

Enduring Themes in Contemporary Pure Land Thought

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Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism. Dennis Hirota ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. 257 pages. \$23.50 paper, ISBN 0-7914-4529-1.

Preliminary Remarks

JŌDO Shinshū has contributed a particularly rich and complex philosophical development to the Pure Land stream of the Buddhist tradition, and the work of gaining intellectual clarity about this spiritual path still continues. This review article focuses on a collection of papers that was originally the focus of a conference held in Berkeley, California, in 1996. The subtitle of that volume, “Creating a Shin Buddhist Theology in a Religiously Plural World,” suggests that the way in which Pure Land Buddhists have thought about their tradition in the past may need to change in encountering other religions and in dialoguing with radically different approaches within the Buddhist tradition. Here, I will comment on several of the theorists whose papers are included in *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism*, considering their ideas in terms of three categories that I believe will represent enduring types of 21st-century approaches to Pure Land Buddhist religiosity. One type of approach tries to place the Pure Land stream of the Buddhist tradition, and especially the Jōdo Shinshū school thereof, in comparison and contrast to the Christian tradition. This stance can be seen in

the work of John Cobb and John Yokota. Another posture that we will continue to see throughout this century, tries to understand Shinshū in comparison to other schools of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism. This perspective usually results in minimizing the uniqueness of those Buddhist approaches which derive from the thought of Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262) and can be seen in the papers by Tachikawa Musashi in the aforementioned volume.¹ The third type of viewpoint, which I expect to be enduring, is one which stresses the experiential nature of Shinshū religiosity and its inseparability from the actual practice of the Nembutsu, the saying aloud or reflecting silently upon Amida Buddha's name. This stance can be seen in the work of Dennis Hirota. I will also refer to some of my own writings which have appeared elsewhere and share a perspective on Jōdo Shinshū, which finds it to be concerned with the transformative experience that takes place in the process of saying or thinking upon Amida's name.

My categorization of these approaches differs considerably from that given by Dennis Hirota, himself.² Hirota would highlight modes of understanding and the linguistic dimension of Nembutsu practice in assessing his own work. Instead, I am more concerned about seeing him as part of a larger movement within contemporary Jōdo Shinshū thought that is guiding the practitioner back to practice, that of saying the Buddha's name, and the spiritually transformative experience which comes with that practice. It will be obvious that this is the approach to Pure Land Buddhism which I consider most fruitful. Although this is my own preferred pathway to understanding Shinran and his followers, the other two approaches also have their virtues and will, I believe, endure.

Intramural Comparative Buddhism

As Jōdo Shinshū continues to become better known outside of Japan, we will see more and more applications of a perspective which I call intramural comparative Buddhism. By this, I mean an understanding of two or more schools of Buddhism from the perspective of thinkers strongly committed to one side of the dialogue. Usually, this approach presumes that the goals and suppositions are the same for all schools of Buddhism. Such an assumption is not present in much writing by Jōdo Shinshū authors. Tachikawa is a particularly good example of this approach in that he is broadly informed by Buddhist tradition and has no specific axe to grind. Insiders often do have particular spins

¹ Hirota 2000, pp. 101–24, 223–40.

² See *ibid.*, pp. 241–47.

we wish to give to the material. When we engage in intramural comparative Buddhism, our vested interest often deprives us of the freshness which can be found in Tachikawa's work.

Reservations Regarding Tachikawa Musashi's Approach

Tachikawa sees Buddhist understanding of both the mundane world (Skt. *samvṛiti-satya*; Jp. *zokutai* 俗諦) and the sacralized world (Skt. *paramārtha-satya*; Jp. *shintai* 真諦) as being based on the perspective of dependent origination (Skt. *pratītya-samutpāda*; Jp. *engi* 緣起).³ This concept certainly has its importance in Buddhist doctrinal history, but it is not understood by all practicing Buddhists nor invoked by all the founders of the two hundred or so living schools of Buddhism. In its simplified translation, "interdependence," dozens of recent books on the Buddhist religion treat it as foundational. Tachikawa himself, however, admits that, "the details of the teaching of dependent origination taught by Śākyamuni himself are not known exactly."⁴ What grounds are there then for elevating this concept to the status of being foundational for all Buddhist thought and practice? It is a short step from such foundationalism to the narrowness of fundamentalism as we see in conservative Christianity. It may do us well to remember the Buddha as the Great Physician who prescribes doctrines and practices as remedies. A remedy or therapy is context-specific and not intended for all persons at all times.

