

Hōnen on Attaining Pure Land Rebirth: The Selected Nenbutsu of the Original Vow

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HŌNEN IN THE HISTORY OF EAST ASIAN PURE LAND BUDDHISM

PERCEIVED FROM THE PERSPECTIVE of the development of the Pure Land tradition in East Asia, Hōnen (1133–1212) is situated at an important juncture. Not only did he introduce Shandao’s populist Pure Land thought to Japan, he also contributed to the transformation of continental forms of Pure Land Buddhism into distinctly Japanese forms.¹ Institutional Pure Land Buddhism in Japan prior to Hōnen was based upon continental models—largely monastic and emphasizing contemplative practice; after Hōnen it became entirely a layperson’s Buddhism, emphasizing devotion. Thus, a study of Hōnen’s Pure Land thought can give us insights into the varieties of Pure Land, both geographically and typologically. We will first characterize Hōnen’s position on how to attain Pure Land rebirth and then return to these geographical and typological considerations.

For exploring Hōnen’s views we will utilize only fully authenticated works, those either entirely or partially autographed by him.² We will rely primarily on his *Passages on the Selected Nenbutsu of the Original Vow* (*Senchaku hongan nenbutsu shū*), but will also utilize the *Seven Article Admonition* (*Shichikajō seikai*) and his letter to Kumagae Naozane dated second day, fifth month.³ Other texts traditionally attributed to Hōnen may be authentic, but the *Passages* is Hōnen’s only comprehensive doctrinal work, and the two other fully authenticated texts we will use contain important statements on practice for rebirth.

HŌNEN ON ATTAINING PURE LAND REBIRTH: THE NENBUTSU OF CALLING ON THE NAME

It is widely believed that Hōnen espoused as practice for rebirth “sole nenbutsu” (*senju nenbutsu*, “sole practice nenbutsu”), that is, the exclusive cultivation of vocal nenbutsu. While this assumption is problematic and

will be reexamined below, it is true that Hōnen propounded vocal nenbutsu, calling on the name of Amida Buddha, as the best practice for Pure Land rebirth. Hōnen employed two quite different rationales for asserting the superiority of vocal nenbutsu. The first of these he presents in the second chapter of his *Passages on the Selected Nenbutsu of the Original Vow* where he differentiates the “right practices” (*shōgō*) for Pure Land rebirth from ineffective “mixed practices” (*zōgō*), and further differentiates the right practices into the “assured right practice” (*shōjō no gō*) and “assisting right practices” (*jojō*).⁴ The right practices are first, reading and reciting the *Amitābha Contemplation Sutra* (*Kan Muryōjubutsu kyō*),⁵ *Amitābha Sutra* (*Amida kyō*), and *Sutra of Limitless Life* (*Muryōju kyō*); second, contemplating (*kanzatsu*) and meditating (*okunen*) on the Pure Land and Amida Buddha; third, venerating Amida; fourth, calling vocally (*kushō*) the name of Amida; and fifth, singing praises and making offerings to that Buddha. Of these, he designates number four, vocal nenbutsu, as the assured right practice, that is, the practice certain to result in Pure Land rebirth because it is in conformity with the practice designated by the eighteenth vow of Amida Buddha.⁶ This conformity of vocal nenbutsu to the eighteenth vow involves Hōnen’s second rationale, which we will examine shortly. The remaining right practices, that is, those other than calling on the name, are designated by Hōnen as “assisting practices.” Although here he does not explain how they assist vocal nenbutsu, in Chapter Four he calls them “supporting practices” (*jojō*) in that they generate karma that produces the same result as vocal nenbutsu.⁷

As we can see, the right practices are all exclusively Pure Land practices, focusing on Amida or the Pure Land. Any practice directed toward some other buddha, as well as more general practices such as charity (*danna*; Skt. *dāna*) and observance of the Buddhist precepts, are rejected as largely ineffective.

In Chapter Three of the *Passages* Hōnen presents the second of his two basic rationales for the superiority of nenbutsu. There he claims that calling on the Buddha is the best practice for Pure Land rebirth because it is the practice selected by Amida for his eighteenth bodhisattva vow. The eighteenth is the well known vow of the *Sutra of Limitless Life*, which Hōnen read as promising Pure Land rebirth for all who call on Amida with deep faith ten times or more.⁸ Hōnen maintains, moreover, that Amida chose calling on his name as the practice of this vow because the name possesses all of his “ten thousand” karmic merits, or kinds of wholesome karma, which will be acquired by sentient beings who call the name, and because it is an easy practice whereas other practices are difficult. This principle of the ease of the selected practice, nenbutsu, revealed to Hōnen not only the inferior capacity of sentient beings in an age of final dharma (*mappō*), but also the Buddha’s soteric intentions. Because of his great compassion Amida sought

to bring about the universal, egalitarian salvation of all sentient beings of whatever ability, merit, station, or gender. “And thus was it not,” Hōnen asks, “for the purpose of equally and universally (*byōdō*) bringing about the rebirth of all sentient beings that the difficult [practices] were rejected and the easy adopted as the [practice] of the original vow?”⁹ Thus, vocal nenbutsu is the easy practice endowed with Amida’s ten thousand merits guaranteed to make rebirth available to every sentient being.

We should also note that Hōnen explicitly interprets the nenbutsu of this vow as vocal nenbutsu. He does this by identifying the “ten *nen*” (*jū nen*) of the vow with the “ten *nen*” in the passage in the *Amitābha Contemplation Sutra* on the rebirth of the very worst of human beings. That well known passage reads,

... [he] makes them call (*shō*) without interruption [until they] complete ten nenbutsu (*jū nen*), calling “Namu Amida Butsu.”¹⁰

For Hōnen the “ten *nen*” of the vow, that is, the selected practice of the vow, was definitely vocal rather than contemplative nenbutsu.

