

Shinran's Rejection of Deathbed Rites

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In 1259 and 1260, famine and disease devastated Japan's eastern provinces. Shinran (1173-1262)—later revered as the founder of Jōdo Shinshū, or the True Pure Land sect—wrote to his follower Jōshin-bō expressing sorrow that so many people, old and young, had died. Then he added, "Personally, I attach no significance to the manner of one's death, good or bad. Those in whom faith is established have no doubts; therefore they dwell in the company of those certain to be born in the Pure Land (*shōjōju*). And for that reason, their end is auspicious, even if they are foolish and ignorant."¹¹ Jōshin-bō had perhaps seen fellow believers die of hunger and sickness, and Shinran's letter reassured him that, because of their faith, those people had nonetheless been born in the Pure Land of the Buddha Amida (Skt. Amitābha, Amitāyus). But at the same time, his words—"I attach no significance to the manner of one's death, good or bad"—ran contrary to religious attitudes of the day. For many of Shinran's contemporaries, nothing in life was more significant than one's manner of leaving it. Only those who died peacefully, with their minds focused on Amida or some other buddha or bodhisattva, were believed to escape saṃsāra, the miseries of deluded rebirth, and achieve birth in a pure land (*ōjō*). Once born in a pure land, one's enlightenment was assured, so in effect liberation itself depended on one's mental attitude at the end. For Shinran, however, efforts to control one's dying thoughts in order to reach the Pure Land were incompatible with his insight that salvation—*ōjō*—occurs, not as the consequence of human striving in reliance on one's own efforts (*jiriki*), but solely through reliance on the power that is "Other" (*tariki*), that of Amida's original vow to save all who place faith in him. Shinran's dismissal of the need for correct mental focus in one's last moments

pear directly as quotations in Shinran's writings, but surely his intent is that they be preserved and read.

- 6) I follow the reading of Imai Masaharu, who has pointed out that the verb forms employed by Eshinni indicate that she directly witnessed these encounters and suggests that she herself had already been a member of Hōnen's following at the time. See Imai Masaharu, *Shinran to Eshinni*. (Kyoto: Jishō Shuppan, 2004).
- 7) In Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi, eds., *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 104.
- 8) There is a slight difference between Shinran's quotation and the most widespread version of Hōnen's text, representing perhaps some authorial variation in choice among synonyms. The common text has "foremost" (*saki*, 先) and Shinran's copy has "fundamental" (*hon*, 本). Although basically indistinguishable in meaning, Shinran's *hon* is appropriate to the central meaning he emphasizes in Hōnen's expression.
- 9) It is said that Shinran's treatment of *bodhicitta*, for example, is a direct response to Myōe's criticisms of *Senjakushū*. This may well be the case, but it should also be noted that the structure of Shinran's discussion replicates in form the logic of intersection and of spatial "worlds" of apprehension that we have been examining in this article. There is a crossing of two pairs of bipolar terms—"lengthwise"—"crosswise" and "departing"—"transcending"—to form four quadrants or categories of Buddhist path in relation to the mind aspiring for enlightenment (*bodaishin*, *bodhicitta*).
- 10) Dennis Hirota, trans., in *Plain Words on the Pure Land Way: Words of the Wandering Monks of Medieval Japan* (Kyoto: Ryukoku University, 1989). The original text may be found in Miyasaka Yūshō, ed., *Kana hōgo shū, Nihon bungaku taikei*, volume 83 (Iwanami Shoten, 1964), p. 189.
- 11) While *gi-naki o gi to su* is used in regard to nembutsu in *Tannishō* 10, in Shinran's own writings its topic is Other Power, and it is not used to characterize nembutsu directly.

* An earlier version of this essay has appeared in Japanese translation in Bukkyō Daigaku hen, *Hōnen Bukkyō to sono kanōsei* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2012).

was radical and profoundly counter-intuitive, even within the exclusive nenbutsu movement. In this essay I first seek to illuminate Shinran's distinctive position by contrasting it with that of the mainstream Pure Land thought of Japan's Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1185-1333) periods and with the teachings of Shinran's teacher Hōnen as well as other exclusive nenbutsu figures. I then return to Shinran's dismissal of the significance of one's manner of death as an expression of his absolute reliance on Amida's vow and also touch on the question of how thoroughly his followers accepted it.

The Last Moment in Mainstream Pure Land Thought

The idea that one's dying thought influences one's next rebirth predates the historical Buddha and is found in most Indian religions, Buddhism included.²⁷ In the Mahāyāna, it developed in connection with aspirations for birth in the superior realms of buddhas and bodhisattvas, especially Amida's Land of Bliss (Skt. Sukhāvātī, Jpn. Gokuraku) said to lie in the western quadrant of the universe. We find this idea in the *Contemplation Sūtra*, which says that Amida, together with his holy assembly, will descend in welcome (*raigō*) to receive devotees at the moment of their death and escort them to his pure land. This sūtra promises that even the most evil persons, if they encounter a good teacher who instructs them at the time of death so that they are able to sustain ten consecutive thoughts of Amida and chant his name, shall, with each thought, erase the sins of eight billion kalpas and be born in the Pure Land.²⁸

