

# Ippen Shōnin

YANAGI SŌETSU

## I

IPPEN SHŌNIN (1239–1289),<sup>1</sup> founder of the Ji Sect of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, lived during the latter half of the Kamakura period, at a time when Dōgen (1200–1253) and Nichiren (1222–1282) were active, and Shinran (1173–1262), in ripe old age, was still living as well. During this same period the European Middle Ages also saw a remarkable occurrence of many great religious saints, men such as St. Francis (1182–1226), St. Thomas Aquinas (1226–1272), and Meister Eckhart (1266–1329).

The first great Buddhist figure Japan produced was Prince Shōtoku (574–622). Saichō (767–822) and Kūkai (774–835), the Japanese Tendai and Shingon sect founders respectively, were men of the Heian period. In the following Fujiwara period, the greatest names are those of Jiei (912–1017) and Eshin (942–1017). These men have become great pillars of Japanese Buddhism. But it is the Kamakura period that was unquestionably the outstanding age in Japanese religious history. Perhaps it may even be said that the Buddhism prior to it was a preparation undergone for the cause of generating Kamakura Buddhism. The founders of both Rinzai and Sōtō Zen sects, the Jōdo and Jōdo Shin sects of Pure Land Buddhism, and the Nichiren sect all appeared during

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<sup>1</sup> *Shōnin* 上人 is an honorific title applied in Japan to eminent Buddhist priests. Sometimes translated as *saint*, e.g., Saint Hōnen, Saint Shinran. Trans.

this age. The Ji sect, which begins with Ippen Shōnin, was the last of the Kamakura sects to emerge.

This great and varied religious flowering left in its wake a brilliant cultural as well as religious effulgence. A time of such a number of individual sects and schools has seldom been seen in any age, whether in the East or West. It was ushered in, in great part, by Hōnen (1133–1212), the celebrated founder of the Jōdo sect.

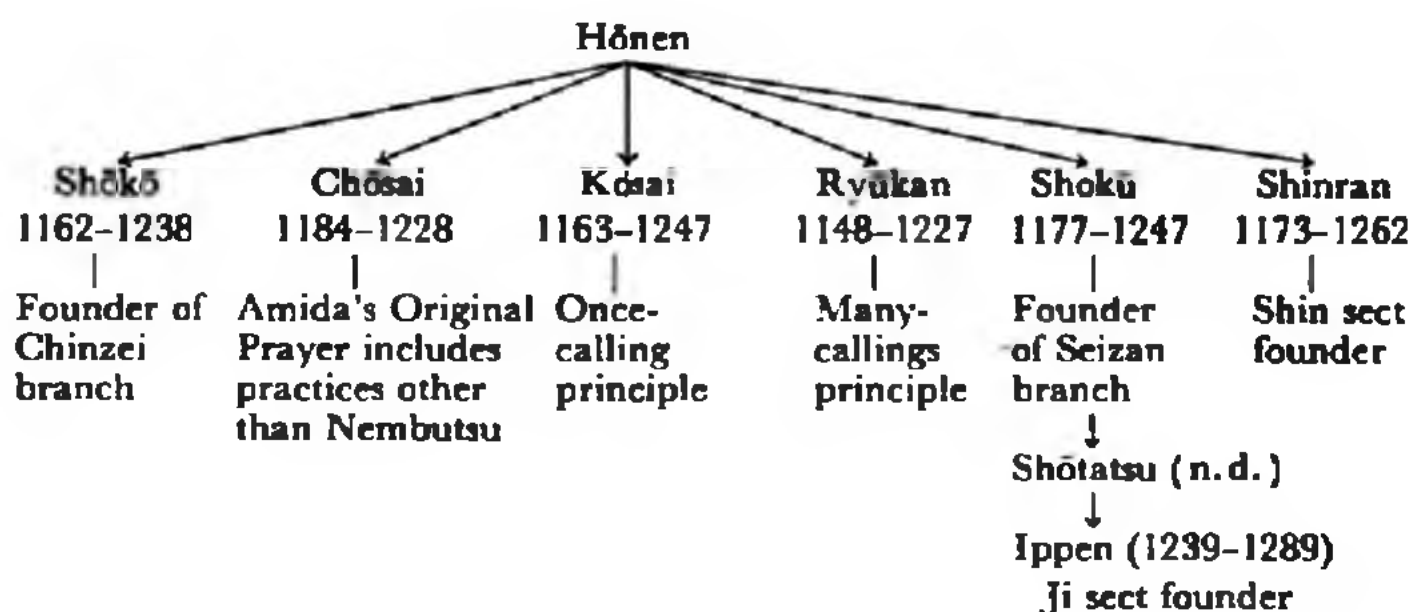
The Court Buddhism, the Buddhism of the upper classes, the Buddhism of the samurai class—in general, Buddhism as a pacifier and preserver of the state—which had hitherto prospered, was, through the Nembutsu school whose foundations were laid by Hōnen, greatly broadened and made to permeate down through the levels of society until it reached the common people.

Declaring that he would “rely solely on Shan-tao” (Jap. Zendō, 613–681), Hōnen built his entire teaching on the foundation of the T’ang dynasty Pure Land patriarch Shan-tao’s *Commentary on the Meditation Sutra* (*Kuan ching su*). But he took a Nembutsu teaching that until now had had nothing more than an ancillary function in several Buddhist sects, and raised it to the status of an independent sect, calling it the Jōdo, or Pure Land sect. His scriptural authority was the Three Pure Land Sutras, the *Larger Sutra of Eternal Life*, the *Meditation Sutra*, and the *Amida Sutra*; the object of his worship, Amida Nyorai, the incarnation of great compassion (*karunā*). He taught that the calling of Amida’s Name (*myōgō*) was the act that assured one’s rebirth in the Pure Land. This is called the “other-power” teaching, for it rejects self-power and places all trust in Amida Buddha. It is also known as the Nembutsu teaching, because it stresses singleminded repetition of the six characters of Amida’s Name.<sup>2</sup> And since this involves nothing more than the calling out of the six characters Na-mu-a-mi-da-but-su, it is referred to as the “easy path” as well. Developed for the needs of the common people, Hōnen’s Jōdo teaching may be considered a Buddhism for ordinary lay men and women.

