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5. HŌNEN, THE FOUNDER OF THE JŌDO SECT

Hōnen's Discovery in the Scriptures

As Hōnen was well acquainted with the doctrines of the various sects of the Holy Path (*Shōdō*),[1] all the learned men of the Hossō and Sanron, as well as of the Tendai and Kegon sects, spoke in the highest terms of his marvelous understanding and extensive scholarship. Nevertheless he was still troubled about the way of attaining salvation, and ill at ease. So with a view to the discovery of the path leading thereto immediately after death, he read the whole of the Buddhist Scriptures[2] through five times. He dwelt long and intently upon every trace he could find of what Shaka[3] himself had taught during his lifetime, only to find one difficulty after another present-

Hōnen proclaiming the new Evangel

[1] See Glossary under Holy Path (*Shōdō*) for a description of the *Shōdō* path as seen by Hōnen.

[2] The collection of all the teachings and precepts which the historical Buddha taught during his whole lifetime, and the works of his disciples; in Sanskrit: *Tripitaka*.

[3] The Japanese word for Shākyamuni, the historical Buddha. See Glossary under Shaka.

ing itself to his mind. At last he found a book called *Ōjōyōshū*[4] written by Genshin, based upon a commentary by the venerable Zendō on the *Meditation Sūtra*. While perusing this book, it occurred to him to examine Zendō's commentary. He found that the writer earnestly inculcated the principle that by the practice of the *Nembutsu*, even the ordinary man, with all his heart distractions, may understand how he may be born into the Pure Land immediately at death, and thus the way of deliverance was made very easy.

This Leads to the Founding of the Sect

Though he had noticed it every time he turned over the pages of Scripture, he read this again three times with special attention, and finally came to the following passage: "Only repeat the name of Amida[5] with all your heart. Whether walking or standing, sitting or lying, never cease the practice of it even for a moment. This is the very work which unfailingly issues in salvation, for it is in accordance with the Original Vow of that Buddha."[6] Through this passage he was led to the conclusion that the common man, no matter how far removed from the age of the Buddha, may by the repetition of Amida's name, in virtue of that Buddha's Original Vow, of a certainty attain birth into the Pure Land. And so in the spring of the fifth year of Jōan (1175), when he was forty-three years of age, he unhesitatingly abandoned all other forms of religious discipline, and applied himself exclusively to the practice of the *Nembutsu*.

Meditation Compared with the *Nembutsu*

Hōnen once said, "to attain birth into the Pure Land, there is nothing better than calling upon the Buddha's name." In reply to this, Jigembō urged the superiority of meditation on the Buddha. Then Hōnen defended his position, by showing that the calling upon Amida's name was in accord with His Original Vow, but Jigembō insisted that his teacher, the deceased Ryōnin Shōnin, had held that meditation was better. To this Hōnen replied, "He was indeed born before us, but even so, what difference does that make?" At this Jigembō became very angry, but Hōnen continued, "Ac-

[4] "Collection [of Scriptural Passages] on the Essentials for Birth into Pure Land," written by the Tendai priest Genshin.

[5] The Buddha Amida, through whose Original Vow all men may be born into the Pure Land. See Glossary under Amida Buddha.

[6] Amida's vow that all sentient beings who call with faith upon his name shall be born into the Pure Land. See Glossary under Original Vow.

cording to Zendō, although the Buddha Shaka taught there was merit in the meditative and non-meditative good works, yet if we enquire into the final purpose of Amida's Original Vow, we find that it was to lead all sentient beings to the one practice of calling upon His name (*Nembutsu*). Thus it is perfectly evident, that the supreme place is given to the invoking of this Buddha, and all you need to do is to read the Scriptures over carefully to find this out."