Using the homogenizing concept of dependent origination to understand the thought of Shinran and his followers is particularly procrustean. Shinran himself never uses the term in the corpus of his writing. While I respect Tachikawa's intention to situate Shin Buddhism more centrally in the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, we cannot put words in Shinran's mouth. He did not treat dependent origination as foundational in the way that Tachikawa and many other contemporary buddhologists wish to see it.

Tachikawa's treatment of Dainichi Nyorai and Amida Buddha as equivalently "personifications of the working of emptiness"⁵ ignores the fact that Shinran uses both the *sambhoga-kāya* (Jp. *hōjin* 報身, Buddha of a glorified body) model and the *hōben hosshin* 方便法身 (Dharma-body of compassionate means) model to describe Amida.⁶ In employing the latter model, Shinran is

³ See *ibid.*, pp. 105–9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁶ On this note, see Hirota 1991.

a long way from identifying Amida with the absolute principle with which Tachikawa, Cobb and Yokota try to equate him.⁷ According to the thought of Tan-luan 曇鸞 (476–542), who innovated the concept in the early sixth century, there are innumerable *hōben hosshin*. Amida Buddha is only one of these. With the *sambhoga-kāya* model, it is even clearer that Amida cannot fill the function that the aforementioned three theorists try to assign him. Amida as *sambhoga-kāya* is identical with the process of making and enacting his vows.

Amida is, then, one *sambhoga-kāya* among innumerable others. Tachikawa refers to Amida as a “personification” of emptiness and this term is misleading at best. “Personification” implies the imposition of a personal nature upon a non-personal reality. The ultimate concern for Buddhists, and we may here use Tachikawa’s preferred term, emptiness, is a dynamic truth that is intrinsically neither personal nor impersonal.

Tachikawa tells us that “In Pure Land faith, however, it is not permitted the practitioners of religious action to judge for themselves the extent to which their goal has been attained.”⁸ I doubt that this even seems to be the case in all ten schools of Jōdo Shinshū or in the two schools of Jōdo Shū. I understand why such an opinion could emerge from studying some authors within Hongwanji-ha. Even in this school, however, I would deny that this is so. Certainly our ultimate goal is the same as that of other Buddhists, thoroughgoing enlightenment. The relevant mediate goal is, however, the receiving of *shinjin* 信心. *Shinjin* is a sort of faith. Or, we may say that a model of faith is one model that clarifies what *shinjin* is.⁹ Tachikawa’s earlier draft of his paper simply said that it is considered arrogant to assert that one has faith in Amida.¹⁰ Rather than quibble about Tachikawa’s interpretation, I would like to say that it is often assumed that there are no Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists who have a clear knowledge that they have received *shinjin*. This is not so. I suspect that there are hundreds of thousands of Buddhists in this stream of tradition, perhaps millions, who know that this moment of profound entrusting has occurred. There is wisdom in knowing that one has been given *shinjin*. But as even this

⁷ Both of these latter authors’ perspectives can be found in Hirota 2000. For John B. Cobb Jr., see pp. 147–60; for John S. Yokota, see pp. 73–100, pp. 199–221.

⁸ Hirota 2000, p. 113.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the nature of *shinjin*, see my article, “Existentializing and Radicalizing Shinran’s Teaching by Repositioning it at the Center of Mahāyāna Tradition,” in Tanaka and Nasu 1998, pp. 272–74.

¹⁰ Original 1996 conference booklet, p. 147.

wisdom (*chion* 知恩) is received from Amida Buddha, there is not necessarily any arrogance in acknowledging that one has been so benefited.