In Japan, this idea was popularized by the Tendai scholar-monk Genshin (942-1017) in his famous *Ōjō yōshū* (Essentials of Birth in the Pure Land). In this work Genshin explained how deathbed practice should be conducted so as to ensure right mindfulness at the last moment (*rinjū shōnen*).²⁹ Genshin drew on the vinaya commentary of the Chinese master Daoxuan (596-667), who had described how dying monks were purportedly treated at the Jetavana monastery in Śrāvastī in India.³⁰ The dying, Daoxuan says, should be removed to a separate structure called the Hall of Impermanence (*mujōin*), where the sight of their possessions and familiar surroundings will

not arouse thoughts of worldly attachment. There, a buddha image should be installed, and a cord woven of five-colored threads should be tied to its hand. The dying person should be made to sit or lie down facing west and to hold the other end of the cord, to help generate thoughts of following the Buddha to his pure land. Flowers should be scattered and incense burnt, to create a dignified atmosphere. Genshin also cited the Chinese Pure Land teachers Daochuo (562-645) and Shandao (613-681) on advice to the *zenchishiki* (Skt. *kalyāṇamitra*, literally "good friend"), or spiritual guides in attendance at the deathbed. These persons should protect the dying from worldly distractions and monitor their dying visions, which were thought to presage one's rebirth realm. If the dying report seeing flames or other frightful images, the *zenchishiki* should assist them to perform repentance. Above all, they should chant together with the dying to ensure that they complete the final ten nenbutsu. Genshin himself recommended that dying persons visualize Amida Buddha descending in welcome with his attendant bodhisattvas and enveloping them with his radiant light; by so doing, he says, they will eradicate all their past misdeeds. Genshin also quoted the *Dazhidu lun* (Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom), which says that "one's last thought at death outweighs the practice of a hundred years" and maintained that the nenbutsu chanted at the moment of death possesses a far greater power than it does at ordinary times.³¹

The form of deathbed practice that Genshin described was put into practice by a group of his fellow Tendai monks called the Twenty-five Samādhi Society (Nijūgo zanmai-e), formed in 986, who vowed to assist one another in chanting nenbutsu at the time of death. Their practices were adopted at other monasteries and then spread to lay devotees, first among the aristocracy and then across social levels. Scholar-monks of various lineages composed similar instructions for deathbed rites, accommodating Genshin's instructions to the practices and teachings of their particular school. The ideal of a mindful death was celebrated in a genre of religious literature known as *ōjōden*, accounts of men and women believed to have been born in Amida's Pure Land. The subjects of these biographies invariably die calmly,

chanting the nenbutsu and facing west, toward Amida's Pure Land. Dying in this exemplary fashion was considered both the immediate cause for achieving *ōjō* and a proof that it had occurred. As additional evidence, wondrous signs at the time of death—such as purple clouds rising in the west, music heard in the air, unearthly fragrance in the death chamber, or unusual preservation of the body—were often reported, not only in hagiographic literature such as *ōjōden*, but also in courtier diaries and other historical documents.⁷

Belief in the power of one's last thought meant, as the *Contemplation Sūtra* says, that even the most ignorant or sinful person, by chanting the name of Amida at the end, could be born in his pure land. But by the same principle, no matter how earnestly one might have practiced throughout life, a single wrong thought at the last moment could send one plummeting down into the hells or other evil realms. The circumstances of one's death are difficult to control, and people worried that accident, sudden death, senility, or excruciating pain might rob them of the opportunity to chant nenbutsu at the end, condemning them to miserable rebirths. Such anxieties were expressed, if not generated, by didactic tales on the theme of otherwise holy men defeated by a single delusory thought at the end. In one such story, a devout monk, contrary to all expectation, fails to achieve the Pure Land and is reborn a snake because, even while chanting his last nenbutsu, he happens to notice a vinegar jar on the shelf and dies wondering who will inherit it.⁸ Bad deaths exacerbated the grief of relatives and associates, who feared for their deceased's postmortem fate. A religious teacher whose death fell short of the mark might even become a target of criticism, especially if he headed a new and controversial religious movement. The Tendai cleric Jien (1155-1225) wrote in his diary that there had been "nothing remarkable" about the death of Hōnen (1133-1212), founder of the independent Jōdo or Pure Land sect, and that his *ōjō* was therefore "by no means a certain thing."⁹ *Nomori no kagami*, a late thirteenth-century treatise on poetics attributed to Minamoto no Arifusa, similarly criticized the death of Ippen (1239-1289), founder of the mendicant Pure Land order known as the Jishū, saying that not

only was there no sign of Amida's descent, but Ippen's body was in such a dreadful state that his disciples had to hurry to cremate him before others could see it.¹⁰ People of Heian and Kamakura Japan offered prayers, copied sūtras, made pilgrimages, dedicated Buddha images, and performed all sorts of meritorious acts in hopes of achieving a death with correct mental focus. Belief in the power of one's last thought undeniably gave hope that even the most ignorant or sinful persons, by chanting the name of Amida at the end, could be born in his Pure Land. But it also inspired considerable anxiety about what would happen if one's last moments did not go as planned.

Hōnen's Teachings on the Last Moment

How was the ideal of "right mindfulness at the last moment" received in the exclusive nenbutsu (*senju nenbutsu*) movement? This movement was initiated by Hōnen, who denied the need for traditional disciplines such as precept-keeping, meditation, and study, and instead promoted the chanted nenbutsu as the only practice suited to the capacities of all men and women in the degenerate Final Dharma age (*mappō*). This was not his own arbitrary choice, Hōnen said; Amida Buddha himself had selected the invocation of his name as the practice according with his original vow and the sole act upon which *ōjō* depends. Hōnen was deeply committed to this practice and chanted sixty or seventy thousand nenbutsu a day. But what mattered most in chanting, he taught, was an underlying spirit, not of amassing merit through one's own efforts, but of faith in the transcendent "Other Power" (*tariki*) of Amida's compassionate vow. This attitude of utter trust in the Other Power of Amida's vow seems at odds with efforts to control and direct one's last thoughts through the ritual means of deathbed practice. Yet the ideal of dying in a state of right mindfulness was deeply entrenched in the religious culture of medieval Japan, and Hōnen struggled to reconcile it with his emphasis on *tariki*.