<sup>2</sup> In Pure Land Buddhism the six syllable (or character) Name (*Myōgō* 名号), the Name of Amida Buddha, refers to the words *Namu-amida-but-su*. Although in Pure Land tradition the *Nembutsu* has more than one connotation, in the present essay it refers to invoking the Name, “*Namu-amida-but-su*.” Trans.

Various branches are discernible in the sects and schools of Japanese Buddhism, but among them the one that appears to be most Japanese in character of all, and the one that can be said to be truly indigenous to Japan, is Hōnen's Jōdo sect.

The Jōdo sect reveres Hōnen as its founder and regards his great *Senjaku bongan nembutsu shū* as its chief scripture. From Hōnen, a number of outstanding disciples followed, their lines later branching off further into several distinguishable streams.



Among these, those lines which have continued to the present day are the Chinzei and Seizan branches of the Jōdo sect, the Jōdo Shin sect, and the Ji sect. As the first two belong to the same Jōdo sect, we may say that the present Japanese Pure Land school is divided into three major bodies: the Jōdo, Jōdo Shin, and Ji sects. To discuss the teachings of these sects, it is imperative to give an account of Hōnen, Shinran, and Ippen, their respective founders.

While the transition from Hōnen to Shinran is well documented, hardly anyone has devoted himself to the matter of Ippen. Since I feel this to be manifestly unjust, I wish in the following pages to draw as much attention as possible to Ippen's unique position in the Japanese Pure Land tradition.

As the above chart shows, Ippen is Hōnen's great-grandson in the Dharma. Having inherited his teaching directly from Shōkū's disciple Shōtatsu, it is

clear that the Nembutsu of the Ji sect evolved from the Seizan branch of the Jōdo sect.<sup>3</sup>

Ippen was born the first year of the En-ō period (1239) and died the second year of Shō-ō (1289), making him at fifty the most short-lived of the great Kamakura priests. His relatively brief life is thought to have resulted from the severe physical trials he underwent during his religious practice and constant pilgrimage throughout the country.

He was born in Iyo, modern Ehime prefecture, on the island of Shikoku, and died on the seacoast of Hyōgo, near the modern port of Kobe. According to the *Rokujō engi*, which relates Ippen's life,<sup>4</sup> his family name was Ochi Kōno, and his childhood name was Michihisa. He was first drawn to Buddhism at the age of ten when death took his mother from him. It was this same sorrow that brought the youthful Hōnen, Dōgen, and Shinran to contemplate the transience of life. For each of them entrance into a life of preaching and salvation was associated with deep personal loss.

Ippen's religious practice was based on the Pure Land teaching he had learned from his teachers Kedai and Shōtatsu during the twelve years he studied under them on the island of Kyūshū. His priestly name was Chishin.<sup>5</sup> When he was twenty-five, upon receiving news of his father's death, he returned once again to his home in Iyo. The following seven years were difficult ones. Then, one day, seeing a spinning top revolve to a stop, he came to understand the true nature of transmigration and realized for the first time the meaning of life and death—as his biographer puts it, “he grasped the Buddha Dharma's meaning.” He was thirty-three years old.

He made a pilgrimage to far-off Zenkōji in present Nagano prefecture, where he procured a painting depicting Shan-tao's parable of the Two Streams and

<sup>3</sup> While he was studying under Shōtatsu, his fellow disciples included a monk named Ken'i, who later expounded the so-called “Fukakusa principle” of Nembutsu, and who had a close association with Ippen. Yanagi's note.

<sup>4</sup> *Rokujō engi* 六条縁起 is one of the most celebrated of all Japanese horizontal picture scrolls (*e-makimono*); also known as the *Ippen bijiri e* (Pictures of the wandering priest Ippen), painted by En'i 円伊 with a text by Shōkai 聖戒, one of Ippen's disciples. Trans.

<sup>5</sup> Kedai 華台; Shōtatsu 聖達; Chishin 智真.

White Path.<sup>6</sup> Upon returning to the seclusion of his native Kubono, he hung the painting in an alcove of his dwelling. One day, suddenly realizing its true meaning, he expressed his understanding in a verse:

Amida's awakening ten kalpas in the past [was for the sake of those]  
in the sentient world;

In one instant of thought rebirth in Amida's land is achieved.

[When we realize that] ten kalpas and one instant are not two,  
we realize the unborn;

[When we realize that] Amida's Land and the sentient world are  
identical, we sit ourselves down among the Bodhisattvas' great  
assemblage.

In 1275, in his thirty-seventh year, he began a country-wide pilgrimage that was to continue for sixteen years. As a bodhisattva-act which he hoped would lead people to Buddhahood, he distributed to those he met small paper amulets bearing the words "Namu-amida-butsu." Their number is said to have reached a total of 251,724.

The three Japanese Pure Land patriarchs Hōnen, Shinran, and Ippen had distinctively different modes of life. Hōnen, as a priest, lived in Buddhist temples and observed the Buddhist precepts, leading a life of purity as an example to his followers. Shinran, who said he was "neither priest nor layman," shunned temple life and dwelled in the world. Ippen renounced both the temple life and the worldly life, giving up everything to Amida's Name as a *sutebijiri*, a homeless wandering priest who rejects the world and all things in it. The very manner of their different styles of life became the respective foundations which engendered the Jōdo, Jōdo Shin, and Ji sects. Together, their combined strengths built the great edifice of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism.