Valid Insights Contributed by Tachikawa Musashi

Tachikawa's definition of ritual as "creating a distinction between the sacred and the profane" is cogent. If he were to look closely at the central matter of the Pure Land tradition, the Nembutsu, in terms of its being a ritual act which brings the practitioner in touch with the realm of the sacred, his analysis might prove extremely fruitful.¹¹

Tachikawa correctly points out the need for the Buddhist religion to establish an adequate concept of persons. I would suggest an organic model—a person actively pulls together various activities and commitments just as a body actively unifies subsystems like respiration, blood circulation, etc. I have also suggested a narrative model of the person. We are the story that we tell.¹² These two valid insights are indicative of the sort of ground, which may be gained by what I call the intramural comparative approach to understanding Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism.

Christian—Shinshū Dialogue

John Yokota and his long-time mentor, John Cobb, have both taken Christian-Shinshū dialogue about as far as it can go along the lines of unifying the two traditions. Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that true acceptance in this religiously plural world requires allowing others to be different. It is not fruitful to pretend that all the world's major religions are, at some deep level, the same. I am reminded of the situation in Anglo-American philosophizing in the mid-sixties. A handful of thinkers, including Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Austin, and John Wisdom, had forged an approach that came to be called "ordinary-language philosophy." I cannot see that subsequent authors have gone anywhere with their attempts to build on the insights of those thinkers in the last forty years.

Many would disagree with what I have said about the linguistic turn in Anglo-American philosophy. Even so, I would say the same thing about the attempt to unify Buddhism and Christianity that can be seen in the writings

¹¹ I have explored this possibility to some extent in Gibbs 2001.

¹² These models of a person without a soul-thing underlying them have been explored somewhat in Gibbs 1997.

of Cobb and Yokota. Someone was bound to try this. Cobb and Yokota have done a very professional job of it. For reasons I will explain below, I believe that the apparent promise in this approach may not pan out.

Reservations Regarding John B. Cobb Jr. 's Approach

Cobb believes that Pure Land Buddhists need a “historical embodiment” for Amida which parallels the embodiment of Christ in Jesus. This perceived need is based on a Christian approach to ontology and history. So far as historical embodiments go, Buddhists have numerous exemplars of practice. For Shinshū, this would include Shinran, historical teachers, inspiring laypeople (not just *myōkōnin* 妙好人), etc. More importantly, our feeling about this matter as Buddhists is different. The levels of practice and personal experience are more central than the matters of ontology and propositional belief. Hirota stated in his presentation at the 1996 conference that the problem of involvement in history raised by Cobb has its focus not in Amida as an object of faith or as working on the world as object but in Amida’s action (the working of the primal vow) as the awareness of the practitioner. For a traditional Christian, Jesus must have existed and he must have been the Christ. For a Buddhist, even a very traditional one, *perhaps* Śākyamuni was enlightened, *perhaps* there was a renunciant named Dharmākara who fulfilled his vows. For a traditional Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist, *perhaps* Shinran’s realization was genuine. The crucial point for the Shin Buddhist is that something worthy and perceived as reliable is encountered as, e.g., Namo Amida Butsu. Although we use narrative language and even appear (in a secondary way) to make claims regarding ontological truth, religious experience is central. This is not the case for many Christians and Muslims. Those religions really do place the assent to ontological truth-claims more central to the process of being one of the faithful. In Chapter Two of the *Tannishō* 歎異抄, Shinran is reported to have said that he wouldn’t care if it turned out that saying the Nembutsu was actually paving his way to a hellish state of existence. His experience of saying the Buddha’s name was still the truest thing he knew and no other practice nurtured his spirituality. This is a characteristically Buddhist way of seeing things. Practice and experience are central. Veridical theories expressing truth-claims are not of the essence of the Buddha-way. If it turned out that it had been some demon who had actually taught the sutras on Amida Buddha, Shinran would still follow the path of the Nembutsu, and so would I.

Cobb is working with a somewhat rigid and dualistic notion of myth as opposed to language that literally describes states of affairs. His notion of his-

tory does not seem to fit in either of these categories although I am sure it is supposed to be a realm of “literal” truths. He opposes the “myth” of Amida to some felt need for a historical embodiment. But the Jesus he takes as an embodiment of Christ’s/God’s compassion is a thoroughly mythologized figure. Cobb tries to make his ontology, his myth and his mythologized “historical” Jesus seem consistent with one another. This is hardly a prohibitively difficult task in the absence of any solid knowledge of who the historical figure was (Joshua Ben David?) and what exactly he was teaching (New Age Judaism?). Cobb notes that Yokota initially focuses on Śākyamuni Buddha as a historical embodiment of limitless compassion. Hirota rightly points out that the Śākyamuni to whom Yokota refers is a thoroughly mythologized figure with no solid basis in fact.