HŌNEN AND “SOLE PRACTICE NENBUTSU”

While it is generally thought that Hōnen taught “sole practice nenbutsu” (*senju nenbutsu*), that is, the cultivation of vocal nenbutsu exclusively, this is not supported by his arguments in the *Passages*, nor by any of his fully authenticated writings.¹¹ First of all, according to his exclusive versus mixed rationale for the superiority of nenbutsu, Pure Land practices other than vocal nenbutsu—such as chanting Pure Land sutras, making offerings to Amida, and meditatively contemplating the physical features of Amida—are called assisting practices, those practices which contribute to bringing about rebirth. Further, Hōnen does not claim that practices other than the “right” practices are entirely ineffective for rebirth. While he maintains that of those who cultivate the mixed practices only one or two out of a hundred will attain Pure Land rebirth,¹² nonetheless, even this ratio would indicate that the mixed practices are effective to some degree. Moreover, in regard to Hōnen’s second rationale for the superiority of vocal nenbutsu, in spite of the privileged status that he claims was bestowed upon vocal nenbutsu by the eighteenth vow, he does not therefore entirely reject other practices. Regarding the status of practices not selected by the vow he cites this passage from the Tendai Pure Land classic, *Essentials of Pure Land Rebirth* (*Ōjō yōshū*),

Question: All good works, each and every one, have their benefits. Each and every one can earn rebirth. Why do you urge only the single dharma-gate of nenbutsu?

Answer: That we now urge nenbutsu does not hinder cultivation of the various other excellent practices. It is just that anyone—man or woman, noble or commoner, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying, and regardless of time, place, or any other conditions—can cultivate it without difficulty. Moreover, there is nothing to equal the convenience of nenbutsu for those seeking rebirth at the time of death.¹³

Thus, even while claiming that vocal nenbutsu is the vow-selected practice, Hōnen agrees with the view of the *Essentials* and does not insist that other practices are useless for achieving rebirth.

Finally, in Chapter Twelve of the *Passages* where Hōnen subordinates the practices taught in the *Amitābha Contemplation Sutra* to the nenbutsu of the eighteenth vow, he nonetheless acknowledges that any of the thirteen contemplations of the *Contemplation Sutra* and all of the practices called “three kinds of meritorious conduct” (*sampuku*) set out in that scripture—such as filial piety, observing the precepts, arousing aspiration for enlightenment, and reading and reciting the Mahayana scriptures—can become good karma for rebirth in the Pure Land.¹⁴

Thus we see that in his major work, the *Passages*, Hōnen does not espouse “sole nenbutsu.” As a matter of fact, only once in the *Passages* does he use the term, “sole nenbutsu practice” (*senju nenbutsu*). This is at the end of that work where he praises Shandao, calling him “the guide to sole nenbutsu practice” (*senju nenbutsu no dōshi*).¹⁵

Yet, in his own times Hōnen certainly had a reputation as a radical teacher of sole practice nenbutsu. For example, the *Kōfukuji Temple Petition* (*Kōfukuji sōjō*) identifies him as the leader of a nenbutsu sect (*nenbutsu no shū*) who promotes the sole practice of the nenbutsu,¹⁶ and the *Miscellany of Foolish Views* (*Gukanshō*) of Jien (1155–1225) claims that Hōnen promoted sole practice nenbutsu.¹⁷ Indeed, Hōnen’s statements on this issue were somewhat ambiguous. While he acknowledged the efficacy of practices other than nenbutsu, in his writings he constantly urges the sole or exclusive practice of nenbutsu.

THE QUANTITY OF NENBUTSU REQUIRED FOR REBIRTH

Another issue concerning Hōnen’s teachings on nenbutsu is the quantity of nenbutsu necessary for Pure Land rebirth. This is a significant issue because different quantities of nenbutsu imply differences in the way nenbutsu functions to effect rebirth and rebirth for different types of persons. First of all, Hōnen interprets the number of nenbutsu specified in the eighteenth vow quite inclusively as any quantity from ten repetitions

up to that accumulated over a lifetime of cultivation, or from ten down to even one calling,¹⁸ while noting that some other interpreters understood it in a much more narrow sense as exactly ten or as ten or less invocations. In general, however, Hōnen urged aspirants to produce as many nenbutsu as possible, both on a day-to-day basis and throughout their lives.

In Chapter Nine of the *Passages* he specifies that one's Pure Land practices—presumably the exclusively Pure Land practices set out in Chapter Two—should be cultivated in a fourfold manner (*shi shuhō*): first, lifelong, second, reverentially, third, exclusively, and fourth, ceaselessly. He singles out the first of these, lifelong cultivation, as the most important because without it the remaining three modes would not be consummated.¹⁹ Moreover, this position was not merely theoretical for Hōnen. Several early biographical texts indicate that Hōnen himself cultivated an enormous quantity of nenbutsu daily, sixty thousand repetitions or more.²⁰ And in his letter to Kumagae Naozane, as we will see below, Hōnen urges Naozane to pursue up to sixty thousand nenbutsu per day.²¹ When we calculate that at the rate of one nenbutsu per second, it would take sixteen and two-thirds hours to accomplish sixty thousand repetitions, and we get a sense of the total commitment and enormous amount of exertion that Hōnen thought necessary to assure entry into the Pure Land.