That being so, why is it the Ji sect alone has been passed over by the world? One reason may be found in the uncompromising declaration of Ippen himself: "My teaching is for my lifetime only." This gains additional support from the fact that he burned all his writings just before his death, leaving behind nothing but the six syllables, Namu-amida-butsu. Other factors could

<sup>6</sup> This is found in Shan-tao's *Commentary on the Meditation Sutra* and is translated in full in the *Eastern Buddhist* (original series) Vol. III, No. 4 (1925, pp. 288-90). Trans.

be mentioned: the wandering lives led by generations of Ji sect priests after the example of their founder, which prevented them from taking up fixed residence in one temple; the pressure applied by the Tokugawa shogunate to prohibit such wandering priests, which resulted in a decrease in the number of temples and in the vitality of the priests who dwelled in them.

But the day must come when the profundity of Ippen's teaching will be recognized. Any discussion of the Japanese Nembutsu teaching must not be limited to Hōnen and Shinran alone.

## II

What standpoint among the many diverse schools of Far Eastern Buddhism does the Pure Land teaching occupy? It has many different subdivisions, but they all invariably go back to the common concept of nonduality. In fact, it is the variations in their conception of the nature of nonduality which may be said to constitute the differences between all the sects and schools of Buddhism. It is like a high mountain peak whose summit is a single spire but whose paths of ascent are diverse. Different as well are the aspects which characterize their routes. There will, moreover, be easy paths and difficult paths, gradual ascents and sudden ones, eastern approaches and western approaches. At any rate, this is one manner of considering sectarian differences.

Still, as I said, the object is the advaitistic summit. Buddhism speaks of Emptiness, Suchness, and Self-identity, and the Middle Way. It is attempting to express by such concepts the countenance of nonduality. And this is not mere speculation, for Buddhism seeks the realm of nonduality in the matters of everyday life itself. Expressions such as "unrestrictedness" and "total freedom" attempt to convey the essential functioning of nonduality. When man attains to this freedom he experiences a profound and unparalleled sense of joy and thankfulness. Realization of this nonduality is "entrance into enlightenment," "seeing Buddha," "right awakening."

Generally, there may be said to be two paths to the realization of nonduality, wisdom (*prajñā*) and love or compassion (*karuṇā*), and they are dependent on a person's character and circumstances. "Wisdom" refers to *prajñā* and "love" to *karuṇā*. These may also be described as intellectual and emotional or affective characteristics. They are merely guides used for convenience and are in no

way disparate or contradictory. They represent nothing more than overall tendencies.

Buddhism has been divided into the path of the holy man or saint, and the path of the Pure Land, the former being the path of wisdom, and the latter that of compassion. The Pure Land teaching—the teaching of Nembutsu—in general attempts to reach the summit of nonduality by following the latter path. Hence it is a course that does not stop until one has given oneself totally to Amida Buddha, who may be termed the incarnation of great compassion.

Why is it that the holy path is equated with *jiriki*, self-power, and the Pure Land path with *tariki*, other-power? Because in the former, one's reliance on one's own wisdom is predominant, and in the latter, one entrusts everything to another power in recognition of one's own incapacity. This has been illustrated by comparing the former to a person walking a land route using the power of his own legs, and the latter to a person who reaches his destination by ship, entrusting himself to the power of the wind. Why, then, the need for two ways? Because some men are endowed with native ability, and some are not. Intelligent men and ignorant men, strong men and weak, these are differences that grow out of men's characters and environments, and they must be accepted as such.

But it is the vow of the Buddha to save all sentient beings, not the chosen few alone. The weak and ignorant are not equal to the way of self-power. In the degenerate world of the latter-day Dharma<sup>7</sup> another way arose, by which it was possible for the common man to gain salvation as well. He cannot be saved on the strength of his intellect or wisdom. He must be taken up by the power of love or compassion. The Pure Land teaching is one which can effect his deliverance. Hōnen's great contribution was to elucidate this teaching especially for the ordinary people of his time. Shinran and Ippen later carried it to consummation.

What then is this Pure Land teaching? For it to prove beneficial to all men, it must above all not be too difficult. A truly "easy" path must possess a

<sup>7</sup> The *Latter-day Dharma* (*mappō* 末法) is the last of the three periods of gradual decline following the Buddha's decease; at the end of this period Buddha is said to have predicted the total disappearance of Buddhism. Trans.

*tariki* (other-power) character. The most definite expression of such an easy way appeared in the practice of Nembutsu.

The word *Nembutsu* means to "hold the Buddha in mind." Generally, this has taken two forms, contemplative Nembutsu and Nembutsu as vocal utterance. The former is a mental recollecting of the Buddha in one's mind; the latter the pronouncing of the Nembutsu formula, or, as this is called in Japanese, *sbōmyō*. Nembutsu *sbōmyō* means to repeat orally the six syllables, Na-mu-a-mi-da-bu(tsu). It is the easiest possible Nembutsu practice. Although the doctrines of the Jōdo, Shin, and Ji sects may differ in other respects, they are identical in placing their main emphasis on vocal Nembutsu; for it was their desire in this simple religious act to perfect a practice that would enable ordinary people to attain rebirth in the Pure Land. Such is the Pure Land, or other-power, teaching.

The scriptural basis for their doctrine was found mainly in the eighteenth of the forty-eight vows set forth in the *Larger Sutra of Eternal Life*:

Even if I were to attain Buddhahood, if the sentient beings of the ten quarters of this world who desire in true faith to be born in the Pure Land were to repeat the Nembutsu for even a few times, and yet not gain that rebirth, then would I not attain Supreme Enlightenment.