Hōnen's absolutizing of the invocational nenbutsu had several important consequences for his understanding of the last moment. First, it led him to deny the conventional idea that the deathbed nenbutsu possesses a particu-

lar efficacy transcending that of ordinary times. Because the nenbutsu is the sole practice according with Amida's vow, he said, it is always fully endowed with all of Amida's merits. "What difference could there be between the nenbutsu at ordinary times and the nenbutsu at the time of death?" Hōnen asked. "Should one die while chanting nenbutsu as one's ordinary practice, then that is the deathbed nenbutsu, and should one's deathbed nenbutsu be prolonged, that becomes the nenbutsu of ordinary time."¹⁷ This understanding led him to reconceive the causality of the *raigō* from an "Other Power" perspective. Conventional wisdom held that the practitioner's pure mental focus at the moment of death is what causes Amida and his attendants to descend in welcome. For Hōnen, however, it was the other way around: Amida comes to welcome the dying because of the nenbutsu that they have chanted all along, and it is Amida's appearance before the dying that enables them to dwell in right mindfulness, filled with joy and reverence, all thoughts of worldly attachment driven from their minds.¹⁸

In short, Hōnen understood the deathbed nenbutsu, less as a matter of exerting control over one's last moments, than of entrusting oneself to Amida's compassion. For that reason, he sometimes deemphasized some of the ritual aspects of deathbed practice, especially in his later writings.¹⁹ In response to his followers' questions, he said that one need not form Amida's meditation *mūdra* (*jōin*) at the time of death, as the *gasshō* gesture would suffice, nor did one have to hold the five-colored cords or even face a buddha image; the crucial thing was simply to chant the nenbutsu.²⁰ Hōnen is said to have refused on his own deathbed to take hold of the cord fastened to the hand of the buddha image, saying, "That is people's usual way of practice, but it is not necessarily appropriate for me."²¹ He also said that one need not even have a *zenchishiki* or spiritual guide in attendance during in one's last hours. In a famous letter, Hōnen declined a request from the nun Shōnyo-bō (d. 1201), a daughter of the retired emperor Goshirakawa, to serve as *zenchishiki* at her deathbed, as he had just embarked on an intensive nenbutsu retreat. "You should abandon desire for a *zenchishiki* who is an ordinary worldlying and rely on the Buddha as your *zenchishiki*,"²² he told her.

And for warriors dying on the battlefield, Hōnen taught that simply to utter the nenbutsu at the last moment would be sufficient.¹⁷

However, Hōnen did not actively reject traditional deathbed conventions, such as withdrawing to die in a special practice hall where a buddha image is enshrined. He himself even served on occasion as spiritual attendant at the deathbed of his disciples and lay patrons.¹⁸ More significantly, his stance of wholehearted reliance on Amida's vow in no way altered for him the decisive nature of the last moment and the need to be chanting the nenbutsu at that time. He admonished:

Even though you may have admirably accumulated the merit of the nenbutsu over days and years, if you should meet with some evil influence at the time of death and in the end give rise to evil thoughts, you will lose [the opportunity of] birth in the Pure Land immediately after death and be swept away to suffer in the currents of *samsāra* for another lifetime or two...Constant diligence in chanting nenbutsu is the only way to be sure of *ōjō*.¹⁹

He is even said to have remarked: "Sometimes one dies from choking on food while eating. You should chant 'Namu-Amida-butsu' whenever you chew and 'Namu-Amida-butsu' whenever you swallow."²⁰ Thus in Hōnen's thought a tension remains between his spirit of reliance on Amida's original vow and his insistence on the need to be chanting nenbutsu in one's final moments.

Deathbed Practice among Hōnen's disciples

After Hōnen's death, his following split into a number of lineages emanating from his leading disciples. All Hōnen's followers stressed salvation through faith in the power of the Amida's vow, expressed in the chanting of the nenbutsu. But they divided along a spectrum of interpretation. At the conservative end were those who stressed cultivating faith through cumulative nenbutsu chanting up until the end of life and also recommended supporting

practices, such as sūtra recitation, meditation, or precept observance, subsuming these traditional disciplines within a *tarikhi* interpretive framework. At the other end was a more radical group that stressed a sudden transformative experience of salvation through faith, which they held to be Amida's gift and not an effort exerted by the believer.²¹⁾

As one might expect, the conservative faction insisted upon the importance of deathbed practice to ensure that devotees were chanting the nenbutsu at the time of death. We see this, for example, in writings of the Chinzei lineage, beginning with Hōnen's immediate disciple Benchō (a.k.a. Ben'a or Shōkō, 1162-1238), who spread Hōnen's teachings in Kyushu. Benchō adhered closely to the precedents laid down by Shandao, Genshin, and others. He writes: "One should set up before the sick person a buddha image and that individual's personal sūtra, being sure to attach the cords, ready lamps, burn incense, and provide flowers. Without fail one should strike the chimes and chant the nenbutsu, waiting for the dying person's breath to cease and for Amida and Kannon to come in welcome."²²⁾ Benchō seems to have understood these conventions as observances that Hōnen himself had mandated.

