

Honzon — Object of Worship in Shin Buddhism

by Jōryū Chiba, Honpa-Hongwanji, Kyoto, Japan

There is no evidence that the image of Śākyamuni the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, was reproduced or represented in paintings or sculptures during his lifetime. It is stated in the *Anguttara-nikāya*: "The body of Tathāgata is miraculous. The body of Tathāgata cannot be created, nor can it be said whether it is tall or short in its reproduction," or "The Tathāgata is the most honorable in this world and there is none comparable to him even among the devas. He cannot be engraved in any form." Thus, the scripture negates reproduction or representation of the Buddha's holy image.

Therefore, both in his lifetime and for some time after his death, the image of Śākyamuni was not expressed in an anthropomorphic form; he was symbolically represented in forms of the dharmacakra (wheel of the dharma), a Bodhi-tree, a stone with the Buddha's footprint inscribed, and an empty seat.

After Śākyamuni entered Nirvana, his lifetime events or activities were inscribed on platforms, stone walls and the gates of the stupas, in which his remains or relics were enshrined, and those engraved images indicated his remains. Yet his figure was not described in anthropomorphic forms but in dharmacakra or Bodhi-tree. His followers worshipped the Buddha before the stupas and practiced the teachings the Buddha had left to them.

In 324 B.C., when Alexander the Great invaded western India, Greek art was brought into India. For the first time, around the beginning of the Christian era, hundreds of years after the death of the Buddha, his images in imitation of Greek

deities started to be made. It is believed that the Buddha's images in a Greek mode appeared in Gandhāra, in what is now northwest Pakistan in the upper reaches of the Indus River.

About the same time, it is said that images of the Buddha with indigenous Indian features and not in Greek style were made in Mathurā, northwest of Central India in the upper reaches of the Jumna River. Because of the appearance of Buddha images, the object of Buddhist worship shifted from stupas to images. Thus, Buddha images came to be endowed with a sense of dignity and elegance as objects of reverence. Buddha images were also produced as works of art and believers wished to attain enlightenment through aesthetic inspiration from the images. However, since many of these believers remained in the world of aesthetic inspiration or understood the images as magical, they were unable to attain religious truth.

Shinran Shōnin (1173-1262), in order to expound clearly the Buddha's teachings (Amida's Primal Vow), selected the Name of Amida Buddha as *honzon* or the primary object of worship.

Shinran Shōnin says in his *Yuishin-shōmon'i* (*Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone'*), "Amida Buddha is originally colorless and formless; therefore, he cannot be conceived in our thoughts, nor can he be expressed in words. Amida Buddha then has manifested himself in a provisional form for our convenience' sake. It is called *hōben-hosshin* ('dharmakāya-as-compassion, or dharmakāya as expedient means')."

Although the *Tannishō* (*Lamenting the Deviations*) gives expression to the form of Amida Buddha, the master in the Pure Land, it is the

provisional form as dharmakāya-as-compassion. Amida Buddha cannot be originally described in terms of whether he is tall or short, or whether he is square or round, or whether blue, yellow, red, white or black.

The Buddha's image is the provisional form as expedient means (*hōben*) and through it one is to realize the Buddha's truth. People, however, understood that the Buddha lodged in the image of Buddha itself, and that this image was endowed with something magical, thereby missing the original significance of the image of the Buddha. Shinran Shōnin then proposed the Name as the object of worship in order to elucidate the way the Buddha should have been represented and to get rid of the sense of magic attributed to the image of the Buddha. It was in the middle of the seventh century that the faith in or the devotion to Amida Buddha was introduced into Japan. Due to the missionary work of Genshin (942-1017) from the end of the tenth century to the beginning of the eleventh century, faith in Amida Buddha began to spread. Genshin in his *Ōjō-yōshū* (*Essentials of Birth in the Pure Land*) preached the welcoming-descent of Amida Buddha, that is nembutsu practitioners will be welcomed and escorted by Amida Buddha to the Pure Land of the western region at the moment of their death. Since then the theory of Amida's welcoming-descent became popular, and the production of many images of Amida coming down to welcome and save nembutsu practitioners began.

It is said that Fujiwara no Michinaga, a well-known statesman who died in 1027, on his deathbed tied his hands to those of the image of Amida Buddha with strings, directed his eyes only to Amida, heard only Buddha-Dharma in his ears, kept single-heartedly the Pure Land of Amida in mind, and breathed his last breath.

The saving power of Amida in the case of Genshin, as seen on the deathbed of Fujiwara no Michinaga, needed to coincide with one's bodily, verbal and volitional expression through one's

entrusting in the Buddha. In the case of Hōnen Shōnin (1133-1212), the teacher of Shinran Shōnin, one was saved through one's single-hearted recitation of the nembutsu. In the case of Shinran Shōnin, shinjin or one's entrusting mind of Amida Buddha made saving or salvation possible.

In the teachings of Shinran Shōnin, salvation was attained by hearing Amida's name and entrusting in the power of Amida's Vow. One was settled in rank equal to Amida Buddha, thereby not needing to wait for Amida's coming down to welcome one on one's deathbed. This is called *heizei-gōjō* ("accomplishing the act for birth in the Pure Land in ordinary times").

Shinran Shōnin was negative not only about the theory of Amida's welcome but also about one's worship of the Buddha's image in the form of welcoming-descent. Furthermore, he was negative about worshipping Amida in form or in image. One's wishing for birth in the Pure Land through seeing the Buddha's image led to the practice of self-power called "contemplation of the Buddha." Shinran Shōnin made his position clear by stating that it was of vital importance to realize the essence of religion (Amida Buddha's Primal Vow) without being attached to form or color or remaining in the world of artistic beauty. It can thus be assumed that this was due to his judgment that the Name best served as the object of worship in realizing Amida Buddha's Primal Vow.