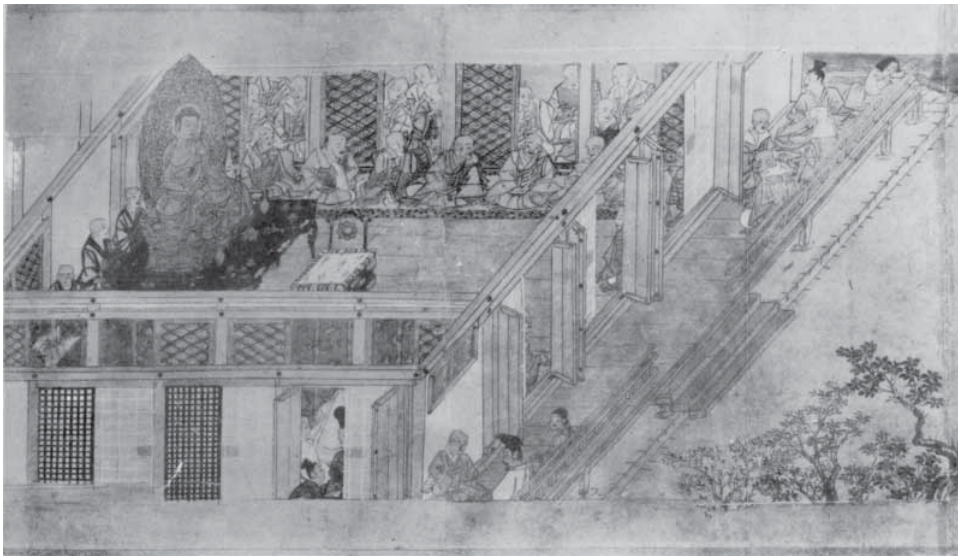
Hōnen's Homes

Shortly after Hōnen began to devote himself exclusively to this one practice, he left his den in Kurodani on Mount Hiei, and removed to a place called Hirodani on the Western Mountain, and then after a little while, finding a quiet retreat in the neighborhood of Yoshimizu on the Eastern Mountain, he left Hirodani and settled there. When people visited him there, he explained the doctrines of the Jōdo (Pure Land), and urged upon them the practice of the *Nembutsu*. His influence increased daily, and the numbers converted to his *Nembutsu* sect grew like the clouds in the sky. Though he changed his residence quite often, moving to the Kawaraya at Kamo, to Komatsudono, the Kachiodera Temple, and to Ōtani, he never neglected his work of evangelism. His fame at length filled the Court, and his influence spread throughout the land. This is due to the fact, I think, that the teaching of the Amida Buddha has a special affinity for our country, and that the cult of the *Nembutsu* is peculiarly adapted to these latter degenerate days, when men have forsaken the Law. Ōtani is the place where Hōnen lived, died, and was buried, and where the building called Mieidō, containing his relics, now stands, evidencing by its small size of some thirty by one hundred feet the simplicity in which he lived.

Hōnen's Search for Salvation

Hōnen once said, "Having a deep desire to obtain salvation, and with faith in the teachings of the various Scriptures, I practice many salvation forms of self-discipline. There are indeed many doctrines in Buddhism, but they may all be summed up in the 'three learnings,' namely the precepts, meditation, and knowledge, as practiced by the adherents of the Lesser and Greater Vehicles,[7] and the exoteric and esoteric sects. But the fact is that I do not keep

[7] The two branches of Buddhism. The so-called Lesser Vehicle (Hīnayāna), and the so-called Greater Vehicle (Mahāyāna). See Glossary under Mahāyāna (Greater Vehicle) and Hīnayāna (Lesser Vehicle).

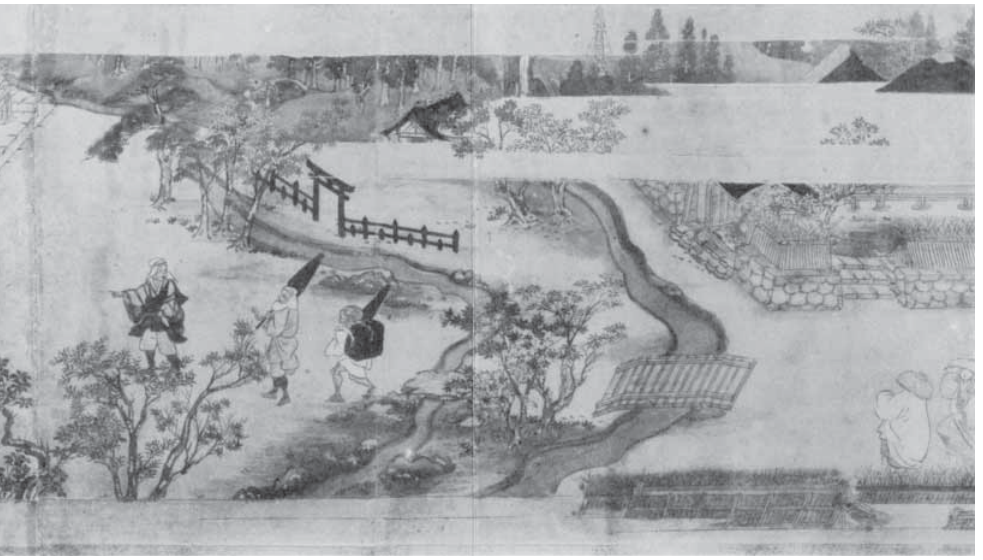


even one of the precepts, nor do I attain to any one of the many forms of meditation. A certain priest has said that without the observance of the *śila* (precepts), there is no such thing as the realization of *samādhi*.[8] Moreover the heart of the ordinary unenlightened man, because of his surroundings, is always liable to change, just like monkeys jumping from one branch to another. It is indeed in a state of confusion, easily moved, and with difficulty controlled. In what way does right and indefectible[9] knowledge arise? Without the sword of indefectible knowledge, how can one get free from the chains of evil passion, whence comes evil conduct? And unless one gets free from evil conduct and evil passions, how shall he obtain deliverance from the bondage of birth and death? Alas! What shall I do? What shall I do? The like of us are incompetent to practice the three disciplines of the precepts, meditation, and knowledge.