Benchō's successor Ryōchū (a.k.a. Nen'a, 1199-1287) compiled a set of instructions for deathbed practice (*rinjū gyōgisho*) from the standpoint of the exclusive nenbutsu, one of the first works of this kind to be written in vernacular Japanese. Titled *Kanbyō yōjin shō* (Admonitions in Caring for the Sick), this work contains detailed instructions for nursing and encouraging the terminally ill and became enormously popular, even outside Pure Land circles. It also reflects the same tension that we see in Hōnen's teaching between absolute reliance on Amida's vow and the importance of one's last nenbutsu. Attendants should assure the dying that, because of their prior devotion, Amida will surely come for them at the time of death, and they will receive the Buddha's protection, enabling them to dwell in right mindfulness at the final moment. Without the power of Amida's vow, Ryōchū says, ordinary worldlings like ourselves would have no hope of birth in the Pure Land. But for that very reason, he maintains, it is essential to be chanting the nenbutsu at the end. No matter how terrible the pains of dying, one must not

become distracted even for an instant. One's entire lifetime of nenbutsu practice has been solely for the sake of this crucial moment, so how could one relax one's efforts now? To slip up at the last moment would mean falling back into the samsaric realms. Attendants should chant continuously to ensure that the dying person hears the Buddha's name and do all in their power to keep him or her conscious, alert, and able to chant the ten final nenbutsu.²³⁾

For conservatives like Benchō and Ryōchū, deathbed rites to ensure right mindfulness at the end remained crucial. But what about the more radical among Hōnen's followers, those who stressed, not the cumulative momentum of daily practice, but union with Amida Buddha in the nenbutsu of the present moment? This position was represented by the Seizan lineage, initiated by Hōnen's disciple Shōkū (1177-1247). Shōkū and his followers had their base among the Kyoto aristocracy, and Seizan teachings show strong influence of medieval Tendai original enlightenment doctrine (*hongaku hōmon*). Based on his own understanding of Other Power, Shōkū held that the nenbutsu was not a practice initiated by the believer but Amida Buddha's own act of uniting the believer with himself. In chanting the nenbutsu with this understanding, Shōkū taught, one enters a nondual realm in which linear time collapses, and Amida's primal vow to realize buddhahood and the salvation of the devotee are both realized simultaneously. Similar ideas of the immediate realization of ōjō, each with its own emphasis but all involving a radical overturning of the mind that relies on self-power, occur in the teachings of Shinran: the Jishū leader Ippen, who, though not in Hōnen's direct lineage, had studied for a time with some of Shōkū's disciples; and Ippen's successor Ta'a Shinkyō (1237-1319). None of these teachers denied the conventional notion of birth in Amida's western Pure Land at the time of death, which they anticipated as a real event. But they saw that future birth as grounded in a transcendence of self in union with Amida, in which ōjō is realized in the faith of the present moment.²⁴⁾

One might expect that these figures embracing some version of the "immediate ōjō" idea would, like Shinran, reject the need for deathbed practice, but this seems not to have been the case. Or at least, we find no explicit

statement to that effect. Shōkū said, "In being embraced by the Buddha, there is no distinction between the moment of death and ordinary time. As far as ōjō is concerned, the moment of death and ordinary time are one."²⁵ However, this remains a theoretical statement, and it is not clear whether or not it translated into a rejection of deathbed observances. Among teachers of "immediate ōjō," only Shinkyō of the Jishū left detailed comments on how to approach the time of death.²⁶ Shinkyō taught that for nenbutsu practitioners, now is always the moment of death. "Since the moment of death and ordinary time are not separate, they are not two.... Nonetheless, since you may expect to die at some point, it is vital to continue chanting nenbutsu being constantly mindful that one's [thought at the] last moment will be determined by this present one," he said.²⁷ Here we see that, while Shinkyō embraced the idea of nondual realization of ōjō in the present moment, that conviction in no way cancelled out for him the need for continual nenbutsu chanting to prepare for the time of death. Shinkyō's emphasis on the absolute power of the nenbutsu led him, like Hōnen, to abridge many of the outward formalities of deathbed practice. Even the warrior cut down on the field of battle, he said, could be born in the Pure Land as long as he chants the name of Amida, even once, before dying.²⁸ Shinkyō also dismissed the significance of good and evil omens accompanying a person's death; as long as a person died chanting the nenbutsu, then he or she had achieved birth in the Pure Land.²⁹ The crucial thing, however, was that one did indeed have to "die chanting the nenbutsu," and on this point Shinkyō remained uncompromising. He admonished, "Never, ever conclude that someone reached the Pure Land if he failed to voice the nenbutsu at the time of death."³⁰ As Shinkyō's example shows, embracing the idea that ōjō is realized in the present moment by no means necessarily entailed rejecting the necessity of the final nenbutsu.