"I" is Dharmākara Bodhisattva, the name assumed by Amida Tathāgata during his disciplinary stage prior to attaining Buddhahood. Amida is his name upon attaining right awakening or enlightenment and becoming a Buddha. The important point in the above passage is that which advocates the practice of the vocal recitation (*sbōmyō*) or Namu-amida-butsu as the way of salvation for sentient beings—an "easy way" expressly provided for those of inferior endowment, who have only to pronounce the words. For them, there could be no more welcome teaching. Hōnen repeats over and over: Simply pronounce it. How is it the wonderful result of rebirth in the Pure Land is achieved from such an utterance?

"*Namu*" means to take refuge, *Amida* means infinite life, and *Butsu*, Buddha, an enlightened one. Infinite life is also expressed as infinite light, though infinite does not refer to any measurable length of time, for it does not belong to the province of dualistic longs and shorts, large and small.



The pronouncing of "Namu-amida-butsu" signifies two things: *Namu* is "taking refuge," the complete and utter relinquishing of self; and this involves trusting oneself to Amida Buddha because one cannot hope to attain salvation on one's own.

Hōnen called himself "Hōnen of the ten evil deeds." Shinran spoke of himself as a "*gutoku*," or bald-headed ignoramus. "A man of humble capacity" was Ippen's term of self-reference. Without this realization of one's own ordinariness and lack of ability, there can be no refuge or genuine faith in the other-power. Total, unreserved awareness that one is an ordinary, unenlightened man permits no traces of self-power. For the ordinary man, there is literally nothing else to do but to give himself up totally to the other-power. This "refuge" thus indicates a pure faith unadulterated by reasoning or traces of self-power.

The word "just" in Hōnen's advice "just pronounce it" contains profound religious meaning in itself, for unless the Nembutsu is indeed *just pronounced* it cannot be said to be devoid of self. The instant all traces of self are gone, the pronouncer touches the supreme truth. At this infinitesimal point of time he becomes one with the infinite. So when Hōnen says "just pronounce it," he is speaking of a Nembutsu that does not abide in the shadow of self-power. He called all other religious practices "auxiliary practices," as opposed to the pure and undefiled Nembutsu itself. One of Hōnen's disciples, Shōkū, referred to it as a Nembutsu of "plain wood" (*shiraki* 白木). It ceases to be a Nembutsu that "I" pronounce.

Shinran said that the Nembutsu possessed "meaningless meaning." We read in one of Ippen's Buddhist sermons,

Because they are sensible people, Shan Tao called those who abandon argumentation and repeat the Nembutsu singlemindedly, the best among men.<sup>8</sup>

Only a Nembutsu that does not abide in self is able to receive the other-power in its totality. To utter such a Nembutsu is to enter the realm of the Pure Land.

<sup>8</sup> This and all other quotations not otherwise identified are from Ippen's Buddhist sermons, the *Ippen Goroku* 一遍語錄. Trans.

A *myōkōnin*<sup>9</sup> named Tahara no Osono was once repeating the Nembutsu over and over as was her usual practice, when someone came up and began to mock her: "Are you mouthing those empty Nembutsu again?" Osono is said to have made the following reply in sincere gratitude: "If the Nembutsu of someone like me were to accrue some merit, what would happen then? You teach me that the Nembutsu is 'empty' . . . I hadn't heard a 'good friend' was in the neighborhood."<sup>10</sup>

"Empty Nembutsu"—that is the beginning and the end of the Pure Land Nembutsu teaching, which began with Hōnen and was brought to maturity in Shinran. Let us now turn and examine the course it took in the life and teaching of Ippen Shōnin.

### III

The budding of the religious mind begins early, in the insecurity man experiences on observation of the world's relentless flux. This may be stated in other terms as the desire for some constant within this flux. If the feeling of insecurity increases, self-reflection and a persisting concern over one's own actions will arise. Why am I so filled with envy and contentiousness? Why so seized by deceit and pride? On reflection, these anxieties are seen to come from man's confrontation with life and death, and from a division of self and other. Yet for the ordinary man, freedom from his evil karma is totally impossible. In which case, where can he turn? The Nembutsu practice advocated by Hōnen represents a way to resolve this problem. In his work *Senjaku shū*, Hōnen writes:

Whenever you call out (the Name of) the Buddha, the Buddha hears you forthwith. If you constantly bow in reverence to the Buddha, the Buddha sees you. . . . If sentient beings desire to see the Buddha, the Buddha immediately appears before them in answer to their thought.

<sup>9</sup> The term *myōkōnin* 妙好人 (lit., the wondrous good men) refers to especially devout Pure Land believers who practice the Nembutsu in singleminded faith. Trans.

<sup>10</sup> *Good friend*—*zenjibiki* 善知識, a general term referring to one who helps another achieve religious progress. Trans.

These words are essentially similar to those of Jesus: "Seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you."

When you pronounce the Name of the Buddha, the Buddha hears your voice—this is the salutary message of Hōnen's teaching. With the calling of the Name man is able to attain the joy of encountering Buddha and having all anxieties dispelled. That is why Pure Land Buddhism speaks of it as "the act that definitely assures rebirth in the Pure Land" (*shōjō no gyō* 正定の業). Hōnen's teaching of salvation was one that led from man to Buddha.