Hōnen's view that assurance of rebirth required the generation of as many nenbutsu as possible over a lifetime was the conventional view of his times, the twelfth century, but there were alternative views with important implications. Some of Hōnen's disciples interpreted the *Sutra of Limitless Life* as requiring only one nenbutsu. This can be justified not only by an interpretation of the eighteenth vow's "ten-nenbutsu" passage, but also by the so-called "vow fulfillment passage" of that sutra which promises rebirth to all who produce even one nenbutsu (*ichinen*).²² The implication of this view is that rebirth is accomplished primarily by faith in Amida and his vow rather than by the good karma generated by many nenbutsu, and further that evil-doers can be reborn by this faith and the power of Amida's vow despite their bad karma. In this interpretation, many repetitions of the nenbutsu can be seen as an attempt to expunge bad karma and thereby through self-effort become worthy of Pure Land rebirth, rather than to utter the nenbutsu but once in reliance upon the Other Power of Amida's compassionate promise in the vow. Varieties of this position were espoused by several of Hōnen's disciples—by Shinran, whose views are well known, and also apparently by others such as Kōsai and Hōhombō Gyōkū.

Either justifiably or unfairly, the teaching on rebirth by just one nenbutsu was associated early on with the radical view called "encouragement of evil conduct" or "unhindered evil" (*zōaku muge*), the notion that one can with impunity violate the Buddhist precepts—for example, against meat-eating and sexual misconduct—because Amida saves in spite of their bad karma

those who call on him.²³ In his *Seven Article Admonition* (*Shichikajō seikai*) Hōnen emphatically condemned this distortion of his teachings, without explicitly rejecting, however, the view of rebirth by just one nenbutsu.²⁴ And in 1206 he expelled from his community of disciples the monk Hōhombō Gyōkū, allegedly for teaching encouragement of evil conduct.²⁵

On the other hand, in Hōnen's age, rebirth by ten nenbutsu implied rebirth achieved only or especially at the time of death because of the close association of this specific quantity of nenbutsu with the passage from the *Amitābha Contemplation Sutra* just cited on the rebirth of the worst of beings by ten nenbutsu uttered at the moment of death. Among aristocrats and clergy the cultivation of nenbutsu at times of critical illness or at the approach of death was a common practice. The general view was that nenbutsu cultivated at this juncture had the power to expunge extraordinary amounts of evil karma, as depicted in the *Contemplation Sutra*, and thus to bring about the rebirth of even grievous transgressors. A related view was that this deathbed nenbutsu was effective because it established the "right reflection" or "right thought" (*shōnen*) at the very moment of death, and thus it was thought important to constantly cultivate nenbutsu throughout one's life so as to be well practiced and prepared to generate the "right reflection" at death, or in the event that death was untimely so as to be in possession of the "right reflection" at the last moment. These views emphasizing deathbed nenbutsu tended to see nenbutsu as expiatory, and also saw it as a consciousness purifying form of meditative practice, deemphasizing its relationship to the eighteenth vow.²⁶

In his authenticated works Hōnen did not emphasize deathbed nenbutsu. And as a matter of fact, in Chapter Twelve of the *Passages* he declines to identify the deathbed ten nenbutsu of the worst of beings with the nenbutsu of the eighteenth vow, equating it rather with one of the so-called "non-meditative wholesome practices" (*sanzen*) of the *Contemplation Sutra*, reading and reciting Mahayana scriptures.²⁷

HŌNEN AND SELF POWER VERSUS OTHER POWER NENBUTSU

Thus, we see that Hōnen urged those seeking Pure Land rebirth to cultivate enormous quantities of nenbutsu, both on a day-to-day basis and over a lifetime. This could be considered Self Power practice, that is, the attempt to save oneself through the accumulation of many meritorious acts rather than to rely on the saving power of the Buddha. We must remember, however, that for Hōnen the merit or good karma of nenbutsu cultivation ultimately derived from Amida, who had invested the nenbutsu with ten thousand merits by means of his many eons of purified bodhisattva cultiva-

tion (*shōjō no gyō*).²⁸ For Hōnen, utterance of the nenbutsu was always “the practice of the original vow” (*hongan nenbutsu gyō*).²⁹ Indeed, the significance of Hōnen’s concept “selected nenbutsu of the original vow” (*senchaku hongan nenbutsu*), the main theme of the *Passages* and the idea around which his thought is structured, is that nenbutsu is the practice intentionally chosen and endowed by Amida’s vow with that buddha’s extraordinary karmic power. Thus, for Hōnen the nenbutsu is the means of acquiring the karmic merit earned by Amida during his bodhisattva career. We might ask, If the nenbutsu has such extraordinary karmic merit, then why are such large quantities required? Shouldn’t just a few, ten, or even one utterance be adequate? Hōnen, in his authenticated works, never asked himself that question. We can find the suggestion of an answer in his letter to Kumagae Naozane, where he tells Naozane that if he cultivates up to sixty thousand nenbutsu per day then even minor violations of the Buddhist precepts will not impede his rebirth. This means that Hōnen thought nenbutsu expunged bad karma, and we might speculate that he urged constant nenbutsu cultivation so as to remove bad karma whenever it occurred.³⁰ In the *Passages* we find that Hōnen indeed acknowledges the power of nenbutsu to extinguish even the weightiest bad karma, as for example in the situation described in the *Contemplation Sutra* for the rebirth of the worst type of person (*gehon geshō*) by ten nenbutsu cited above. This sutra goes on to claim,

Because of calling on the Buddha’s name, with each reflection (*nennen no naka ni*) they remove [the evil karma generated by] eighty billion eons of samsaric offenses.³¹

However, in the *Passages* Hōnen rarely refers to the removal of bad karma by nenbutsu except in relation to this section of the *Contemplation Sutra* and the parallel section on the rebirth of the “best of the worst” (*gehon jōshō*) by just one nenbutsu.³² Moreover, these grievous transgressors, persons so depraved as to have committed the “ten evil acts” or the “five irredeemable offenses” were not the primary target of Hōnen’s teachings.³³ He considered virtually all sentient beings living in an age of final dharma, the relatively virtuous as well as unrepentant perpetrators, as equally the ordinary deluded persons (*bonbu*) for whom Amida had pledged his vows.³⁴

