Demythologizing Pure Land Buddhism: Yasuda Rijin and the Shin Buddhist Tradition. By Paul B. Watt. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 196 pages. Hardback: ISBN 978-0-8248-5632-8.

JEFF SCHROEDER

In the process of modernizing Shin, or True Pure Land, Buddhism, scholar-priests like Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863–1903), Soga Ryōjin 曽我量深 (1875–1971), and Kaneko Daiei 金子大栄 (1881–1976) took up the task of "demythologizing" the story of Amida Buddha's creation of the Western Pure Land. For them, this story must not be taken literally as the teaching of an otherworldly paradise where one goes after death; rather, it expresses realities accessible here and now. Yet the fantastical myths of the Pure Land sutras may not present the main obstacle to modern individuals embracing the Pure Land Buddhist path. Rather, that obstacle may be the practice of the *nenbutsu* 念仏 itself. Practically speaking, becoming a Shin follower above all requires becoming a *nenbutsu sha* 念仏者, a "sayer of the name." In approaching a Shin site of practice, the first thing one encounters is not the story of Amida's vows or the philosophical elaboration of them by Shinran in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信證; what one encounters—audibly and visibly—is the *nenbutsu*, the phrase of six characters—*Namu Amida Butsu* 南無阿弥陀仏 ("homage to Amida Buddha")—recited earnestly, with heads bowed, by groups of practitioners. The modernization of Shin Buddhism could not simply repackage Shin ideas into a compelling philosophy; Shin Buddhism is a religious path, and its primary practice of chanting the Buddha's name had to be made intelligible for a modern audience. To treat the saying of the name as a "magical spell or incantation" is "one of the great dangers that the name possesses and is a great pitfall," Shin scholar-priest Yasuda Rijin 安田理深 (1900–1982) insists (p. 71). The primary task of Yasuda's career, as portrayed in Paul Watt's *Demythologizing Pure Land Buddhism: Yasuda Rijin and the Shin Buddhist Tradition*, was to explain the true nature of the *nenbutsu* for superstitious practitioners and skeptics alike. As such, this book might well have been titled "Demystifying the *Nenbutsu*."

Watt's study of Yasuda Rijin is composed of two sections: a brief but extensive and richly detailed introduction to the Shin Buddhist tradition and Yasuda's life and thought, and a series of translations of Yasuda's

lectures and writings with notes and introductions.[1] As explained in the book's introduction, Yasuda first studied Zen Buddhism and received precepts from a Sōtō Zen master, but in 1919, encountered a book by Kaneko Daiei that turned his interests toward Shin. In 1924, he became a student at Otani University in Kyoto, where he studied under Soga Ryōjin. Following the completion of a secondary course of studies at the university in 1930, Yasuda worked as a temple lecturer, head of a private Shin academy, writer, and occasional professor at Otani University (1944–1946, 1961–1966). From the 1950s, he became interested in works by Western writers such as Heidegger, Buber, Barth, and Tillich. In 1960, he had an extended conversation with Tillich in Kyoto, which formed the inspiration for the lecture translated by Watt as "A Name but Not a Name Alone."

As indicated above, Yasuda's work built upon the "demythologizing" efforts of his predecessors. At the risk of oversimplification, the achievements of those figures can be summarized as follows: Kiyozawa, the father figure of the Ōtani-denomination lineage of modernist Shin scholars, demythologized Amida Buddha by developing new philosophical language for discussing Amida (as "the Absolute Infinite" or "the Tathāgata") and by emphasizing the direct relationship between the Shin practitioner and Amida in the present. Soga then reinterpreted Dharmākara—the bodhisattva of the distant past who became Amida—as the "true subjectivity" of all sentient beings that emerges through the act of entrusting (and later, as the *ālaya* consciousness described in Yogācāra Buddhist texts). Kaneko then drew upon the Western philosophical concept of "forms" or "ideas" (*kannen* 観念) to reinterpret the Pure Land as the eternal, ideal realm providing the invisible basis for this mundane world, a realm accessible through the experience of awakening (*jikaku* 自覚). Thus, it was left for Yasuda to move beyond such doctrinal questions to the issue of Shin Buddhist practice. His writings present a comprehensive picture of demythologized Shin doctrine—Amida Buddha as "one and the same with human beings" (pp. 59, 119); bodhisattvas as ordinary human beings who have recovered awareness of their original nature (p. 91); transmigration as the state of having forgotten one's true self (p. 108); and the Pure Land as the underlying reality of this world accessible in the present (pp. 79, 109–12)—but Yasuda's primary goal is to explain the *nenbutsu*.

[1] Three of the book's six translated pieces appeared in *Cultivating Spirituality: A Modern Shin Buddhist Anthology*, eds. Mark L. Blum and Robert F. Rhodes (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), but significant revisions were made to the most important of these, "A Name but Not a Name Alone."

In Yasuda's explanation, the name (*myōgō* 名号) of Amida Buddha is, in one sense, a word just like any other word—a provisional, constructed, second-order representation of reality. The construction of a world of names and concepts is intrinsic to human existence and humans' discriminative thinking. In a memorable phrase, Yasuda comments, "We are like silkworms who make cocoons and who live within the cocoons we ourselves make. We do not live in a world of direct experience" (p. 69). The process of Buddhist awakening, then, involves awakening to the provisional, empty nature of words and concepts. "By understanding names as provisional, one becomes able to use names without being deluded by them" (p. 71).

