic of this calibre are surely not too many. Furthermore, the Senchakushū English Translation Project of the Sōgō Bukkyō Kenkyūjo in Tokyo, the team responsible for this translation, had already begun to work on the translation of the *Senchakushū* several years before. In 1998 this translation was published as the first book of a planned series of publications of book-length research projects by the Kenkyūjo. Kobayashi Yoshinobu functioned as chief of the project, and Hirokawa Takatoshi wrote an introduction of 55 pages. The translation itself is based on the Augustine/Kondō translation but deviates from the older one at various points.

The first part of the introduction presents a brief history of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan, focussing rather conventionally on the exegetical tradition represented by thinkers such as Genshin and Eikan. This overview is followed by an account of Hōnen's life with special reference to his conversion experience. Hirakawa gives a summary of what the five central biographies, written within the first hundred years after Hōnen's death, have to say about the

Tendai monk's conversion to the exclusive vocal nembutsu. Hirakawa believes that Hōnen's conversion was abrupt and radical in as much as the encounter with Shandao's writings in 1175 completely changed his life. "Yet in another way," he argues, "his conversion process was a gradual one that fermented over the years" (p. 9). Unfortunately, Hirakawa does not even mention the possibility of Hōnen's being influenced by the "Southern Pure Land tradition" represented by Eikan and his fellow practitioners. In this respect, Hirakawa sticks to the traditional view of Hōnen's nembutsu doctrine being the product of a combination of the Tendai Pure Land tradition and of Shandao's teaching.

Hirakawa then proceeds to an account of Hōnen's later teaching career, emphasizing his rejection of the influential *hongaku* 本覺 (innate enlightenment) doctrine. He briefly describes the three waves of suppression of the nembutsu movement in 1204, 1207 and 1217 without, however, considering the reasons for the opposition by the established schools beyond those given in Kōfuku-ji Petition (*Kōfuku-ji sōjō* 興福寺奏狀) of 1205.

In the second part of the introduction, Hirakawa reviews the teachings of the *Senchakushū* in the context of the Pure Land doctrine based on the so-called Three Pure Land Sūtras (*Jōdo sambukyō* 淨土三部經). Hōnen was the first to choose the *Muryōju-kyō* 無量壽經, the *Amida-kyō* 阿彌陀經 and the *Kanmuryōju-kyō* 觀無量壽經 as the authoritative basis of an independent Pure Land doctrine. Hirakawa summarizes the contents of the three sutras and explains what they meant to Hōnen and how he interpreted them to make them fit his nembutsu doctrine. He then briefly explains the way in which Hōnen was influenced by the Chinese Pure Land masters Daochuo and Shandao, and why Hōnen revered the words of Shandao as the words of a Buddha.

Hirakawa's subsequent introduction into Hōnen's Pure Land teaching is very informative. He appropriately emphasizes the importance of three crucial points in Hōnen's attempt to establish a new Pure Land orthodoxy: (1) the classification of the teachings (*kyōsō hanjaku* 教相判釋), (2) the construction of a lineage of doctrinal transmission (*kechimyaku* 血脈), and, most importantly, (3) Hōnen's concept of "selection and rejection" (*senchaku* 選擇). I will skip the first two points here and instead discuss the third in more detail.

Hōnen's notion of *senchaku* is without a doubt the most innovative and absolutely indispensable element of his doctrinal system. In short, Hōnen claims to propagate the exclusive practice of calling upon Amida's name on the basis of a radical process of selecting what is soteriologically helpful and rejecting what is not. At the end of that process only the nembutsu is left. This alone would have not been particularly innovative since Mahāyāna Buddhists have always chosen what they thought would serve their needs. In Hōnen's view, however, it was not him or any other practitioner who selected the nembutsu and rejected all other

practices, but Amida himself. Based on Shandao's interpretation, Hōnen maintains that Amida has chosen the nembutsu as the "rightly established act" (*shōjōgō* 正定業) in his eighteenth vow. Accordingly, it was, so to speak, upon the Buddha's command that Hōnen rejected the Holy Path of the other schools and entered the Gateway of the Pure Land, that he rejected the "miscellaneous practices" (*zōgyō* 雜行) and chose the "five right practices" (*go shōgyō* 五正行), and that he, among the various right practices, selected the "rightly established act" of the nembutsu alone and rejected the "auxiliary acts" (*jōgō* 助業).