But with the passage of time Nembutsu thought acquired an even greater maturity. On the foundation laid by Hōnen, Shinran erected the great pillars of his own Nembutsu thought. Nembutsu means to contemplate the Buddha, to entrust oneself to the Buddha. If so, then the calling of Nembutsu does not, and moreover cannot, be dependent on one's own power. Rather than saying that man contemplates the Buddha, Shinran taught that, essentially, it is the Buddha that thinks of man: from being a practice that goes "from man to Buddha," Nembutsu must mature into an act that proceeds from Buddha to man. In Shinran's own often repeated words, "'Take refuge' [Namu] is the royal command of Amida's Original Vow summoning sentient beings." Pronouncing of the word "Namu" (take refuge), rather than meaning one is giving oneself to the Buddha, signifies the Buddha's summons to man: Take refuge in me. And it is only after hearing this call that man truly takes refuge. Without Amida Buddha's infinitely compassionate Prayer, there would be no way for ordinary people to be saved. According to Shinran, everything depends on the functioning of the Buddha, who makes his appeal to all sentient beings. For Hōnen, it was from the devotee to the Buddha; for Shinran, this process was reversed.

What, then, was Ippen's teaching? In holding that man supplicates to the Buddha, or that the Buddha beckons to man, there remains a basic man-Buddha dualism. Even when salvation is defined as the mutual interpenetration of the two, the words "man" and "Buddha" are still separate. If we make out the Buddhist Dharma to be the nondualistic view, then it is desirable for us to seek a more profound standpoint. The Name (the pronouncing of the Nembutsu), which is able to eliminate this duality, contains within it man's actual rebirth in the Pure Land. So instead of man contemplating Buddha or Buddha contemplating man, one must attain the realm where Nembutsu is

just Nembutsu, and nothing else. We may consider the following quotations from Ippen as the last word on Nembutsu teaching. A purer statement could not be made.

At the instant of each calling of the Name, the Nembutsu recites the Nembutsu.

In the same way, the hearing of the Name is not man's hearing, neither is it the Buddha making man hear it.

The Name hears the Name; there is nothing to be heard apart from the Name . . . You must know it as the Name that does not allow of other thoughts.

For Ippen, the words "Namu-amida-butsu" do not indicate the interpenetration of *man* who gives himself with the word "Namu," and the *Buddha* who receives him with the words "Amida-butsu." "Namu" and "Amida-butsu" are self-identical, and the meaning of the Name lies hidden in what is prior to its separation into two words. Consequently, rebirth cannot be said to exist apart from this unbifurcated state.

"It is simply that 'Namu-amida-butsu' gains rebirth . . ."

"Originally, the Name itself is the rebirth."

Ippen's profundity lies in pointing out that it is not *man's* birth in the Pure Land but the birth of the Name. In the Name, not even the shadows of the two words "Buddha" and "man" leave any trace. This is what he means when he speaks of the Name being single and solitary. Over the pillars set in place by Shinran, Ippen thus placed the ridgepole and roofing, bringing to completion the great Nembutsu edifice of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism.

One can also trace the transition from Hōnen to Shinran to Ippen in their respective interpretations of the word *Na-mu* (in Japanese, *ki-myō* 帰命). Hōnen took them as meaning that man entrusts (*ki*) his life (*myō*) to the Buddha. Shinran regarded "Namu" as the Buddha directing (*myō*) man to entrust (*ki*) himself to Buddha. For Ippen, it meant to entrust or return oneself (*ki*) to the nondualistic life-source (*myō*) that is prior to division into man and Buddha.

A similar development appears in their concepts of merit-transference

(*ekō* 廻向). The words *sbisbin ekō* 至心廻向, which appear in the *Sutra of Eternal Life*, were generally thought to refer to man transferring the merit he had accumulated in religious practice to the Buddha. That is how Hōnen understood it. But Shinran went against the normal interpretation and dared to understand it as merit-transference made by the absolute mind (*sbisbin*) of Amida, viewing all from the standpoint of Amida Buddha. It was of course his personal religious experience which led him to read it in this way. Pure Land thought thus achieved another forward step, with the act of merit-transference advancing into that of “no merit-transference” (*fu-ekō* 不廻向). If the transference is from man, traces of self-power must be said to remain. But if everything comes from the side of the Buddha, then for man it is not transference of merit. This interpretation shows Shinran’s desire to encompass everything within the working of Amida’s other-power.

But is this indeed the final, deepest significance in merit-transference? In the Buddha’s act of merit-transference to man there still remains a distinction between man and Buddha. Both man and Buddha must be taken up within the dynamic working of merit-transference, which has been described as knowable “only between Buddha and Buddha,” or as a “communication between one Buddha and another.” The words of Ippen quoted previously about “Nembutsu doing Nembutsu” constitute perhaps the ultimate response. He says:

“Though you put your mind into the Name, you must not put the Name into your mind.”

“Though you are ruled by the Name, you must not influence the Name . . . The Name does not depend upon meaning; it is a Dharma independent of man’s mind.”

“There is no meaning in the Name of Amida. *Namu-amida-butsu*.”

Therefore,

“You may regard as gibberish all words other than *Nembutsu*.”

“Do not be preoccupied with knowledge about the *Nembutsu*.”

“Apart from this present *Namu-amida-butsu* do not cherish any distinction of before and after.”

Here, thoughts about merit-transference versus no merit-transference vanish, leaving only the aspect of merit-transference transferring its merit and Buddha face to face with Buddha.

Therefore, the "Namu" of the *ki* and the "Amida Butsu" that is the Dharma truth (*bō*) which is his refuge, are originally one. In a work entitled the *Kongōbōkaibiketsusō*<sup>11</sup> we read: "Within the Nembutsu there is never devotee and Dharma. What is there to call a practitioner? What to call Dharma?" The concept of oneness of *ki* and *bō* is the philosophic principle of the Pure Land school. The Chinzei branch of the Jōdo sect, the Shin sect, and the Ji sect all succeeded to this tradition. Ippen says: "Since *ki* and *bō* are the nondual Name, apart from Namu-amida-butsu neither subject nor object has any place to turn."