Nevertheless, some exclusive nenbutsu practitioners were, like Shinran, beginning to question the need for deathbed rites in light of the teaching of reliance solely on the Other Power of Amida's vow. Ironically, we know of them chiefly through Benchō, who recorded their views in order to repudi-

ate them. For example (Benchō writes), someone asks: When assailed by the pains of death, ordinary practitioners are disturbed in body and mind and will find it hard to concentrate on Amida. Can't such people achieve ōjō simply by virtue of the nenbutsu they have chanted all along, without a deathbed rite? Benchō retorts that preparing for the last thought is the most essential business of one's lifetime; those who do not chant the nenbutsu at the end do not reach the Pure Land. One who chants the nenbutsu earnestly in life will surely be able to carry out the deathbed practice. Besides, he adds, the whole spirit of the question is misguided; a serious practitioner, in keeping with the virtue of assiduousness (*virya, shōjin*), will strive to do more, not less.³¹ Someone else asks: Isn't the presence of a *zenchishiki* redundant for exclusive nenbutsu practitioners, whose ōjō is already assured? Here Benchō counters by noting that Hōnen himself acted in the capacity of *zenchishiki* for his followers. Dispensing with a *zenchishiki*'s help at the time of death is like trying to fly without wings or cross the sea without a boat. "A bold warrior," Benchō says, "in subduing the enemy, makes use of a bow and arrows as well as a sword... a *zenchishiki* is like a great general who arouses the conditions for ōjō." Should one's mind become disoriented at the end, a *zenchishiki* can help one to practice repentance and thus clear away karmic hindrances at the final moment.³²

Benchō seems to have been especially distressed by "a certain faction" among nenbutsu practitioners who maintained that, no matter how someone dies, as long as he or she chanted the nenbutsu in life, that person has achieved ōjō. He counters:

A good death is when [the pain of] the last illness abates, so that the dying do not suffer but pass away as though falling asleep, with a composed mind and palms pressed together, having said "Namu-Amida-butsu" as their final words. Or, if purple clouds gather, or if the dying see radiant light or behold a transformation buddha, that signals birth in the Pure Land in the upper grades.... A bad death is when they thrash about, spit blood, or become deranged before dying... All such persons

fall into the three evil paths.³³⁾

It is irresponsible, Benchō says, to suggest that people who die in agony or in a state of mental confusion have achieved the Pure Land. While we do not know who Benchō was criticizing, the particular position that he rejects here sounds remarkably similar to Shinran's.

Whether they stressed cumulative nenbutsu practice over time or transformation through faith in the nenbutsu of the present moment, the majority of Hōnen's disciples and others influenced by him, like Hōnen himself, emphasized the nenbutsu as absolute. For that reason, they denied any qualitative distinction between the nenbutsu of ordinary time and the nenbutsu of the final moment. Yet precisely because they saw the nenbutsu as absolute, they retained the conviction that one's ōjo in some way depended upon chanting it at the time of death. Thus a tension remains in their teachings between absolute reliance on the power of Amida's vow and the decisive importance of one's last nenbutsu. Scholars have often assumed that Hōnen's exclusive nenbutsu doctrine gave its followers greater confidence in achieving ōjō than that held by their Heian predecessors or those identified with the Buddhist mainstream. Kasahara Kazuo, for example, writes that, before the emergence of the exclusive nenbutsu, "People practiced with the slender hope that, by revering many buddhas and bodhisattvas and engaging in multiple practices, they could perhaps be saved by the Buddha's compassion. They were not able to practice with the conviction that that Buddha would certainly save them. They did not have the self-confidence that arises from single practice."³⁴⁾ But as long as ōjō still hinged in some sense on the nenbutsu at the time of death, it seems unlikely that the exclusive nenbutsu teaching in and of itself would have been sufficient to alleviate fears about one's last moments.

Shinran's Rejection of Deathbed Practice

Shinran took as his starting point the recognition of human sinfulness and the utter impossibility of extricating oneself from delusion and attachments; even one's good deeds, in his estimation, are tainted by the egocentric calcu-

lation (*hakarai*) that they will rebound to one's credit. But when one abandons all efforts to ensure salvation through one's own virtues and entrusts oneself wholeheartedly to Amida, one is seized by the Buddha's compassion, never to be let go, and faith arises in one's heart. In that moment of entrusting oneself to the power of Amida's vow, Shinran said, one directly achieves birth in the Pure Land (*sokutoku ōjō*). Such persons, who have realized the adamant mind of faith, experience the "spontaneous raigō" (*ji raigō*); that is, Amida and his holy assembly—a vast throng of transformation buddhas and bodhisattvas—surround and protect them, not just at the moment of death but at all times and places.³⁵⁾ For Shinran, as for other exclusive nenbutsu teachers, the immediate realization of ōjō did not negate birth in the Pure Land as a cosmological destination, which occurs at the time of death. But in his thinking, what guaranteed birth in the Pure Land in the next life was trust in Amida's vow in the present and not one's own efforts in nenbutsu chanting up until the final moment. This conviction led Shinran to the radical step of rejecting deathbed practices altogether. "When faith is established, one's attainment of the Pure Land is also established; there is no need for deathbed rituals to prepare one for Amida's coming," he wrote.³⁶⁾ Individuals in whom faith has arisen dwell at the stage of those whose birth in the Pure Land is certain; thus they are in effect "equal to buddhas."³⁷⁾ For such persons, any subsequent nenbutsu were uttered solely in gratitude to Amida for a salvation that, in essence, had already been achieved. Whether or not one chanted it at the moment of death was not a crucial issue.