Scholars have often puzzled over the "apparent contradictions in the behavior of Hōnen, who while teaching the exclusive nembutsu is known also to have engaged in other practices" (p. 44). Hōnen is famous for his strict adherence to the precepts, and it is certain that he even administered them to others. This despite the fact that, according to Hōnen's nembutsu doctrine, neither observance nor reception of the precepts do bring a person closer to the Pure Land. Why then, did Hōnen not reject them? Hirakawa claims to have found the solution. He believes that the full meaning of the word "*senchaku*" is constituted not only by "selection" and "rejection" but also by "reappropriation." That is to say, Hōnen meant to reject the Gateway of the Holy Path, the miscellaneous practices and the auxiliary acts only temporarily and reintegrate them later at different stages. After the "firm establishment of faith," Hirakawa claims, the nembutsu practitioner should take up the miscellaneous practices again, and after birth in the Pure Land, he will enter the Gateway of the Holy Path in order to attain enlightenment. While there is little reason to doubt that Hōnen believed that the practitioner would be able and willing to do in Amida's Pure Land what a perfect Buddhist should do, Hirakawa's hypothesis about the reappropriation of the miscellaneous practices after the establishment of firm faith needs explanation. This is an innovative interpretation of Hōnen's concept of *senchaku* indeed, and contradicts the traditional sectarian view. However, one needs strong arguments if one is to successfully refute well established "truths," and I am afraid that Hirakawa's arguments are a little too weak to succeed. Roughly speaking, his new interpretation rests on three pillars, namely one historical argument (i. e. the apparent contradictions in the behavior of Hōnen), one textual or doctrinal argument, and one philological argument.

Hirakawa argues that, in the twelfth chapter, Hōnen says,

Everyone among those who seek birth in the Pure Land should strive diligently to awaken the *bodhicitta* in the manner proper to his or her own school. Even though all other practices are lacking, awakening the *bodhicitta* can be the karmic action for birth in the Pure Land. (p.129)

Hirakawa interprets this passage as "an attempt by Hōnen to reappropriate a particular aspect of Buddhist teachings as an aid to birth in the Pure Land. In

principle, any aspect could be so reappropriated” (p. 41). He then points out that “in chapter 16 of the *Senchakushū*, Hōnen says that the miscellaneous practices are to be abandoned ‘temporarily.’ This word ‘temporarily’ carries the connotation that once the practitioner has established faith firm enough to assure birth in the Pure Land (*ketsujō ōjōshin*), the miscellaneous practices can be revived as aids to the nembutsu” (p. 42). In the twelfth chapter, that much is true, Hōnen discusses the thirteen “contemplative [practices]” (*jōzen*) and the three “noncontemplative [practices]” (*sanzen*) as described in the *Contemplation Sūtra*, that is to say, “miscellaneous practices” which should, according to the sixteenth chapter of the *Senchakushū*, be abandoned. It seems that Hōnen does in fact not only recommend the awakening of *bodhicitta* but also other practices which he rejects in the sixteenth chapter. He says:

Even though other practices are lacking, if anyone performs one or several of these thirteen contemplative [practices] according to his or her own capacity, then he or she will be able to attain birth. (p. 127)

Even though all the other practices are lacking, the performance of the ten good acts can be the karma by which one is born. (p. 128)

For all those who seek birth in the Pure Land, even though they fail to perform the other practices, deep faith in cause and effect can become a karmic action for birth. (p. 129)

Or else they may copy the *Pan-jo [ching]* and the *vaipulya* sūtras, and explain the *Nieh-p'an ching* and the other sūtras, making this their karmic action for birth. (p. 130)

If read outside their contexts, these passages seem to suggest that Hōnen not only recommended the nembutsu, as is generally believed, but also acknowledged that other practices may lead to *ōjō* as well. However, Hōnen makes it unmistakably clear that the miscellaneous practices are only theoretically conducive to birth in the Pure Land. Although “one should revere all of the eleven types of noncontemplative practices” (p. 135), they “do not correspond to the original vow” (p. 133) and were thus “not transmitted [to Ānanda]” (p. 133) by Śākyamuni. They “were expounded only in order to reveal the superiority of the nembutsu over the other practices” (p. 134) and “in order that they might be abandoned” (p. 134). “One should [...] realize that the manifold practices do not suit the capacities of the people [in the age of final Dharma]” (p. 136). There is no indication that Hōnen really intended to “reappropriate” any Buddhist practice at any point.

Let us now examine the philological argument. The crucial passage in the sixteenth chapter reads:

計也。夫欲速離生死二種勝法中且闍聖道門選入淨土門。欲入淨土門正雜二行中且拋諸雜行選應歸正行。欲修於正行正助二業中猶傍於助業選應專正定。正定之業者即是稱仏名。稱名必得生。依仏本願故。(T 83. 18c-19a)

Hirakawa's new interpretation of this crucial passage centers mainly upon a single character, that is, the character 且. Hirakawa, and apparently the other translators in the project as well, reads this character "*shibaraku*" and translates it as "temporarily." Thus, the translation runs as follows:

When I consider these matters carefully, I wish to urge that anyone who desires quickly to escape from the cycle of birth-and-death should, of the two types of the excellent teaching, **temporarily** lay aside the Holy Path and select to enter through the Gateway of the Pure Land. If such a one should desire to enter through the Gateway of the Pure Land, of the two practices, the right and the miscellaneous one should **temporarily** abandon the various miscellaneous practices, and select to take refuge in the right practices. If one desires to exercise oneself in the right practices, of the two types of right acts, the rightly established and the auxiliary, one should set aside the auxiliary right acts and resolutely select the rightly established and follow it exclusively. The rightly established act is reciting the name of Amida Buddha. Those who recite the name will unflinchingly attain birth, because it is based on Amida's original vow. (p. 147-8)