In the *Anjinketsujōsō*,<sup>12</sup> we find: "Though we pronounce Namu-amida-butsu, we do not thereby draw nearer the Buddha-body; the virtue of enlightenment as the oneness of *ki* and *bō* appears in the act of sentient beings reciting the Nembutsu." "Returning to the Namu-amida-butsu of the *ki-bō* oneness, is called Nembutsu samadhi."

When he speaks of the "oneness of *ki* and *bō*", he is of course referring to the teaching of nonduality.

#### IV

All Nembutsu schools advocate the pronouncing of the Name. Prior to the establishment of the distinct and separate sects of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, the Nembutsu was included among the practices of various sects in China and Japan. From early times, for example, the so-called *jōgyō zammai* 常行三昧, the "samadhi of constant practice," was a prominent discipline, the "constant practice" referred to being that of Nembutsu. After all, what is wanted is Nembutsu in the normal activities of daily life, rising with Nembutsu and retiring at day's end with Nembutsu as well. This is a reason some

<sup>11</sup> *Kongōbōkaibiketsusō* 金剛宝戒法决掌—a work dating from the mid-Kamakura period, attributed in later times to Hōnen, but this is doubtful. Trans.

<sup>12</sup> *Anjinketsujōsō* 安心决定抄. A work which contains one of the clearest expositions of the other-power teaching, and which has been very influential in the Shin sect especially. It has been attributed to Ken'i, one of Ippen's fellow disciples. Trans.

Nembutsu followers make it a practice to intone a constant Nembutsu, up to tens of thousands of times each day. There is a Jōdo sect temple in Kyoto known popularly as the "Hyakumanben" ("One Million Nembutsu Repetitions"), which shows the inseparable role the actual *practice* of Nembutsu has played in the Japanese Pure Land schools. In this temple there is a great rosary (also called Hyakumanben). Devotees sit around in a large circle and take a section of the rosary and pass the beads through their hands, reciting the Nembutsu as they count them off one by one. In the Pure Land tradition such practices are called Ta-nembutsu 多念仏, many Nembutsu callings, in which large numbers of repetitions are preferred. It was one of Hōnen's disciples, Ryūkan Risshi, who made the principle of many repetitions a matter of Pure Land doctrine.

But it is not that there is merit or virtue in great amounts of Nembutsu. Ta-nembutsu means nothing more than this: if one spends all one's time in Nembutsu, it leads naturally to many repetitions. Hence even a single repetition, if it is uttered in sincerity and purity, in accord with ultimate reality, is an assurance of rebirth in the Pure Land. Even the Pure Land sutras speak of repeating the Nembutsu "up to ten" times, and "down to" one time. The idea thus developed of a "mind pacified" (*anjin* 安心) through "faith" being more profound than Nembutsu as "practice." This notion is known as the *ichinen-gi* (一念義) or "principle of one calling." It derives from another of Hōnen's disciples, Kōsai, and expresses even the uselessness of many Nembutsu repetitions.

But this view was expelled from the Jōdo sect as heretical; and understandably so, for the idea that a single calling of Nembutsu is enough is hardly in keeping with the orthodox Jōdo position of a more or less continual Nembutsu. Naturally, Hōnen, the founder of the sect, advocated many repetitions in terms of practice. He said: "Of the practices for Pure Land rebirth, Nembutsu is foremost."

Shinran, however, put greater emphasis on "faith" than on "practice," and held that the practice for attaining rebirth in the Pure Land was rooted in the devotee's faith. Hence he valued the *quality* of the single repetition over the *quantity* of many. The story, which first appeared in Shinran's 13th-century "biography," the *Godenshō*, in which Shinran's master Hōnen is said to have

upheld the position of faith over that of practice, is surely historically inaccurate. Pure Land tradition distinguishes two general branches of Pure Land teaching, one which emphasizes Nembutsu practice (*kigyō-ba* 起行派), and one which stresses faith (*anjin-ba* 安心派). The Jōdo sect belongs to the former group, and the Shin sect to the latter.

Therefore, in the Shin sect the pronouncing of the Name, rather than being regarded as an act bringing about rebirth, came to be interpreted as a Nembutsu of "thanksgiving" (*bōsha* 報謝). This is a reason for the dispute between advocates of one calling and advocates of many callings that arose within the sect from an early period. Hōnen's attitude with regard to the question was characteristically equitable and moderate:

If one pronounces the Nembutsu carelessly because of the teaching that one attains rebirth in the Pure Land by one calling of the Name or by ten callings of the Name, one's faith will hinder one's practice. If one feels uncertain about the efficacy of only one calling because of the teaching to recite the Nembutsu continuously without letup, one's practice of the Nembutsu will hinder one's faith. Believe, trusting in the efficacy of one calling, and then continue that practice throughout your life.

Viewing the Nembutsu horizontally, we have the Jōdo sect's *practice*; viewing it vertically, we have the Shin sect's *faith*. What is the Ji sect's standpoint regarding these two?

Ippen is no different from Shinran in the belief that a single Nembutsu calling can assure Pure Land rebirth. But this "one calling" is not a numerical frequency. "One calling" is something that must come into play at each and every calling. Therefore, there is a continuity of such "one callings." And this is not a matter of many callings for their own sake, nor many callings intended as recompense or thanksgiving. It is a series of single callings that arise newly and freshly at every new moment. Hence, for Ippen there was numerically neither one calling nor many callings.

He said that "for the Name there is no reckoning of one calling or ten callings." Since it is a quantity-less Nembutsu, why give rise to distinctions of one and many? One calling in itself is many callings, and vice versa.