In fact, Shinran said those who await Amida's coming only at the moment of death are not yet fully established in faith. That criticism would have applied to most people of his time, who believed that whether they reached the Pure Land or fell back into the samsaric realms would be determined by their thoughts at the last moment. Shinran allowed that, by the merit of having chanted Amida's name, even people such as these might achieve ōjō at the end of life with the aid of a spiritual guide. But in the meantime, he said, lacking true faith, they must live with anxiety about their salvation, continually anticipating the moment of death.³⁸⁾

In sum: Like Hōnen himself, other teachers of exclusive nenbutsu, despite their individual doctrinal emphases, stressed the importance of ongoing nenbutsu practice up until the time of death in order to align oneself with the salvific power of Amida's original vow. They emphasized the nenbutsu as absolute, and for that reason, a tension remains in their approach between trust in Amida's compassion and the need to be chanting the nenbutsu at the final moment. In contrast, what Shinran absolutized was less the chanted nenbutsu itself than the spirit of reliance on *tarihi*, and in that shift, the tension dissolves: only faith matters, one's manner of death does not. There is an elegant simplicity, a thorough-going consistency, in Shinran's teaching on this matter, which extends the implications of reliance on Other Power far beyond where others were willing to take it.

Shinran's attitude toward deathbed practice seems to resonate with a personal experience he had in 1231, when he was about fifty. A letter written by his wife Eshinni records that, at that time, Shinran fell seriously ill. In his fever and pain, he found himself unconsciously reciting the text of the *jing* or *Larger Pure Land Sūtra*, which he had memorized in his youth. But then he reflected that the faith given by Amida together with the nenbutsu is complete and perfect in itself and lacks nothing that would need to be supplemented by chanting sūtras. At that point Shinran recognized in himself the stubborn human tendency to attempt to control one's fate through the self-assertion of personal striving. Once this thought occurred to him, he stopped reciting the sūtra, and soon after his fever broke.⁴⁰ We can only speculate whether or not this experience may have shaped his later rejection of deathbed rites. In any event, Shinran's utter trust in the salvific power of Amida's vow gave him the courage to relinquish those efforts, so widespread in his day, to control the manner of one's dying and also dispelled for him the anxieties that those efforts entailed.

After Shinran's Death

For those who shared Shinran's faith, his rejection of deathbed practice would have alleviated fears about whether or not one would be able to focus

one's mind on Amida and chant the nenbutsu at the moment of death. One would expect that his followers should have welcomed it. Yet hints in the historical record suggest that not all of Shinran's followers were able to accept his view that one's manner of dying has no soteriological significance. Shinran himself lamented in a personal letter that it was beyond his power to correct fellow practitioners who say they await the coming of Amida at the final moment—indicating that, at least for some, this view remained deeply entrenched.⁴¹ *Tannishō* lists, as one of the "deviations" that arose among followers after Shinran's death, the idea that chanting the nenbutsu at the time of death erases the sins of prior lifetimes and thus enables birth in the Pure Land. *Tannishō* dismisses concern with eradicating sins as a lingering reliance on self-power; one is saved, not by the eradication of sin, but by the compassion of Amida's vow, which embraces one from the very moment that faith first arises.⁴² Yet the very fact that Yuien-bō, the compiler, found it necessary to address this issue suggests that the deathbed nenbutsu may still have been valued by some within the early Shin community. Shinran's great grandson Kakunyo (1270-1351), the third Honganji patriarch, upheld Shinran's position, writing that "attaining birth in the Pure Land by the nenbutsu has nothing to do with whether one's death is good or bad."⁴³ But Kakunyo's biography of Shinran makes a point of describing him as dying in an exemplary manner: "He lay down on his right side with his head to the north, facing west, and breathed his last, chanting the nenbutsu."⁴⁴ It is also suggestive that Kakunyo's son, the Shin evangelist Zonkaku (1290-1373), made a copy of Ryōchū's *Kanbyō yōjin shō*, a text emphasizing the salvific power of the final nenbutsu in a way quite contrary to Shinran's position.⁴⁵ While further research would be needed to establish the point, perhaps some minimal form of deathbed observance, such as facing west and chanting Amida's name as described in Shinran's biography, may have been performed in Shin circles, although—like Shin funerals—schematized in a way that stressed reliance on Other Power and not the efforts of the devotee.⁴⁵

Even for those who shared Shinran's view, good deaths among fellow believers may still have carried a profound emotional impact and seemed to

legitimize their faith. Shinran himself was not immune to this response. He once lavishly praised, as a sign of exemplary faith the death of a follower, Kakushin-bō, who at the end chanted the nenbutsu and died peacefully with his hands pressed together.⁴⁶ Shin orthodoxy holds that that ōjō is assured from the moment that faith first arises and one is enveloped by the power of Amida's compassion, never to be abandoned. But not until the moment of death does one actually go to the Pure Land. Thus even though, in Shinran's teaching, ōjō does not depend upon it, an exemplary death still held attraction as a conclusion befitting a life of faith.