As a provisional name, the name of Amida has nothing magical or inherently powerful about it. Yet it is unique among names in that it does not represent any particular object or form; rather, it represents formlessness (pp. 59, 85–86). Thus, when calling the name of Amida Buddha, Shin practitioners are not calling out to a particular being or object. Rather, they are calling out to the formless reality that lies behind the world of forms. That formless reality is the true and original nature of the world and of one's self. The practice of *nenbutsu* is the practice of bearing witness to that formless reality and one's self as an embodiment of that formless reality (p. 126). In this way, Shin practitioners transcend discriminative, dualistic thinking and "call back to interior existence itself the present existence that has been made external" (p. 109), uniting internal and external, self and Tathāgata.[2]

That the *nenbutsu* is able to effect such a transformation is due to the power of the Buddha's Primal Vow (*hongan* 本願). In the ordinary explanation, Amida Buddha made the Primal Vow to save all sentient beings, who, learning of Amida's salvific powers, are filled with a desire, or vow, to be saved through rebirth in Amida's Pure Land. Yasuda complicates this explanation by pointing to a "deep internal connection" between Amida's Vow and the vows of sentient beings, such that, ultimately, those vows are one and the same (p. 119). In fact, for Yasuda, the Primal Vow—the desire to compassionately save all beings—is "the transcendent foundation of all worlds" (p. 120), more fundamental than being itself: "It is not that there is someone who expresses a desire; rather, through desire, someone is established. We speak of the Tathāgata, of sentient beings, and again of the vari-

[2] Of course, according to Shin teachings, this process of awakening is not brought about through one's own efforts, but rather through Other Power. Thus, Yasuda also speaks of the Shin practitioner in passive terms as one who "receive[s] the call" and is "transformed" by Amida (pp. 85–86).

ous Buddhas and bodhisattvas—they are merely stages of desire that have been established on the basis of the one desire" (p. 132). That one desire—the Primal Vow—only takes form and becomes active in practitioners and in the world through the practice of the *nenbutsu*. By calling out the words "Namu Amida Butsu," practitioners give expression to the universal compassion fundamental to their own natures and to the universe itself.[3]

As Watt emphasizes, an important aspect of Yasuda's demythologizing of Pure Land Buddhism is his situating of Pure Land teachings and practices within the context of the broader Mahayana tradition. Tellingly, in the six essays translated here, Yasuda quotes Vasubandhu many more times than he does Shinran.[4] The book's first two essays do not relate specifically to Shin teachings at all; instead, they represent Yasuda's exploration of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra thought. In characteristic Mahayana terms, Yasuda argues that a lack of awareness of the empty nature of existence causes humans to remain trapped in worlds of their own mental creation (p. 36). The solution to this problem, according to Yasuda, is the practice of *nenbutsu*. Rebirth in the Pure Land through an entrusting mind (*shinjin* 信心) established through the practice of the *nenbutsu*—such is how Shin Buddhism charts the path to awakening, whereby people break through their cocoons of discriminative thinking into an awareness of reality just as it is. The name of the Buddha is so important here because humans are essentially conceptual, name-dependent beings, and it is only through a name that humans can encounter that which is prior to names.

Watt has made a valuable contribution to modern Buddhist studies with these translations of writings by Yasuda Rijin, who undoubtedly stands as one of the most creative and influential postwar Pure Land Buddhist thinkers. I highly recommend this book for all those seeking to understand modern Pure Land Buddhist thought, but with a few words of warning.

First, while Watt has done an excellent job introducing background information on the classical and modern Shin Buddhist tradition, his discussions of Yasuda's Western influences are sparse. This makes it hard to fully understand the significance of Yasuda's extensive engagement with Western philosophy and theology. In particular, I would have liked Watt to expand his discussion of Heidegger's notion of "the call to conscience" and how it

[3] For a fuller understanding of Yasuda's argument, which is based on his analysis of Amida's seventeenth, twelfth, and thirteenth vows and Shinran's commentaries on them, see the book's last essay, "Fundamental Vow, Fundamental Word."

[4] By my count, he cites Vasubandhu twenty-three times in five essays while only citing Shinran thirteen times in two essays.

may have informed Yasuda's understanding of "the calling of the name" (pp. 157, n. 51; 160, n. 18).

Second, there is an important gap in Yasuda's career left out by this volume. Two of the translated pieces come from the early 1930s while the rest come from the 1960s and 1970s. What was Yasuda writing in the intervening twenty-five years? What did he have to say about Japanese imperialism and war? Watt addresses this question only briefly (pp. 13–14), and the broader issue of Yasuda's views on Buddhist ethics could have been developed much further (see pp. 40–41).

Finally, there is the issue of Yasuda's writing style. More a preacher than a scholar, Yasuda was not a systematic thinker or writer. His train of thought can be hard to follow, particularly when his long, meandering paragraphs stretch to multiple pages in length. His writing style can perhaps best be compared to the improvisations of a jazz musician. Riffing over and over again on the same themes and experimenting with new modes of expression (including borrowed foreign expressions), Yasuda's lengthy expositions veer between plodding repetition, impenetrable contradiction, and dazzling bursts of insight. In the end, the reader is rewarded with a new appreciation of the complexities and challenges of modern Pure Land thought and practice, but one wishes Yasuda had been a better editor of his own writings. Watt has done an admirable job translating and annotating these difficult writings in an accurate and thorough manner, but I wonder whether a monograph about Yasuda's writings, or perhaps a more freely translated set of Yasuda's writings accompanied by necessary annotations, may have been more effective at revealing the vitality and relevance of Pure Land thought and practice in modern life.