If not primarily as exorcism of bad karma, then how did Hōnen understand that nenbutsu functioned to bring about Pure Land rebirth? First of all, though an innovative thinker, Hōnen was nonetheless a Buddhist thinker and believed deeply in the fundamental role of karma—as he put it, “cause and effect”³⁵ (*inga*)—in producing both bondage and liberation. He did not often exposit on the role of karmic causation in bringing about Pure Land rebirth, perhaps because the role of karma was such a given within his Buddhist worldview, but in Chapter Nine of the *Passages* he quotes a

Chinese text, the *Standard Interpretations on the Western Land* (*Hsi-fang yao-chueh shih-i t'ung-kuei/Saihō yōketsu shakugi tsūki*) as saying that

... lifelong practice [of nenbutsu] means constantly generating pure causation (*jōin o nasu*) from first arousing the aspiration for enlightenment to [the realization of] enlightenment without ever backsliding.³⁶

Of course, as we have noted, for Hōnen this pure causation ultimately derived from the bodhisattva practices performed by Amida.

In addition to this power of the nenbutsu to expunge bad karma and generate good karma for rebirth, there was another way Hōnen saw nenbutsu functioning to bring about Pure Land rebirth. This was by establishing a devotional bond of mutual care and concern between the practitioner and Amida. This devotional character of nenbutsu is clarified by Hōnen in Chapter Two of the *Passages* where he discusses the advantages of exclusive versus mixed practice. He says,

Those who cultivate the right and assisting practices become extremely intimate and familiar with Amida Buddha. Thus it says in a prior passage of the *Commentary [on the Contemplation Sutra by Shandaō]*,³⁷ "When sentient beings engage in cultivation and with their mouths always call on the Buddha, the Buddha hears them; when with their bodies they always venerate and worship the Buddha, the Buddha sees them; when in their minds they always reflect on the Buddha, the Buddha knows them; when sentient beings meditate (*okunen*) on the Buddha, the Buddha meditates on them. Because none of the three modes of either that [Buddha's] or these [sentient beings'] karmic action is ever relinquished, we call this the intimate karmic condition."³⁸

As we see, cultivation of nenbutsu was for Hōnen an act of devotion expressing adoration for and reliance upon Amida as a personal savior. It was an intense, exclusive, and constant worship of the Buddha which elicited a like response, enormously magnified in degree. Thus, for him the "right practices" were best not only because they generate good and annul bad karma, but also because they generate a karmic bond of mutual intimacy and care between devotee and soter that will protect the devotee during life and assure his or her birth in the Pure Land at death.³⁹

Within classical Pure Land Buddhist thought, devotion to Amida is of course expressed as the three attitudes necessary for Pure Land rebirth (*sanjin*) set out in the *Contemplation Sutra*: first, sincerity (*shijō shin*), second, deep belief in Amida and corresponding acknowledgment of one's own

fallen condition and helplessness (*jinshin*), and third, aspiration for rebirth (*ekō hotsugan shin*). Consonant with his understanding of the devotional character of nenbutsu, Hōnen also firmly believed that these three attitudes were essential to effective nenbutsu cultivation.⁴⁰

In summary we can say that while Hōnen did acknowledge that nenbutsu can expunge even the most evil karma and make rebirth possible for the most heinous offenders converted to Pure Land faith only upon their deathbeds, he urged his contemporaries to cultivate every day throughout their lives as much nenbutsu as possible, the richly meritorious nenbutsu of the vow, so as to accumulate as much good karma for rebirth as possible, but also to create a caring, loving, and saving bond with Amida.

HŌNEN ON THE BUDDHIST PRECEPTS

While Hōnen's position in the *Passages* on the practices for rebirth is systematic and fairly clear, we find in his *Seven Article Admonition* what seems like a glaring contradiction to that position. This involves the role of the Buddhist precepts, the fundamental guides to moral conduct for Buddhists. In the *Passages* Hōnen explicitly relegates the observance of the precepts to the status of "mixed cultivation"⁴¹ and declares it to be a practice not selected by the original vow and therefore unnecessary for Pure Land rebirth.⁴² However, in the *Seven Article Admonition* he orders his disciples,

Cease and desist the following: claiming that the nenbutsu dharmagata does not include the observance of precepts, urging sexual misconduct, liquor-drinking and meat-eating, calling those who observe the precepts "cultivators of mixed practices," and teaching that those who rely on Amida's original vow need have no fear of committing evil deeds.⁴³

And he adds,

With regard to the above, the precepts are the foundation of the buddhadharma. While various forms of cultivation are pursued [by different persons], these same [precepts] should be observed by all. Thus, preceptor Shandao would not raise his eyes to view a woman. The import of this form of behavior goes beyond the basic monastic rules (*hon ritsu*) [and involves basic morality]. For Pure [Land] practitioners (*jōgō no tagui*) not to conform [to the precepts] is to lose all the teachings inherited from the *tathāgata*-s and to ignore the example of our patriarchs.⁴⁴

Here Hōnen contradicts the position he took in the *Passages* and emphatically demands of his disciples that they observe the precepts.

There are several ways we can attempt to understand this contradiction. While the *Passages* was a theoretic statement of doctrines, the *Seven Article Admonition* was a response to charges by Hōnen's critics of serious abuses by him and his disciples. It was a pragmatic and passionate attempt to correct those abuses and fend off persecution of his movement. As we can see, this particular admonition (number four) focuses on the gross distortion of his teachings called unhindered evil. Perhaps in these circumstances Hōnen felt constrained to enjoin the observance of precepts in spite of the position he took earlier in the *Passages*. Indeed, he may have changed his views on this matter between the composition of the *Passages* in 1198 and the issuing of the *Seven Article Admonition* in 1204. Yet, Hōnen's position on the precepts in the *Seven Article Admonition* seems like a pragmatic compromise with principle in the face of external pressure.