- 1) *Mattōshō* 6, *Shinran chosaku zenshū* (hereafter *SCZ*), ed. Kaneko Daiei (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1964), 588.
- 2) Franklin Edgerton, "The Hour of Death: Its Importance for Man's Future Fate in Hindu and Western Religions," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Institute* 8, part 3 (1926-1927) : 219-49.
- 3) *Guan wuliangshou jing*, *T* no. 365, 12 : 346a.
- 4) In *Genshin, Nihon shisō taikēi* (hereafter *NST*) 6, ed. Ishida Mizumaro (Tokyo: Iwamami Shoten, 1970, 206-17). For a partial English translation of Genshin's instructions, see James C. Dobbins, "Genshin's Deathbed Nembutsu Ritual in Pure Land Buddhism," *Religions of Japan in Practice*, ed. George J. Tanabe, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 166-75.
- 5) See Koichi Shinohara, "The Moment of Death in Daoxuan's Vinaya Commentary," in *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations*, ed. Bryan J. Cuevas and Jacqueline I. Stone (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 105-33.
- 6) *Ōjō yōshū*, *NST* 6 : 290-91. The *Dazhidu lun* reference is at *T* no. 1509, 25 : 233b.
- 7) For more detailed background, see Jacqueline I. Stone, "By the Power of One's Last Nenbutsu: *Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan*," in *Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha*, ed. Richard K. Payne and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 77-119, and the Japanese sources cited there.
- 8) *Konjaku monogatari* 20 : 23, *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikēi* 36, ed. Komine Kazuaki (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1994), 273-75.
- 9) *Gukanshō, Nihon koten bungaku taikēi* 86, ed. Okami Masao and Akamatsu Toshihide (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1967), 295.
- 10) *Nomori no kagami, Gunsho ruijū* (hereafter *GR*) no. 484 (Tokyo: Zoku Gunsho Ruijū Kanseikai, 1939-1943), 27 : 481a.
- 11) *Nenbutsu ōjō yōgi shō, Shōwa shinshū Hōnen Shōnin zenshū* (hereafter *HSZ*), ed. Ishii Kyōdō (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1955), 686 : see also *Sanjin ryōkan oyobi gohōgo*, 453.
- 12) *Gyakushū seppō*, *HSZ* 276. See also *Hōnen Shōnin goseppō no koto*, 168-69 : "Ōgo no Tarō Sanehide e tsukawasu gohenji," 521-22 : "Shōnyo-bō e tsukawasu onfumi," 545 : "Ōjō jōdo yōjin," 563-64 : *Jōdoshū ryakushō*, 596-97 : and "Seizanha Gyōkan Gyōei shoden no onkotoba" no. 5, 778. For discussion, see Nabeshima Naoki, "Hōnen ni okeru shi to kanshi no mondai" (1) and (2), *Ryūgaku Daigaku ronshū* 434-435 (1989) : 137-55 (esp. 146-50), and 436 (1990) : 272-99 (275-76), and Nakatomi Itaru, "Hōnen no raigōkan," *Indogaku bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 48, no. 2 (2000) : 679-82.
- 13) For Hōnen's understanding of deathbed practice, see Suzuki Seigen, "Rinjū gyōgi ni tsuite," *Jōdogaku* 27 (1960) : 393-419 : Itō Shintetsu, *Nihon Jōdokyō bunkashū kenkyū* (Tokyo: Ryūbunkan, 1975), 46-65 : and Nabeshima, "Hōnen ni okeru shi to kanshi no mondai" (1) and (2). These studies, however, stress Hōnen's rejection of deathbed formalities and do not underscore his understanding of the last moment as the point at which ōjō is determined.
- 14) *Ippyaku shijū gokajō mondō* 24 and 26, *HSZ* 652.
- 15) See for example "Gorinjū no toki monteira ni shimesarekeru onkotoba" no. 4, *HSZ* 724-25. For variant accounts, see *Hōnen Shōnin den no seiritsushiteki kenkyū*, Hōnen Shōnin Den Kenkyūkai (Kyoto: Nozomigawa Shoten, 1961), 2 : 271.
- 16) "Shōnyo-bō e tsukawasu onfumi," *HSZ* 545. See also *Ōjō jōdo yōjin*, 562-63, and *Ippyaku shijū gokajō mondō* no. 66, 657.
- 17) "Amakasu Tarō Tadatsuna ni shimesu onkotoba," *HSZ* 717.
- 18) See Nabeshima, "Hōnen ni okeru shi to kanshi no mondai (2)," 289-290 : Suzuki, "Rinjū gyōgi ni tsuite," 405-6 : and Stone, "By the Power of One's Last Nenbutsu," 112n36.
- 19) "Shichikajō no kishōmon," *HSZ* 814.
- 20) *Tsune ni ōserarekeru onkotoba*, *HSZ* 493. See also the very similar statement attributed to Hōnen in *Ichigon hōdan*, *GR* no. 840, 28b : 290a.
- 21) On this range of interpretation, see Mark Blum, "Kōsai and the Paradox of *Ichinengi*: Be Careful of What You Preach," *Pacific World*, third series no. 6 (2004) : 57-87.
- 22) *Jōdoshū meimoku mondō* 3, *Jōdoshū zensho* (hereafter *JZ*), ed. Jōdoshū Kaishū