The Jōdo sect leans predominantly to the side of many callings, placing importance on the continuity of the Nembutsu. On the other hand, the Shin



sect inclines toward the idea of one calling, with all other additional callings coming to signify merely an act of thanksgiving. The Ji sect looked to a Nembutsu beyond numerical distinctions, and thus eliminated the contradiction between one and many callings. "There should not be any distinction of before and after apart from the Namu-amida-butsu of this very moment," is how Ippen puts it. "Distinctions," of course, such as those of one calling, many callings, and thanksgiving, too. The Nembutsu must be pure and unalloyed.

Two opposing ideas concerning man's rebirth in the Pure Land exist in the Pure Land tradition, the notions of *rinjū raigō* (臨終来迎; also termed simply *raigō*) and *beizai gōjō* (平生業成; also expressed as *fu-* [no] *raigō*). The Jōdo sect is generally identified with the former concept, which holds that one is welcomed into the Pure Land by the coming of Amida and his attendant Bodhisattvas at the time of one's death. The latter, associated with the Shin sect, teaches that the act effecting Pure land rebirth is something which can be perfected in this life without waiting for the next.

The idea of deathbed salvation has its original source in the Three Pure Land Sutras, one of which, the *Amida Sutra*, states simply:

. . . that person, when about to die, will see Amida Buddha and his Bodhisattva host appear before him. And immediately after his death, with his mind undisturbed, he can be reborn into the Pure Land of Amida Buddha.

It is not difficult to imagine the ardor with which Pure Land followers embraced this idea. Its humanistic appeal was enhanced especially by the imaginative depictions of Buddhist painters such as Eshin (Genshin). Paintings attributed to him such as the Yamagoe Amida, the Coming of the 25 Bodhisattvas, and the widely esteemed Coming of the Three Honored Ones, give fine expression to the devoted faith of these followers. In a sense, birth in the Pure Land has a meaning of being received by Amida Buddha. Therefore, if we visit temples of the Jōdo sect, we find that the central figure of worship, Amida Buddha, is depicted coming toward us to welcome us into the Pure Land. Hōnen said:

Since Amida's original prayer vows to save all sinful sentient beings through the calling of the Name, when we simply pronounce the

Nembutsu in singleminded faith, there is no doubt that the coming of Amida Buddha will follow as a natural matter of course.

There being no rebirth without Amida's coming, the Jōdo sect has always held pictorial representations of this "welcome" in particular esteem.

But in the Shin sect this belief died out. The reason, as I stated before, is that the Shin sect teaches *beizei gōjō* (rebirth attained in daily life), that is, Pure Land rebirth may be assured prior to death, that the work of rebirth may be consummated in one's everyday life in this world. Why should Pure Land rebirth be attainable only at death? If one is able to establish true faith during one's lifetime, then the assurance of rebirth is attained. Therefore, if one can attain to "one thought" or "one calling" (*ichinen*, 一念) of faith, one has no need to look to the coming of Amida at the time of death. This is the Shin sect's idea of *fu-raigō* (lit., not-coming), that is, not depending on Amida's deathbed welcome. The Shin priest Zonkaku (1290–1373) writes in his work *Jōdo shin'yō sbō* 浄土真要鈔 that:

The principle of *beizei gōjō* held by followers of Shinran does not emphasize the hope of Amida and the Bodhisattvas coming to lead us to the Pure Land at death. It teaches their "not-coming," and is not wedded to the principle of "coming." *Beizei gōjō* applies only to those who encounter the Dharma during their earthly life.

And if one were to encounter the Dharma at the point of death, then one would attain rebirth at that moment. We do not say that it occurs during this life. We do not say that it occurs upon death. We say simply that when true faith is attained, rebirth is forthwith determined. Thus we say that rebirth is attained at the same time as faith (*sokutoku ōjō* 即得往生) . . .

In Shin sect temples one therefore does not find enshrined the figure of Amida coming to welcome devotees into the Pure Land. In the alteration of view regarding Pure Land rebirth from *rinjū raigō* to *beizei gōjō* we trace the path that goes from the Jōdo sect to the Shin sect. Yet the transition from "coming" to "no coming" can be said to follow in the same channel as the change from many callings to one calling, from merit-transference to no merit-transference. "No coming" does not leave the realm of dualistic thought any more than

coming does. Once again, was not Ippen the one who brought this conflict to a final stop?

The Jōdo sect formulated a view of Pure Land rebirth centered at the time of death. The Shin sect's view had to do with this life. The Ji sect saw through to the basic core of Pure Land rebirth in its view of time of death-*qua*-this life, preaching that there is no time of death that is apart from this present life; that each moment is in fact the time of death; that the coming of Amida and the Bodhisattvas occurs within this life. In a word, wherever the Nembutsu is called, there is the continual coming of the Buddha. Thus death occurs in this life and the coming of the Buddha takes place at each moment. This gives a new touch of life to the view of Amida's welcoming visitation at death that the Shin sect had forgotten, and still encompasses the idea of death and rebirth in this present life that the Jōdo sect overlooked. Or, as Ippen tells us,

“Apart from this present Nembutsu there is no time-of-death Nembutsu; it is ‘time of death’ within this present life.”

“The reciting of the Nembutsu is itself the site of Amida's coming. Know truly that the reciting of the Nembutsu is the coming of the Buddha, and you have gained absolute assurance of his coming.”

“In Namu-amida-butsu there is neither time of death nor this life . . . This present instant of Nembutsu calling is established as the time of death. Each such instant is therefore the time of death. Each such instant is Pure Land rebirth.”

The teachings of non-transference of merit (*fu-ekō*) or Amida's not-coming (*fu-raigō*) cannot be said to have fully sounded the nondualistic Buddhist Dharma. Nembutsu has no relation to temporal distinctions. “This present Nembutsu” does not allow of before or after. Therefore, in Nembutsu the difference between this life and time of death, between coming and not coming, disappears.