Fortunately, another of Hōnen's authentic writings touches on the subject of the precepts and gives us an opportunity to more fully understand his position. This is his letter to Kumagae Naozane, probably composed also in 1204 but prior to the *Seven Article Admonition*.⁴⁵ Kumagae Naozane, a.k.a. Rensei (1141–1208), was a warrior from the eastern provinces who had distinguished himself in the Gempei War of 1180–1185 and became a close vassal of the warrior chieftain or Shōgun, Minamoto Yoritomo.⁴⁶ But then in 1187 he had a falling out with Yoritomo, and in 1191 or 1192 entered the Buddhist clergy. Later he journeyed to Kyoto and became Hōnen's disciple, probably in 1194.⁴⁷ Subsequently he left Hōnen's center and traveled about, but apparently stayed in touch with Hōnen by correspondence. Hōnen's letter to Naozane is dated the second day of the fifth month and is in response to a no longer extant letter from Naozane in which Naozane apparently asked Hōnen about the advisability of pursuing certain practices. Hōnen responded:

I was so pleased to receive your letter. Indeed, since last [I received a letter from you or saw you] I was very worried, and I am very pleased at what you have written. Please read what I am going to write about "just nenbutsu" (*tan nenbutsu*).

Nenbutsu is the practice of the Buddha's original vow. Because observance of precepts, recitation of sutras, incantations, contemplation of buddha-nature (*rikan*), and so on are not the practices of that Buddha's original vow, those who seek [the land of] Boundless Bliss should without fail first cultivate the practice of the original vow, and then in addition to that, if they want to add other practices, they may do so. Also, [to cultivate] just the nenbutsu of the original vow is alright. Those who seek [the land of] Boundless Bliss

without cultivating nenbutsu, cultivating only practices other than nenbutsu, will not be able to attain rebirth in Boundless Bliss....

Also, sexual relations with women (*nyobon*) is definitely [a violation of] the precept forbidding sexual relations (*fuinkai*). And disinheriting of one's children is definitely [a violation of] the precept forbidding anger (*fushinkai*). Because the observance of the precepts are not in the original vow, you should observe them only as much as you can manage (*taetaran ni shitagaite tamotase tamau beku sōrō*).... To utter just nenbutsu (*tada nenbutsu*) thirty, fifty, or sixty thousand times a day with all your heart is the practice certain to achieve rebirth. Other good works are for when you have time to spare from nenbutsu. But if you utter sixty thousand nenbutsu a day, what other practices need you do? If you diligently, with all your heart, cultivate thirty or fifty thousand nenbutsu per day, then even if you violate the precepts a little that ought not prevent your rebirth....

However, even though the practice of filial conduct (*kōyō no gyō*) is not in the Buddha's original vow, [your mother] is eighty-nine years old. What you are fully prepared and waiting for [the death of your mother] will probably happen this year or soon. It is very sad. But whatever happens should not pose a problem [for you]. You are the only one who is waiting with her, and you must without fail [continue to] wait with her....⁴⁸

Apart from a theoretic, doctrinal context, and absent external pressures, this was Hōnen's heartfelt advice to a disciple. First of all we should note that he instructs Naozane that nenbutsu, especially when cultivated to the utmost of one's ability throughout each day, is solely sufficient for Pure Land rebirth because it is the practice designated by the Buddha's original vow. Other practices not selected by the vow can be helpful, but should be cultivated only after nenbutsu and to the extent that they do not interfere with nenbutsu cultivation. This clarifies what Hōnen meant by "sole practice nenbutsu" (*senju nenbutsu*). He clearly meant that for Pure Land rebirth one need cultivate "just nenbutsu" (*tada nenbutsu*).

Hōnen goes on to advise Naozane that this is true also in relation to precept observance. Like all "mixed practices," precept observance is not necessary, though it may be marginally helpful *in addition* to nenbutsu. Hōnen's comment that violating the precepts a little ought not to hinder Naozane's rebirth if he has cultivated thirty or fifty thousand nenbutsu per day indicates, as we remarked above, that Hōnen acknowledged that nenbutsu expunges bad karma, but it also shows that Hōnen saw precept observance as primarily useful for preventing the accumulation of evil karma. And, by advising Naozane to observe the precepts only as much as

he could manage, Hōnen probably meant that while nenbutsu is easy and convenient for anyone in any circumstances (as stated in the passage from the *Essentials of Pure Land Rebirth* quoted by Hōnen and cited above), strict observance of the precepts is difficult and requires special circumstances, specifically those of a monastic setting. Naozane was a so-called “lay priest” (*nyūdō*). A lay priest was a person who had entered the clergy after pursuing a secular career, and in many cases while still remaining to some degree a householder. Because Naozane still had a wife, mother, and children, he had many secular bonds and obligations. Therefore, it would have been difficult and perhaps inconsiderate and unjust of him in his circumstances to have rigorously observed the monastic precepts. However, as we have seen, Hōnen definitely viewed bad karma as a hindrance to Pure Land rebirth, and for Hōnen as for any Buddhist, the surest way to avoid bad karma was to observe the precepts. Thus, he advises Naozane to observe them as much as he can manage, that is, to the extent that he is able within his circumstances. In response to Naozane’s questions Hōnen advises him that within his circumstances he should avoid having sexual relations with his wife and not disinherit his son, but fulfill his filial obligations by remaining at home with his mother until she dies.⁴⁹