"And so I enquired of a great many learned men and priests whether there is any other way of salvation than these three disciplines, that is better suited to our poor abilities, but I found none who could either teach me the

[8] *Samādhi* here signifies a form of abstract meditation.

[9] Indefectible knowledge (Sanskrit: *anāsravajñāna*). The original here is *muro* (Sanskrit: *anāsrava*, indefectible). This expression is used in the opposite sense to *uro* (Sanskrit: *sāsrava*), which means literally "having a leak," i.e. having such an evil nature that its defects leak out through the five senses. It therefore means the state of complete exemption from such an evil nature and the evil consequences which flow from it.



Hōnen's discussion with scholars at Ōhara

way or even suggest it to me. At last I went into the Library at Kurodani on Mount Hiei, where all the Scriptures were, all by myself, and with a heavy heart, read them all through. While doing so, I hit upon a passage in Zendō's *Commentary on the Meditation Sūtra*, which runs as follows: 'Whether walking or standing, sitting or lying, only repeat the name of Amida with all your heart. Never cease the practice of it even for a moment. This is the very work which unfailingly issues in salvation, for it is in accordance with the Original Vow of that Buddha.' On reading this I was impressed with the fact, that even ignorant people like myself, by reverent meditation upon this passage, and an entire dependence upon the truth in it, never forgetting the repetition of Amida's sacred name, may lay the foundation for that good *karma*, which will with absolute certainty eventuate in birth into the blissful land."

Hōnen's Reason for Founding a Sect

Hōnen once said, "The reason I founded the Jōdo sect was that I might show the ordinary man how to be born into the Buddha's real land of compensation.[10] According to the Tendai sect, the ordinary man may be born into the so-called Pure Land, but that land is conceived of as a very inferior place. Although the Hossō sect conceives of it as indeed a very superior place, they do not allow that the common man can be born there at all.

[10] The Pure Land of Amida Buddha.

And all the sects, though differing in many points, all agree in not allowing that the common man can be born into the Buddha's land of real compensation; while, according to Zendō's *Commentary*, which laid the foundation of the Jōdo sect, it was made clear that birth into that land is possible even for the common man. But many said to me, 'You surely can promote the *Nembutsu* way of attaining *Ōjō*[11] without establishing a new sect. You are doing this merely out of ambition, to appear superior to others.' At first sight this seems quite plausible, but on further reflection it really misses the point. Unless I start a separate sect, the truth that the common man may be born into the Buddha's land of compensation will be obscured, and it will be hard to realize the deep meaning of Amida's Original Vow. I, therefore, in accordance with the interpretation given by Zendō, unhesitatingly proclaim the doctrine of the land of real compensation. This is by no means a question of personal ambition."

Hōnen's Doctrine a Message to His Age

Hōnen said to Shinjakubō, a priest from the province of Harima, "Suppose two Imperial orders were sent out, one for the western and one for the eastern provinces. What would you think, if the one intended for the western were by mistake taken to the eastern provinces, or vice versa? Would the people observe them?" After some thought Shinjakubō replied, "Even though they were Imperial orders, how would it be possible for the people to observe them?" "Right you are," said Hōnen. "Now by the two Imperial orders, I mean the teachings we inherit from Shaka belonging to the so-called three periods, that of the perfect Law, the imitation of the Law, and the ending of the Law.[12] The practice of the so-called Holy Path (*Shōdō*), belongs to the periods of the perfect Law and its imitation, and is only attainable by men of superior capacity and wisdom. Let us call this the Imperial order to the western provinces. The practice of the so-called Pure Land (*Jōdo*) belongs to the degenerate age when the Law has fallen into decay, in which even the most worthless may find the way of salvation. Let us liken this to the Imperial order to the eastern provinces. So it would never do to confuse these two paths, only one of which is suited to all three periods. I once discussed the doctrines of the Holy Path and of the Pure Land with several scholars at Ōhara, and admitted that they both are equally Buddhistic, just as both horns of an ox are equally his own. I went on to show that

[11] Birth in the Pure Land.

[12] For further details see Glossary under Three Periods of the Law.

from the standpoint of human capacity, my doctrine of the Pure Land is much superior and has had by far the greater success. Though the Holy Path is indeed profound, it belongs to an age already past, and is not suited to men of the present day; and while the Pure Land seems shallow it really is just the thing for our generation. When I thus won in the argument, the audience applauded, deeply convinced of the truth of the saying, 'In the period of the latter days of the Law, which last ten thousand years, all other Sūtras shall perish, but the one teaching of Amida alone shall remain to bless men and endure.'"

His Unceasing Practice of the *Nembutsu*

From the time Hōnen began to repeat the name seventy thousand times a day, he did nothing else day or night. And if anyone came to ask questions about religion, while he seemed to be listening to the questions, he lowered his voice, but really did not cease repeating the *Nembutsu* for a moment.

Hōnen Shōnin

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