The Name as *honzon*, depicted as the object of worship by Shinran Shōnin, consists of six characters (*na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu* 南無阿彌陀仏), or eight characters (*na-mu-fu-ka-shi-gi-kō-butsu* 南無不可思議光仏) or ten characters (*ki-myō-jin-jī-ppō-mu-ge-kō-nyō-rai* 歸命盡十方無碍光如来). The Name is written vertically in the center of a long sheet of paper, with other pieces of paper stuck to it above and below, upon which are written words of sutras, discourses and expositions explaining the meaning of the Name. These legends

written above and below the Names are called *sanmei* or *meimon* ("the inscriptions"). By adding the inscriptions to the Name, Shinran Shōnin also meant to negate the understanding of the Name as something magical.

In those days, the practices of the *hyakumanben nembutsu* (*hyakumanben* meaning a million times) and the *yūzū nembutsu* (*yūzū* meaning permeating) were popular. In the form of the *hyakumanben nembutsu*, one wishes to be born in the Pure Land by the merit of chanting the nembutsu many times. Hōnen Shōnin himself recited the nembutsu tens of thousands of times a day. The idea of the *yūzū nembutsu* is that the merits of the nembutsu permeate practitioners. If practitioners chant the nembutsu many times, they can share the total merits of the nembutsu with each other, and so with an increased amount of merits they can be born in the Pure Land. Thus, due to the popularity of the *hyakumanben nembutsu* and the *yūzū nembutsu*, people understood the nembutsu to possess magical power.

It can be said that Shinran Shōnin against that trend of the times added the inscriptions to the Name in order to have people understand the right meaning of the nembutsu and to get rid of the sense of magic in the Name. In his writings, when he expounds the six-character Name of Amida Buddha, Shinran Shōnin also refers to the nine-character and ten-character Names. The six-character Name (*na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu*) is originally a free transliteration from Sanskrit and when its meaning is expressed in Chinese characters, it can also be represented in eight or ten characters. It can thus be considered that by introducing the nine and ten-character Names of Amida Buddha, Shinran Shōnin did not want his nembutsu practitioners to recite the six-character Name simply as a magical formula.

In the institution (*kyōdan*) of Jodo-Shinshu, after the death of Shinran Shōnin, *honzon* in forms of wooden images, pictures and the Names were

used as objects of worship. Rennyo Shōnin (1415-1499), who became the eighth monshu of the Honganji around the middle of the 15th century, unified or standardised *honzon*. Inheriting the tradition of the Name as *honzon* from Shinran Shōnin, Rennyo Shōnin selected for himself as *honzon* the ten-character Name, called the *honzon* of the unhindered light. This *honzon* scroll was made up of dark-blue silk on which the ten-character Name (*ki-myō-jin-ji-ppō-mu-ge-kō-nyō-rai*) was inscribed with gold paint and was surrounded by forty-eight rays of light with a lotus pedestal underneath it. It was a colorful and ornate *honzon*. This *honzon* of Rennyo Shōnin was inherited from Shinran Shōnin's ten-character *honzon* on dark-blue ground.

When Rennyo Shōnin selected this *honzon*, he was strongly conscious of the *honzon* of light (*kōmyō-honzon*), which was highly popular among the Shin followers of the time. The *honzon* of light spread at a very rapid speed in the Shinshu institution after the death of Shinran Shōnin. This *honzon* was made up of dark-blue silk, about two meters long, and about one meter wide, in the center of which the large nine-character Name of *na-mu-fu-ka-shi-gi-kō-nyō-rai* 南無不可思議光如來 was written lengthwise with gold paint. The Name emitted rays of light and on both lower sides of the Name the six and ten-character Names and two pictures of Śākyamuni and Amida Buddha were painted and on both upper sides of the Name the Pure Land Patriarchs of India, China and Japan with Prince Shōtoku were painted. The inscriptions were added further above and below the Name. It was an extremely splendid and ornate *honzon*.

Rennyo Shōnin's *honzon* of the unhindered light was worshipped by many people but as his institution became larger and influential, his *honzon* aroused opposition from other institutions. He then stopped giving the *honzon* of the unhindered light to his followers and gave instead the Name written with ink on white paper—usually the six-

character Name. He is said to have drawn sometimes hundreds of the six-character Name a day. Rennyo Shōnin insisted that the Name of Amida Buddha was preferred to the image or picture of Amida; yet later in his life, he granted many pictorial *honzon*. This was due to his judgment or understanding that the teachings of Shin Buddhism had been spread widely in Japan, and that the followers would no longer expect Amida's welcoming-descent or magical powers even if the pictures of Amida Buddha were used as *honzon*, the object of worship.

Shinran Shōnin maintained that Amida in Shin Buddhism is "the dharmakāya-as-compassion"

and is not the "dharmakāya-as-suchness," which is formless. Pictures, wooden images and scrolls of *honzon* are not themselves Amida but undoubtedly serve as useful means to awaken one to his saving activity.

Rennyo Shōnin admonished that one would not enter Buddhahood without attaining shinjin even if one were surrounded by seven or eight folds of *honzon*.

The *honzon* is nothing but the provisional form indicating the Buddha's existence and the means through which one is to realize Amida's Vow, the Buddha's truth or suchness and the Buddha's compassion.

(Translated by Hōyū Ishida)