Hōnen’s advice in this letter helps us to resolve the apparent contradiction we noted between his views on observance of the precepts in the *Passages* on the one hand and in the *Seven Article Admonition* on the other hand. Although not necessary for Pure Land rebirth, he apparently thought that everyone should attempt to observe the precepts as much as their circumstances would allow so as to avoid the accumulation of bad karma. For those who were regularly ordained monks he would have probably urged a rigorous observance, for lay priests a less strict conformance as dictated by their particular circumstances, and for laypersons a sincere attempt to observe at least the primary rules, such as those forbidding the taking of life, stealing, and lying.⁵⁰ On the other hand, given the special circumstances of an age of final dharma when virtually all human kind have become just “ordinary deluded beings” (*bonbu*), he was convinced that strict observance of precepts was almost impossible. While in the *Passages* Hōnen attempts to explain why Amida had selected nenbutsu rather than other practices for his vow, he remarks,

If observance of the [lay] precepts and monastic rules had been made [the practice of] the original vow, then those who violate or who have not taken the precepts would have no hope of rebirth at all. Yet those who observe the precepts are few, while those who violate the precepts are extremely numerous.⁵¹

Thus, while one should avoid evil conduct by attempting to observe the precepts, one’s major efforts should be dedicated to the cultivation of nen-

butsu. If one's nenbutsu cultivation is of sufficient quality and quantity, one will be reborn in spite of one's bad karma.⁵²

THE VARIETIES OF PURE LAND BUDDHISM

Finally, let us return as promised to a consideration of the varieties of Pure Land Buddhism. At the beginning of this study I ventured the view that Hōnen contributed to the transformation of continental forms of Pure Land Buddhism into distinctly Japanese forms. By this I mean that institutional Pure Land Buddhism in Japan prior to Hōnen was based upon continental models—largely monastic and emphasizing contemplative practice—but after Hōnen it became entirely a layperson's Buddhism, emphasizing devotion. An adequate defense of this thesis is far beyond our limitations of time and space here, but let me briefly consider the ways in which Hōnen's teachings on practice facilitated participation by laypersons in Pure Land Buddhism. In addition to his rejection of earlier Buddhist mystical, monistic systems of thought and of the complex rituals associated with them,⁵³ Hōnen, as we have documented, rejected the core practices of Buddhist monasticism—meditation and observance of the precepts. His rejection of meditation, that is, contemplations of the Pure Land and its beings (*kanzatsu*, *kambutsu*), was total and definitive for the Pure Land tradition that followed him.⁵⁴ As we have seen, the complex visionary meditations that dominated the Pure Land tradition prior to Hōnen, and that even for Shandao continued to be an important form of practice, were replaced by the simple devotional act of calling on the name of the Buddha.

With regard to the value of precept observance, we first acknowledged contradictions between the positions taken by Hōnen in the *Passages* on the one hand and in the *Seven Article Admonition* on the other, and then explored how Hōnen clarified the relation of the precepts to the nenbutsu in his letter to Kumagae Naozane.⁵⁵ There he unequivocally declares that the cultivation of nenbutsu is absolutely essential for the attainment of rebirth, while the observance of the precepts is of only marginal value. Based on the advice he gives to Naozane we can conclude that for Hōnen one could be a layperson, pursuing a lifestyle completely unobservant of the Buddhist behavioral precepts as such, and yet cultivate the requisite quantity and quality of nenbutsu for Pure Land rebirth. Finally, in exploring the character of Hōnen's nenbutsu we discovered that while he urged sustained cultivation of enormous quantities of nenbutsu and saw this nenbutsu as accruing good karma for rebirth (albeit the karmic merit derived from that which Amida had invested in the nenbutsu), he also taught that sincere and deeply believing nenbutsu cultivation establishes an intimate and caring bond between the cultivator and the Buddha, and at death the Buddha

would therefore welcome the devotee into the Pure Land. As James Foard has pointed out,⁵⁶ Hōnen was one of those early Kamakura Buddhist leaders who participated in a devotional movement that eliminated the necessity of institutional or sacerdotal mediation and made salvation immediately available to laypersons. Thus, with few exceptions, after Hōnen Japanese Pure Land Buddhism became a layperson's Buddhism.⁵⁷

NOTES

1. Elements of Shandao's thought had been introduced to Japan prior to Hōnen by Genshin (942–1017) and Yōkan (1033–1111). By “populist” I refer to that Chinese Pure Land tradition that reached its fullest expression in Shandao (613–681) and shaped its teachings to address and guide to liberation the largest number of persons possible, both clergy and laity and of whatever social stratum or spiritual capacity.
2. Only seven or eight texts exist in manuscripts bearing Hōnen's handwriting: the *Senchaku hongan nenbutsu shū*; the *Shichikajō seikai*; the letter to Kumagai Naozane dated second day, fifth month; three partial letters to Shōgyōbō, undated; a single line of text and Hōnen's signature on the so-called *Ichigyō ippitsu Amida kyō* (*One-line-one-brush Amitābha Sutra*); and possibly the *Ichimai kishōmon*; see Tōdō Kyōshun and Itō Yuishin, “Hōnen Shōnin shinpitsu ruishū kaisetsu,” in *Jōdoshū kaishū happyakunen kinen Hōnen Shōnin Kenkyū*, ed. Bukkyō Daigaku Hōnen Shōnin kenkyūkai (Tokyo: Ryūbunkan, 1975).
3. Probably written in 1204; see Akamatsu Toshihide, *Zoku Kamakura Bukkyō no kenkyū* (*Further Studies on Kamakura Period Buddhism*; Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1966), p. 297.
4. Hōnenbō Genkū, *Passages on the Selected Nenbutsu of the Original Vow* (*Senchaku hongan nenbutsu shū/Senchakushū/Senjakushū*, T. 2608), T83.2c.
5. I will not use diacritical marks in words derived from Sanskrit when they occur in titles I have translated into English.
6. This formulation Hōnen obtained from Shandao (*Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* [*Kuan Wu-liang-shou-fo-ching shu* / *Kan Muryōjubutsukyō sho*, T. 1753, T37.272a–b]), who derived it from the *Discourse on the Sutra of Limitless Life and Verse in Aspiration for Rebirth* (*Wu-liang-shou-ching yu-p'o-t'i-she yuan-sheng chieh*, *Muryōjukyō ubadaisha ganshō ge* [also known in Japanese under the abbreviated names: *Ōjō ron* and *Jōdo ron*], **Sukhāvātītoyūha upadeśa*, T. 1542), attributed to Vasubandhu, where these five practices are called the “five gates of buddha-reflection” (*wu nien-men/go nenmon*).
7. Hōnen, *Passages*, T83.7b.
8. Hōnen, *Passages*, T83.4b–6c. The vow is found at T12.268a.
9. Hōnen, *Passages*, T83.5c.
10. *Amitābha Contemplation Sutra* (*Fo-shou kuan Wu-liang-shou-fo ching* / *Bussetsu kan Muryōjubutsu kyō*, T. 365), T12.346a.
11. With the possible exception of the *Ichimai kishōmon*.