Cobb’s query as to whether or not Buddhists are content with a mythical account¹³ is driven by a correspondence model of truth. In the Russelian formulation, there are states of affairs and our propositions are true when they describe the relevant states of affairs accurately. I agree with Paul Ricoeur that language reveals truth in a variety of ways. Even the Western philosophical tradition has been consistently distancing itself from a correspondence theory of truth for the past century.

Cobb suggests that Pure Land Buddhists can “be enriched as they respond to questions with which Christians have been wrestling more intensively for a longer period of time.”¹⁴ But the problem is to identify in just which areas Buddhists can learn from Christians and vice versa. It seems to me that Buddhists have been wrestling more intensively and for a longer period of time with the question of the nature of language than Christians have. The one area where I would be inclined to admit that Christians have been theorizing more intensively is the matter of personhood. In the essays in *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism*, it is not Cobb but Tachikawa (a Buddhist) and Gordon Kaufman who address the unique status and worth of the individual. On the topic of the relation between mythic-narrative language and the function of language to reveal truth, it seems to me that the Buddhist tradition is more advanced. Our more fluid and various ways of appreciating language help to prevent us from taking the sort of mystified view of history that leads Cobb to identify the historical person referred to as Jesus with a supposedly obvious exemplar of compassion.

¹³ Hirota 2000, p. 156.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

The status of process thought as representatively Christian is somewhat open to question. It seems to me that the views of Cobb are a digression from ontological claims for Christ, heaven, etc. as they are found in more traditional Protestant and Catholic theology. Cobb elaborates new philosophical perspectives that are in consonance with only some other contemporary theologies. A problem for me is that if I dialogue with Cobb, Yokota, or similar process thinkers, who am I in dialogue with. How many people actually ascribe to the sort of take on Christian ideas that they are presenting?

A related issue is raised by Hirota in response to Yokota, "Why Process Thought?" I would like to point out that there are something like three hundred thousand religious traditions in the world. Process theology is either a newly-arisen religion or a new take on some sort of liberal Protestantism. There are about two hundred schools each of Buddhism and Christianity active in the world today. Why would we want to assert the identity of the ultimate concern in one out of the two hundred schools of Buddhism and the ultimate concern in one out of the two hundred schools of Christianity?¹⁵

Valid Insight to Be Drawn from Cobb's Work

There is only one point in Cobb's work that interests me as a Buddhist pastor. He states, "An accurate description of experience in a context where grace is recognized leads to an increase in its role in the whole experience and to alteration of its other aspects."¹⁶ Shinran's life was filled with experiences of finding the "grace" of Amida, if I may for the present refer to it in that fashion, in many persons and events. He was able to have such experiences because he discerned the presence of Amida's working in the saying and hearing of the Nembutsu. Shinran saw his wife as an embodiment of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Kannon 観音, his teacher, Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), as an embodiment of the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Daiseishi 大勢至, and perceived a statue of Kannon to come alive and give him guidance at Rokkakudō 六角堂. In contrast to such experiences of recognizing "grace," for most ministers and philosophers of Hongwanji-ha, the experience of Amida's working remains constrained exclusively to the saying and hearing of the Nembutsu. I think that we might respond to the challenge by Cobb here and look more seriously at, for example, Shinran's description of the benefits in this life that come

¹⁵ Here, I am treating the specifically process understanding of Jesus and the Shinshū version of Amida as distinct from whom those personages are in other streams of the traditions.

¹⁶ Hirota 2000, p. 159.

from saying the Nembutsu. Benefits that he elaborates include being surrounded and protected by numberless gods, bodhisattvas and buddhas in transformation bodies. Such an increase in the role of such “grace” in the whole of experience was the reality of our founder’s experience, but has not often been remarked upon by others in our tradition over these past seven centuries.