Based on this translation, Hirakawa's interpretation may sound plausible. However, the meaning of the character 且 is extremely vague. It is often used as an untranslatable introduction to a sentence, and in many cases the lexical meaning of the character is completely lost. It may also, as an adverb (read "*masa ni V+n to su*"), indicate the future or the intention to do something, which would be a reasonable interpretation in our case. It is also worth noting that this is the only passage in which the translators chose to translate 且 as "temporarily." Furthermore, it may be asked why Hōnen uses the qualifying adverb "temporarily" only in connection with the Holy Path and the miscellaneous practices. If 且 had such a strong meaning here, we might as well suppose that Hōnen intended to abandon the "auxiliary acts" which support the nembutsu, completely and finally, since the character 且 is lacking here. Hirakawa, however, believes that the auxiliary acts are the first to be reappropriated after firm faith is established, though he fails to present any evidence to back this thesis. At any rate, I think a new interpretation with such far-reaching consequences should be based on much stronger evidence. There are in fact more and stronger arguments against Hirakawa's thesis than there are for it.

As to the historical argument that the contradiction between Hōnen's doctrine and his behavior supports Hirakawa's thesis, I would reply that it may solve one problem but creates a number of new ones. Why should Hōnen have been so vague and unclear about this point if he could have spared himself much trouble by clearly stating that his rejection of the miscellaneous practices was only temporal. This would probably have softened the opposition to his doctrine

to a considerable degree. Moreover, why should someone who has established firm faith in the Other Power of Amida's Original Vow need to support his or her nembutsu practice by the "auxiliary acts" while those with weak faith can do without? According to Hōnen's own statement in the *Senchakushū*, the very moment he lost all doubts as a result of reading Shandao was the very moment he "resolutely abandoned the other practices and took refuge in the nembutsu" (p. 153). Finally, we should not overinterpret the apparent contradiction which led Hirakawa to his new interpretation. Even though Hōnen rejected all other practices on the doctrinal level as unnecessary, this does not imply that he who is assured of his own birth should not keep the precepts. As a good Buddhist monk he may approach the precepts as something valuable in a moral sense (is that such a strange thing for Japanese Buddhism?), even though one should not rely on them as a means for salvation. I dare say that some people keep rules because they are convinced of their moral value and not simply because they are afraid of punishment. As to the conferring of the precepts to others, such as Kujō Kanezane, we may assume that Hōnen used such opportunities to reach important persons and propagate his teaching.

Be that as it may, new interpretations are always useful as they offer new perspectives and stimulate scholarly debate, and my critique is not meant to belittle the virtues of this book in general and of the introduction in particular.

In translating the *Senchakushū*, the translators have been fairly successful in trying to find a compromise between faithfulness to the original text and readability, and so this translation should be very useful to both scholars and the interested public. For the sake of the former it would have been helpful, however, to give important technical terms in brackets, so as to enable the scholarly reader to clearly identify the original term in all its connotations. As many of those terms have a long and complex history of usage and interpretation, one single translation is in most cases not enough to represent their semantic breadth. However, since the translation of most crucial terms is quite consistent throughout the text, it is not too difficult to find the original term in the extensive and instructive glossary which follows the translation. Here, the Japanese characters are also given. In addition, there are two lists of "Japanese Proper Names" and of "Chinese Proper Names."

A word must be said about the extensive "Select Bibliography." It is divided into four parts: "Dictionaries and Collections," "Primary Sources: By Title," "English Translations of Pure Land Sūtras," and "Modern Sources." The vast majority of titles given are written in Japanese, and whereas the list of works in Japanese is quite useful, the lists of "English Translations of Pure Land Sūtras" and of "Western-Language Sources" (a subdivision of "Modern Sources") are rather incomplete and arbitrary. For instance, the English translations by Inagaki

Hisao (1994/1995) and L. Gómez (1996) are missing, not to mention the German and French translations of Hōnen's writings (H. Haas 1910; Renondeau 1965; Steineck 1997). The complete lack of any relevant works in European languages other than English (e.g. Haas 1910; Wakai 1933; Butschkuss 1940, Repp 1993/1996, Kleine 1996, etc.) even in the bibliography called "Western-Language Sources" is most regrettable, although not surprising. May I humbly remind the editors of the fact that "Western languages" does not equal "English"! If the editors were not willing to take notice of books and articles written in German or French, for instance, one hopes they would abstain from giving the title "Western-Language Sources" to a bibliography that contains only English references. By contrast, Jérôme Ducor's internet bibliography of recent works on Pure Land Buddhism, <http://www.ville-ge.ch/musinfo/ethg/ducor/shinbib.htm>, is more comprehensive.

Despite these shortcomings, which merely reflect a general trend to simply ignore everything which is not written in English, I do not hesitate to strongly recommend "Hōnen's *Senchakushū*" to everyone who is interested in Japanese Buddhism. This book will certainly contribute to a better understanding of Hōnen and stimulate further studies in the West.

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