- Happyakunen Kinen Keisan Junbikyoku (Tokyo: Sankibō Busshorin, 1970-72), 10 : 418a. See also *Jōdoshū yōshū* 4 and 6, 210b-12b, 239b-40b, and *Nenbutsu myōgishū* 2, 380a-81b.
- 23) *Kanbyō yōjin shō*, reproduced in Itō, *Nihon Jōdokyō bunkashi kenkyū*, 447-61 : see esp. 453-56 (articles 14-19).
- 24) On Shōkū and the Seizan doctrine of immediate ōjō, especially in comparison with Ippen, see Imai Masaharu, *Jishū seiritsushi no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1981), 183-90, 214-17 : Ōhashi Shunnō, *Ippen to Jishū kyōdan* (Tokyo: Kyōikusha, 1978), 33-36 : Dennis Hirota, *No Abode: The Record of Ippen* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986), xlv-lxvi; and Jonathan Todd Brown, "Warrior Patronage, Institutional Change, and Doctrinal Innovation in the Early Jishū," Ph.D. diss. (Princeton University, 1999), 341-48. For comparison of Ippen and Shinran's teachings on this point, see Hirota, *ibid.*, lxxi-lxxviii.
- 25) *Kangyō gengibun tahitsu shō* 1, *Seizan zensho*, ed. Seizan Zensho Kankōkai (Kyoto: Bun'eidō, 1974), 4 : 267a.
- 26) For discussion of Shinkyō's teachings on this subject, see Brown, "Warrior Patronage," 348-50, 357-360.
- 27) Ōhashi Shunnō, ed., *Jishū niso Ta'a Shōnin hōgo* (Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan, 1975), 168-69.
- 28) *Ibid.*, 150.
- 29) *Ibid.*, 184.
- 30) *Ibid.*, 151 : see also Brown, "Warrior Patronage," 332-36.
- 31) *Jōdoshū yōshū* 4, *JZ* 10 : 210b-211a.
- 32) *Jōdoshū yōshū* 6, *JZ* 10 : 239b-40b. The quotation is at 240b.
- 33) *Nenbutsu myōgishū* 3, *JZ* 10 : 380a-b. A similar passage occurs in Benchō's *Jōdoshū meimoku mondō*, *JZ* 10 : 418b-419a. Hōnen similarly criticizes persons who dismiss prayers for right mindfulness at the time of death as reflecting a lack of faith in Amida's original vow (*HSZ* 814).
- 34) Kasahara, *Kinsei ōjōden no sekai* (Tokyo: Kyōikusha, 1978), 70.
- 35) *Yuishinshō mon'i*, *SCZ* 539.
- 36) *Mattōshō* 1, *SCZ* 580 : see also *Mattōshō* 18, 608.
- 37) *Mattōshō* 7 and 18, 590, 608.
- 38) "Songō shinzō meimon," *SCZ* 495.
- 39) *Eshinni shōsoku* 5, trans. James C. Dobbins, *Letters of the Nun Eshinni: Images of Pure Land Buddhism in Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 30-32. For an interesting perspective on this episode, see Koyama Satoko, "Eshinni monjo daigotsū ni miru Shinran no byōki to kyōten dokuju," *Nishōgakusha Daigaku jinbun ronsō* 85 (2010) : 1-23.
- 40) *Mattōshō* 18, *SCZ* 608.
- 41) *SCZ* 687-88.
- 42) *Kuden shō* 14, *Shinshū shōgyō zenshū* (hereafter *SSZ*), ed. Shinshū Shōgyō Zensho Hensanjo (Kyoto: Kōkyō Shoin, 1936), 3 : 23. Rennyo (1415-1499), famed architect of the Honganji institution, similarly upheld Shinran's position ("Onfumi," *Bunmei* 4 [1472], 11/27, *SSZ* 3 : 406.) See also Kasahara's Kazuo's discussion of Rennyo's position in *Nyonin ōjō shisō no keifu* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1975), 272-76.
- 43) *Godenshō* 2 : 6, *SSZ* 3 : 653. Dobbins points to evidence in Eshinni's letters suggesting that Shinran may not have died in so peaceful and dignified a manner (*Letters of the Nun Eshinni*, 27, 122).
- 44) Washio Kyōdō, "Kishu Zenji sen to tsutafuru *Kanbyō yōjin shō* ni tsuite," *Bukkyō shigaku* 3, no. 8 (1913) : 655-61 : Suzuki Seigen, "Kanbyō yōjin shō ni tsuite," *Nihon rekishi* 139 (1960) : 108-9.
- 45) Shin doctrine denies the efficacy of funeral and memorial services as rites of merit transfer. Because all merit comes solely from Amida, there is nothing that ordinary worldlings can do to aid the salvation of the deceased. As Buddhist funerals spread across class levels in late medieval Japan, Shin leaders adopted them, both for economic reasons and to respond to the demands of followers; still, they maintained that funerary and memorial rites are held not for merit transference but simply to honor the deceased and give thanks to Amida. This remains the official stance today. See Mark L. Blum, "Stand by Your Founder: Honganji's Struggle with Funeral Orthodoxy," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 27, no. 3-4 (2000) : 179-212.
- 46) *Mattōshō* 14, *SCZ* 604.

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Shinran's Hermeneutics of Entry into Religious Awareness

Dennis Hirota

Introduction: Hedgehog and Fox

In a lecture to elite high school students in Tokyo one hundred years ago, the novelist Natsume Sōseki took up the theme “Imitation and Independence” (模倣と独立, 1913).¹⁾ He urged his audience—the future leaders of the nation—to cultivate a resilient spirit of independence and not merely imitate the West, and in order to offer concrete illustration, he plucked from the expanse of Japanese history a single example of such independence, pointing to the figure of Shinran. Although Sōseki underscored Shinran’s frank and open abandonment of traditional Buddhist precepts and conventional norms by taking a wife and eating meat, from the overall content of his somewhat meandering lecture, I suspect it was the Shinran of *Tannishō*, a work only recently introduced to a broad general readership, that he specifically had in mind.²⁾ At present still, it is probably an image of Shinran like Sōseki’s that remains most vivid in the contemporary imagination.

Shinran himself, however, projects a very different self-awareness in his writings. Throughout his life he maintained that his own literary work and propagational activity were intended only to transmit and elucidate the teaching of his master Hōnen. Shinran’s own usage of the term *Jōdo shinshū* 浄土真宗, later applied to the institution stemming from his tradition, attests to this intention, for he himself employs it to indicate “the true essence of the Pure Land way” and to refer precisely to what he learned from Hōnen and understood to be the core of his master’s message. Thus he states, alluding to Hōnen’s catchphrase, “selected Primal Vow” 選択本願 (*senjaku* [or *senchaku*] *hongan*):