Reservations Concerning the Orientation of Cobb and John Yokota

I agree with one of Hirota’s criticisms, which is that, the Śākyamuni Buddha to whom Yokota appeals as a historical embodiment of compassion is thoroughly mythologized. The same can be said of Jesus. It is not clear to me at what level Cobb and Yokota are speaking. Are they doing ontology? If so, the notion of “Amida as the Christ,” which Cobb asserts and which was formerly embraced by Yokota, as well, has some problems. First, this seems to be voiced in the wrong direction. Wouldn’t it be “Jesus as the Amida?” If what is being described is something like an incarnation of an ultimate principle, which way we voice this is crucial. Second, both the view of Cobb and the revised view of Yokota are tied to specific factual claims regarding historical persons. If we search for them as actual historical figures both Jesus and Śākyamuni dissolve into myth, legend and hagiography.

The use of Amida Buddha as a principle which might be embodied in Jesus or Śākyamuni absolutizes Amida in a way that is inconsistent with Shinran’s philosophical works. Shinran’s considered opinion about Amida Buddha is that he is a *sambhoga-kāya*. Shinran also uses the view that Amida is a *hōben hosshin*. In either case, Amida is one amongst numberless persons/modalities through which Suchness, or things such as they truly are, works to reintegrate us. For the role needed in “Jesus as the X” or “X as the Christ” or even “Śākyamuni is an embodiment of X,” the *dharmakāya* (Jp. *hosshō hosshin* 法性法身, Truth body of all Buddhas) would be required, not a *sambhoga-kāya* like Amida. Perhaps Dainichi Nyorai, as understood in esoteric Buddhism, could fill this role. Amida Buddha as he is understood in Mahāyāna Buddhism cannot. It seems odd to me that such an absolutized understanding of Amida has emerged from Yokota’s thinking in terms of “divine relativity.”

Positive Contribution of Yokota’s Work

John Yokota has addressed the need for new concepts in Pure Land thought, for daring speculation, for new theory. There is a willingness to risk censure

in the pursuit of truth behind his work which I find admirable. The current state of Pure Land Buddhist thought calls for fearless speculation, for radically new theorizing, for conceptual structures which are a sharp departure from what has already been done.

Experiential, Practice-centric Shinshū

I suspect that some will object that I am just discussing several current authors and my categories have no special meaning. I see Tachikawa, Cobb and Yokota (whom I have treated together) and Hirota as representing future directions in Jōdo Shinshū theorizing. With Tachikawa and Hirota, what I am focusing on in their work may be only certain aspects of their conceptual projects. Considering the case at hand, Hirota might well emphasize his focus on the linguistic dimension of Shinran's thought. My categorization of his approach as experiential and practice-centric is based on a wish to highlight commonalities in his theorizing and that of other authors, perhaps even my own. I do not see anyone else working on the specifically language-centric nature of Jōdo Shinshū.

Reservations about the Work of Dennis Hirota

I feel that Hirota has not fully integrated the suggestion made at the IBS conference in 1996 by Kaufman regarding the intrinsically transcendent nature of the person. The discussion by Cobb and Yokota regarding the personal nature of the ultimate has perhaps distracted Hirota from the more profound insight of Kaufman. Hirota tells us that objectifying thought is the problem. But I think that Kaufman has an important point to make when he asserts that a person is intrinsically resistant to such objectification. Hirota is rightly suspicious of the Protestant emphasis on inwardness, which usually accompanies such a stress on the transcendent nature of the person. But a person need not be identified with such vague inwardness nor the aspect of subjectivity with a decisionism such as one sees in the writings of Sartre. Kaufman's point was deeper and more general than to be limited to some Cartesian reification of the thinker. In the background of his remark is the Hegelian vision of subjectivity as the locus of the Universal's self-knowledge. Hegel tried to elaborate a notion of the subject as intersubjective, as manifested in language and culture. This was a departure from a claustrophobic European notion of subjectivity which ran from Descartes down to and including the thought of Fichte. Without tying ourselves to the specifics of Hegelianism, we might try

to develop the discernment that a person is the locus of finding oneself in otherness. Some development along these lines might be possible. Hirota is indicating some tendencies in this direction when he describes truth as a mode of perception in which “the transcendent is self-aware from the locus of the practitioner’s life.”¹⁷ In any case, there is more to the idea that the person is intrinsically resistant to objectification than Hirota has adequately accounted for in my opinion.