12. T47.439b–c.
13. Hōnen, *Passages*, T83.5c; Genshin, *Ōjōyōshū (Essentials for Pure Land Rebirth)*, T. 2682), T84.76c.
14. Hōnen, *Passages*, T83.14c–15c.
15. Hōnen, *Passages*, T83.20a.
16. Robert E. Morrell, *Early Kamakura Buddhism: A Minority Report* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1987), p. 75; Kamata Shigeo and Tanaka Hisao, eds., *Kamakura kyū-Bukkyō (Traditional Kamakura Period Buddhism)*; Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1971), p. 32.
17. Delmer M. Brown and Ichirō Ishida, *The Future and the Past: A Translation and Study of the Gukanshō* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 171; Ikawa Jōkei, ed., *Hōnen Shōnin den zenshū (The Complete Biographies of Hōnen Shōnin)*, rev. ed.; Takaishi, Osaka Pref.: Hōnen Shōnin den zenshū kankōkai, 1967), p. 975.
18. Hōnen, *Passages*, T83.6b21–25.
19. Hōnen, *Passages*, T83.13a–b. The fourfold manner of practice, like many of Hōnen's key doctrinal positions, was derived by Hōnen from Shandao (T47.439a7–18), but is not exclusive to Pure Land piety. It is a general Mahayana prescription for bodhisattva practice found, for example, in the *Abhidharmakośa Śāstra* (T.1558.29.141), and in Vasubandhu's *Commentary on the Compendium of the Mahayana* (T.1595.31.209), which were modified by Shandao to conform to his exclusivistic Pure Land devotionalism.
20. Chion kōshiki, Ikawa, *Hōnen Shōnin den zenshū*, p. 1036; and Sammai hottokuki, in Ishii Kyōdō, ed., *Shōwa shinshū Hōnen Shōnin zenshū* (hereafter Shsz) (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1955), p. 864.
21. Ōhashi Toshio (Shunnō), ed., *Hōnen-Ippen (Hōnen and Ippen)*; Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1971), pp. 166–167.
22. T12.272b.
23. See *Kōfukuji sōjō* in Kamata and Tanaka 1971, p. 40 and Morrell 1987, p. 86.
24. Shsz 1955, p. 788.
25. Itō Yuishin, *Jōdoshū no seiritsu to tenkai (The Establishment and Development of the Pure Land Denomination)*; Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1981), pp. 127–130.
26. For the *locus classicus* on deathbed rebirth, see Genshin, *Ōjōyōshū*, T84.69a–71b and Allan Andrews, *The Teachings Essential for Rebirth: A Study of Genshin's Ōjōyōshū* (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1973), pp. 82–86.
27. T83.16a.
28. *Muryōjūkyō*, T.12.267c8; *Senchakushū*, T83.4c28.

29. T83.16b13–20.

30. This was a traditional function of nenbutsu; see *Ōjōyōshū*, T84.66c–67a and Andrews, *Teachings*, pp. 72–73. Matsunaga and Matsunaga claim that Hōnen emphasized the cultivation of large quantities of nenbutsu as a means to exorcise or remove “sin,” i.e., bad karma. However, to support this view they cite Hōnen’s unauthenticated writings, works so numerous and varied that one or another can be used to support almost any opinion about Hōnen. See Daigen Matsunaga and Alicia Matsunaga, *Foundations of Japanese Buddhism*, vol. II (Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1976), pp. 61–62.

31. *Amitābha Contemplation Sutra*, T12.346a18–20.

32. For Hōnen’s references to rebirth by ten or one nenbutsu see *Passages*, Chapter 10, T83.13b6–29 and Chapter 12, T83.16a8–15. In these references Hōnen does identify the deathbed nenbutsu of these evil persons with the nenbutsu of the eighteenth vow, emphasizing that only because this nenbutsu has been empowered by the vow of Amida is it able to remove such extraordinarily bad karma. Yet, as we have pointed out, in his classification of the practices of the *Contemplation Sutra* he declines to identify the nenbutsu of these miscreants with the nenbutsu of the vow.

33. The ten evil acts (*jūaku*) include the taking of life, theft, falsehood, adultery, greed, and wrath, and the five irredeemables (*gogyaku*) include patricide and matricide.

34. In traditional language we would say that evil as well as good persons were equally the primary objects of Hōnen’s teachings (*zennin akunin byōdō shōki*); see Kasahara Kazuo, ed., *Nyonin Ōjō* (Tokyo: Kyōikusha, 1983), pp. 37–38.