I feel that Hirota has not yet drawn out the possibly radical implications of his *imaginative, constructive work*. He is in the process of clearly defining the essence of Jōdo Shinshū. This work is more than just “reconstructive” (as Kaufman has labeled it). However, the force his theories may have in terms of paring away errors in what he refers to as “the traditional dogmatics” of Shinshū is awaiting further clarification.

We need to see more concrete examples of “a coherent and intelligible understanding of oneself and the world that ignores neither the historical and emotional boundness of the self nor the variety and worth of experience.”¹⁸ One example Hirota has given is Shinran’s simultaneous criticism of the authorities that exiled Hōnen and himself, and the joy of the opportunity to spread the Nembutsu teaching to the people in that remote area where he spent his exile. We need further concrete examples and detailed speculation as to what this might mean in the lives of followers less advanced than Shinran himself. The negative moment, “permeability of . . . conceptuality by its own inevitable inadequacy,”¹⁹ is clearer than how the relative judgments’ worth might, in some cases, survive such permeation by inadequacy. What does it mean that “conceptuality fused with the transcendence of its horizons and dualisms allows for the growth of awareness, which ceases to be repetition of prior attachments and becomes genuinely creative activity in the world”?²⁰ Specific examples from the life of Shinran and other important teachers which display this dynamic might help. Are there texts or reports from the experience of Pure Land Buddhists which can help us to understand what action from such a perspective is like? At the conference, Hirota stated that it is through the Name in its character as a linguistic act that integration of one’s ongoing existence with true reality (life, light) occurs. He argued that while passions

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 66

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 65

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 66

²⁰ Ibid.

still arise, they are divested of the direction and the driving force of the intellect, which functions instead to disarm them. However, such passions are assumedly still major determinants of how an individual acts. Someone needs to tell us what living out of such a perspective feels like. Assumedly, it is not some passionless decision. What would such natural action be like?

A related question concerns the move from Shinran's description of *shinjin* as being without "double mindedness" to Hirota's talk of the collapse of the doubled self. Shinran's texts that are consistent with such a collapse would be illuminating. If this is perhaps "imaginative-constructive" work, it would seem to indicate that Shinran "means more than he says," to use a phrase of Gadamer's. Drawing new meaning out of Shinran's texts might well be seen as in keeping with his own principles of imaginative, constructive hermeneutics. Something like this is needed to elicit new meanings from such texts and should be explicitly stated. What is the experience of such a person freed from a doubled or reified self? Is the person more or less of an individual than before? It seems to me that these questions naturally come up. They push us toward some more concrete Buddhist notions of the person. Toward the very thing that Tachikawa mentioned the Buddhist tradition needs. If we were to think of a person on the model of an organism, which actively unifies sub-systems, would the collapse of the doubled self mean that such active unification takes place on a deeper and broader level than that of conscious experience, than conscious experience under "the direction and driving force of the intellect?"

Hirota should respond to Kaufman's claim that he too is making "ontological truth-claims." It should be granted that practice-level discourse is more primary in the Buddhist tradition ("Try looking at it like this . . ."). Even so, despite a secondary or tertiary status, aren't ontological truth-claims being made in Hirota's work? Aren't they implicit in some of Shinran's statements? Hirota, himself, grants that Kaufman "is concerned to note, correctly I think, that a recognition of a therapeutic function does not dissolve the problem of truth-claims about the world."²¹ Without losing the experience-centered focus of his theorizing, Hirota might state to what extent such propositional content is involved in Buddhist theorizing, or at least his own.

Related to the preceding problem is Kaufman's question to Hirota, at the original conference, "does Amida work directly for other goals than Enlightenment as important in themselves?" There is a very basic concern expressed

²¹ Ibid., p. 165.

here which goes beyond the matters of anthropomorphizing Amida and differing notions of what truth is. Shinran elaborated ten benefits of receiving *shinjin*, the encompassing heart and mind of true entrusting. This list, compiled when he was in his early fifties and reiterated when he was in his mid-eighties, includes the benefit of being protected and cared for by all buddhas.²² Does such care and protection only pertain to the ultimate goal of Enlightenment?