35. Hōnen, *Passages*, T83.15b.

36. Hōnen, *Passages*, T83.12c; 134.6–7. See also Chapter 12, T83.15b.

37. T37.268a6–9.

38. Hōnen, *Passages*, T83.3b27–3c2. “A prior passage” means prior to the primary passage of this chapter. This is from Shandao’s interpretation of Śākyamuni’s pronouncement in the ninth contemplation of the *Contemplation Sutra* that those who cultivate buddha-reflection are embraced and never abandoned by the light emanating from Amitābha’s body. The three modes of karma, i.e., of action and its results, are vocal, physical, and mental karma, or speech, act, and thought.

39. During one’s life the nenbutsu provides protection from evil spirits, sudden illness, untimely death, and all misfortunes and calamities; see Hōnen, *Passages*, Chapter 15, T83.18a.

40. Hōnen, *Passages*, Chapter 8, T83.12a28–b3. Unlike Shinran, who was

strongly influenced by Tanluan and for whom faith in the power of the vow and the nenbutsu vitiated the need for incessant nenbutsu cultivation, Hōnen's view of the function of faith derived from Shandao, for whom faith enabled practice. For Hōnen, faith in Amida, the vows, and the nenbutsu provided the motivation and inspiration for assiduous practice. For example, in Chapter 8 of the *Passages* (T83.10a16–11a11) we find Hōnen citing Shandao that,

... deeply believing (*jinshin*)—and I implore all practitioners [to do this]—is to believe whole-heartedly in the Buddha's words, and with no regrets about the past to firmly decide to practice according to these. What the Buddha charges you to reject, reject. What he charges you to cultivate, cultivate. What he charges you to avoid, avoid. This is called conforming to the Buddha's teachings, conforming to the Buddha's intentions, conforming to the Buddha's vows. This is to be a true disciple of the Buddha.... Next there is establishing [deep] faith in relation to cultivation, and there are two kinds of cultivation [we should have deep faith in]: (1) right cultivation and (2) mixed cultivation.

In other words, for Shandao and for Hōnen, deep faith meant to believe deeply that the nenbutsu of the vow is the practice that will certainly result in Pure Land rebirth, and consequently, one should cultivate it assiduously.

41. T83.3b.

42. T83.5c–6a.

43. Shsz, p. 788.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Akamatsu, *Zoku Kamakura Bukkyō no kenkyū*, p. 297; traditionally dated 1193–1194.

46. Naozane also became the protagonist of a *nō* play and several *kabuki* dramas.

47. Akamatsu, *Zoku Kamakura Bukkyō no kenkyū*, pp. 290–295; Fumiko Miyazaki, "Religious Life of the Kamakura Bushi: Kumagai Naozane and His Descendants," *Monumenta Nipponica* 47, no. 4 (1992): pp. 437–439.

48. Ōhashi, *Hōnen-Ippen*, pp. 166–167.

49. Although filial behavior is not a requirement of the Buddhist precepts, it is enjoined in the *Contemplation Sutra* (T12.341c9–12), and Hōnen remarks in the *Passages* that it does generate karma for rebirth (T83.15a8–12).

50. Hōnen himself strictly observed the precepts throughout his life.

51. T83.5c25–6a5.

52. In traditional studies of Hōnen's position on the precepts a passage

from the *Gekishu seppō* (Shsz 1955, p. 243), the *Mappō tōmyōki*, is frequently cited to show that Hōnen viewed the observance of precepts in an age of final dharma as totally irrelevant to rebirth (see, for example, pages 91–92 in Robert F. Rhodes, trans., “Saichō’s *Mappō Tomyōki: The Candle of the Latter Dharma*,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 1, no. 311 [1980]: pp. 79–103). However, the authenticity of the *Gekishu seppō* is not confirmed by an autographed manuscript, thus it might be an apocryphal work.

53. While Matsunaga and Matsunaga (*Foundations*, p. 61) claim that Hōnen participated in ordination rites using esoteric tantric ritual, this claim is dubious. (It is probably based upon the assertion of Ishida Mizumaro on page 266 of “Hōnen ni okeru futatsu no seikaku,” in *Jōdokyō no tenkai* [Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1967], pp. 264–268, but Ishida moderated his view considerably in his revision, “Hōnen no kairitsu kan,” in *Nihon Bukkyō ni okero kairitsu no kenkyū* [Tokyo: Nakayama Shobō, 1986], pp. 313–322.) That Hōnen ordained Kujō Kanezane and two other aristocrats and that he conferred the Buddhist precepts on Kanezane, his wife, and his daughter when they were ill is certain (*Gyokuyō* and *Meigetsuki*; Ikawa, *Hōnen Shōnin den zenshū*, pp. 966–968). That he did so by means of esoteric rites is speculation. An early biography, the *Genkū Shōnin shinikki*, does claim that Hōnen participated in esoteric rituals (Alan A. Andrews, “A Personal Account of the Life of the Venerable Genkū,” in *Religions of Japan in Practice*, ed. George J. Tanabe, Jr. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999], p. 376.), apparently while still residing at Kurodani prior to 1174, but this claim is also dubious; see discussion of the process of compilation of the *Genkū Shōnin shinikki* in Tamura Enchō, *Hōnen Shōnin den no kenkyū* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1972), pp. 16–21 and 292.

54. The issue of Hōnen’s alleged personal participation in contemplative exercises must be treated separately from his teachings on this issue.

55. The original manuscript of Hōnen’s letter to Naozane, written in Hōnen’s own hand, has been preserved and is therefore unquestionably authentic; see Tōdō and Itō, “Hōnen Shōnin shinpitsu ruishū kaisetsu.”

56. James Foard, “In Search of a Lost Reformation,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 7, no. 4 (1980): pp. 261–291.

57. The primary exceptions are the Jishū and Ōbaku Zen.