In his incorporation of an interpersonal model, Hirota has not fully clarified a difference between Buddhist and Christian traditions on the matter of a personal relationship with the truth and its exemplars. For the Christians, Jesus is a person and God is personal. As Hirota has shown in recent writings, Shinran works with the *sambhoga-kāya* model of a person becoming Amida Buddha and with a *hōben hosshin* model of ultimate reality becoming the person Amida.²³ As I have mentioned, Amida is not unique in either regard. In fact, the need to have a personal relationship with one's ultimate concern is not met exclusively through the person of Amida in Pure Land traditions. The incorporation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Kannon, into the Pure Land tradition can be seen in Shinran's life history among other places. Amida may have been a little too grand to meet Shinran's need for an interpersonal dimension to his spirituality. He needed both Shōtoku Taishi 聖徳太子, whom he considered to be a bodhisattva, and Kannon as more concrete mediators of the personal side of Suchness/emptiness. Shinran's listing as among the benefits of saying the Nembutsu that we are surrounded by and protected by gods, buddhas and bodhisattvas at all times is indicative of a broad infusion of personal contact with the ultimate in the life of the Nembutsu-path traveler.²⁴ The presence of these aspects of interpersonal religiosity in Shinran's life are perhaps not clear to Cobb and ignored as not central to his own project by Yokota. Shinran had innumerable embodiments of the ultimate in his personal history. For Shinshū-path travelers to have the same rich experience is as easy as following Shinran's explicit teachings. More attention needs to be paid to these two lists of benefits in this life from saying the Nembutsu. Amida is not a jealous buddha. There are no jealous buddhas. At the level of the *dharma-kāya*, all buddhas are one. It is a Christian problem of needing a specific incarnation of Christ which Cobb and Yokota are, perhaps unconsciously, projecting onto

²² Hirota et al. 1997, vol. 1, p. 112.

²³ See, for example, Hirota 1993.

²⁴ Hirota et al. 1997, vol. 1, pp. 352–55.

our tradition. Monotheistic commitments color a Christian theologian's view of historical embodiments in ways that make understanding the multiple instantiations of non-duality for Buddhists hard for them to appreciate. This issue is quite distinct from the question of the degree to which Amida Buddha may be said to be a person.

Positive Contributions of Dennis Hirota's Work

Hirota's papers accomplish a reintegration of Shinran's practice-centric approach to the Pure Land tradition with the transcendence of practice. It is only the latter aspect which has been preserved in most Hongwanji-ha-sponsored philosophizing. The reintegration of the practice-centered orientation is made possible by stressing the role of actually saying, hearing and reflecting upon the speech-act of the Nembutsu. Hirota quotes Shinran's statement, "there is no nembutsu separate from shinjin nor is the one moment of shinjin separate from the one moment of nembutsu."²⁵ Only the first half of that insight has been clearly preserved in the major denominations of the organized religion of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism. Hirota's work resumes the insight that there is no *shinjin* outside the Nembutsu. The term "practice" is actually complex with many a distinct nuance. In the Buddhist religion, practice is essentially a matter of learning to live a different way, coming to walk through a different world, or to perceive the world you are walking through differently. Hirota's work preserves the transcendence of practice *as* effort toward transcendence from a subjective center, from what is still a practice-centered perspective in the broad sense of the term. To understand Shinran we must understand, Hirota tells us, "the significance of shinjin in terms of the finality of practice in the immediate present."²⁶ His articles consistently reunite these two aspects of Shinran in their inevitable paradoxicality, as practice-centered transcendence of practice in the immediate present. Further, he elaborates this from a stance which is one of practice-based theorizing, which is itself, essentially, an expression of profound religious experience. The result is an articulation of Shinran's vision of the Nembutsu path which is of unprecedented power and which is in my opinion quite persuasive.

Hirota has begun a clarification of what is and how it is transformed in the individual who receives *shinjin* along the path of the Nembutsu. Hongwanji-ha thinking, at least since the Sangō Wakuran 三業惑乱 incident in the early

²⁵ Quoted in Hirota 2000, n. 11, p. 69.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

19th century, has fostered an understanding of Shinran which involves no transformation of the person in this life. This is demonstrably *not* Shinran's teaching.²⁷ While I have called for a more concrete elaboration of this in the reservations expressed above, I am excited by what I have read so far. I think a much-needed reform of the Hongwanji-ha scholarly tradition is underway as can be seen in the respect Hirota's work shows for the "variety and worth of experience."

I believe that Hirota has given the most important part of a correct reply to Cobb and Yokota's concern with historical embodiments of compassion when he stated at the conference that the problem of involvement in history raised by Cobb has its focus not in Amida as an object of faith or as working on the world as object, but in Amida's action (the working of the primal vow) as the awareness of the practitioner. Hirota thus takes the discussion away from a mystified approach to history and brings it back to the religious experience of Pure Land Buddhists and the transformation it works in their personal histories.

Concluding Remarks

I am suggesting that the several authors who participated in the 1996 conference "Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism" may be classed in three groups. The title of the first category, "Intramural Comparative Buddhism," is not destined to last but the approach to Shinshū I am naming with it is. Scholars like Tachikawa Musashi will continue to clarify Shinshū from their own perspective, engaged with a somewhat different stream of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The work they do will continue to have value for those of us firmly rooted in Shinran's teachings as well as for scholars who are not themselves engaged Buddhists.

We cannot escape the tendency that many scholars will have to elaborate Shinshū against the backdrop of Christian thought. Alfred Bloom and Unno Taitetsu have each expressed reservations about "the recourse to traditions other than Shin to explain its basic teachings."²⁸ It is not possible or even desirable to eliminate such tendencies. What we want to see from this group of scholars is a more sincere study of Shinshū preceding and continuing along with such comparative studies. Really the objections of Bloom and Unno might apply to Tachikawa as well as to Cobb and Yokota. I hope that my comments above have indicated how valuable Tachikawa's work is. Both

²⁷ See, for example, Hirota et al. 1997, vol. 1, pp. 551, 553.

²⁸ See Unno Taitetsu's article, "Shin Buddhism in the West," in Tanaka and Nasu 1998, p. 6.

Tachikawa and Kaufman, whose work I have not treated here in any detail, do us a service by raising the issue of personhood. In the re-worked essays Hirota contributed to *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism*, I think we can see some response to this positive stimulus. In Tachikawa's oral presentation, he remarked that the Nembutsu has negating, self-negating and affirming aspects. His recognition of a "self-negating" aspect of the Nembutsu is in consonance with Hirota's conception of the Nembutsu as having a formless aspect as well as having form. Perhaps we can see a potential for further cross-pollination in these two approaches.

I am recommending especially the experiential and practice-centric approach to Shinshū, which I see in the work of Hirota. I am also, specifically, encouraging a careful reading of his work by anyone who is really concerned with the future of Pure Land Buddhist thought. It is the Western paradigm of a deductive system of thought which forces Kaufman and Yokota to see Hirota's work as a conservative defense of tradition. I believe that Hirota is, rather, approaching Shinran's texts as dynamic stimuli for religious experience.

Shinran walked through a world of magic and wonder. Because he encountered the fundamental mystery in the simple saying of some phrase such as "Namanda," he was able to recognize the acting of that compassionate reality in many aspects of his life. This is the goal for those who study Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism as engaged members of the Nembutsu community.

The crucial matter is to penetrate the obscuring fixedness of doctrine and practice, whether old or new, so that we can encounter something mysterious and liberating in and as our saying of Amida Buddha's Name. Transformative experience takes place when we sincerely turn to the Nembutsu and allow it to work in our lives, formlessly and in verbal forms, in deliberate utterance, in nearly spontaneous utterance, and in barely perceptible, sometimes unperceived moments of reverence. For the engaged Buddhist, who also works in buddhology, the task is to learn to walk through a realm of wonder with hope and kindness in our hearts. For the Shin Buddhist who also reads or creates scholarship, our task is to learn and often rediscover the mystery and reliability of living in the light of the Nembutsu.

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