Honen saw Pure Land rebirth chiefly in terms of the moment of death, and Shinran saw it in this life, in a single Nembutsu uttered in true faith. But it was Ippen who came to understand Pure Land rebirth in terms of this life *qua* time of death united in the calling of the Name.

## V

Prior to the Japanese Nembutsu sects no way had existed that fully actualized the universal prayer to provide salvation for all sentient beings. In the various sects belonging to the Holy Path teaching, enlightenment was limited to the select few able to perform the austere practices. The development of the other-power sects opened the doors of the Buddha's teaching to the lesser mortals hitherto shut out.

In fact, the merit of the Pure Land teaching is primarily that it was able to equalize the differences that exist between men. Sexual distinction was swept into the background. Even women, who were said to be especially sinful, were promised expressly the salutary possibility of rebirth. Even the lowest class of courtesan could claim its benefits. Differences of social rank were done away with, as were those of wealth and poverty. The common people were welcomed together with royalty and nobility. The appearance of the Nembutsu teaching meant that each and every person was accorded the chance of attaining Pure Land rebirth. It did not matter whether one was a monk or a layman, wise or dull-witted. In fact, it preached that the total illiterate would be taken up in the Buddha's compassion even more cordially. Nor did it balk, as previous Buddhist teachings had, at the contrast separating the good and the evil. On the contrary, it declared distinctly that evil men were the true object of Amida's teaching. For the calling of Nembutsu, therefore, it makes no difference whether or not one observes the Buddhist precepts. It matters not if one is a criminal, though of course this does not mean to condone evil. Amida's compassion is first and foremost a favor or "gift" accorded to all men through the power of his vow. For the sake of the ordinary man, the other-power renders all things totally and wonderfully incomprehensible.

On this point of the grace or "favor" imparted by the Buddha (*butson* 仏恩), Pure Land teachers did nothing more than simply encourage the exclusive recitation of the Nembutsu. Still, such Nembutsu practice must be based on faith. No, faith is given even greater weight than practice. As I stated on a previous page, this is in effect the doctrinal shift that we find from Hōnen to Shinran. The great fifteenth-century Shin priest Rennyō, who succeeded to Shinran's teaching, said, "You can wrap yourself up in Nembutsu-callings seven or eight layers deep, but if you don't attain faith, rebirth is impossible."

All religion is based on faith. With the attainment of faith one is assured of drawing near to Buddha: without it, one grows remote from him. That is why faith is said to be the root of practice. The Shin school continually stresses this point.

In one sense, I do not think this view is mistaken. On the other hand, is an other-power teaching unburdened by distinctions of men's good and evil, wisdom and lack of wisdom, justified in making the line between faith and lack of faith a matter of established doctrine? Are the doors of salvation closed to those suffering people who are unable to attain to faith? Is not faith too a power that is limited to a select group? Are the blessings of Pure Land rebirth not accorded to those without faith? This very question is the ultimate one that must confront anyone who would establish a Nembutsu teaching. It was Ippen who felt compelled to give it its most profound answer.

Not only did he eliminate the distinction between good and evil, wise and dull-witted, in the face of Pure Land rebirth, he swept away differences of faith and lack of faith to boot. Latent here was the opportunity by which the other-power teaching was to progress from the Shin sect to the Ji sect.

During his wandering throughout the country distributing his Buddhist charms, Ippen once encountered a priest of one of the disciplinary schools. He held out a charm, saying, "Establish faith, repeat the Name, and accept this charm." The priest refused it, saying, "It would be wrong for me to accept it, for I have no faith in the 'one calling' . . . that I do not is something that lies beyond my power." The priest's reply was made in all sincerity. He was not equivocating. How can one honestly continue to persuade non-believers to have faith? Is it not meaningless to distribute charms to those without faith? That night, deeply troubled by such thoughts, Ippen stopped at Kumano Shrine, where Kumano Myōjin was enshrined. The Myōjin was widely believed to be the incarnation of Amida temporarily manifesting himself in the form of a Japanese *kami*. Ippen shut himself up in the shrine and prayed for some resolution to his problems. After he had fallen asleep, the Myōjin appeared to him in a dream and gave him the instruction:

O wandering priest, engaged in spreading the all-pervading Nembutsu. Why do you go about it in such a worthless way? It is not through your efforts that sentient beings are enabled to attain

rebirth. Their rebirth by means of Nembutsu is something that was determined ten kalpas ago through Amida Buddha's enlightenment. You should distribute your charms without differentiating between the faithful and the faithless, the pure and the impure.

Ippen's great joy made him shout out, "From this moment I have relinquished forever the self-satisfaction of self-power."

Man's rebirth in the Pure Land was decided once and for all at the very instant Amida attained to supreme enlightenment ten kalpas in the past. Man does not reach the Pure Land by his own power, nor can he make others attain it. Neither is rebirth such that it can be influenced by mental distinctions such as faith and non-faith, pure and impure. Were rebirth possible through man's own power, faith and purity as well would be unnecessary. Rebirth was consummated with Amida's enlightenment long ago. Man's faith is not needed to support it. So how can distinctions of good and evil, faith and lack of faith disturb Amida's original prayer? Ippen says,

A person who wearies of this world and wishes to abandon it and joyfully seek the Pure Land should not trouble over faith or lack of it, purity or impurity, sinfulness or goodness. He must simply recite *Namu-amida-butsu* in the joy of having chanced to hear of the wondrous Name of Amida.

Not to trouble over faith or lack of it, is the other-power teaching's final astonishing statement. Was it not for these very people without faith, just as they are, that Amida created his way of salvation? Pure Land rebirth is something that was accomplished with Amida's enlightenment and is not governed by anything within man's limited capability. To say that rebirth is impossible without faith fails to know fully the power of Amida Buddha. The profundity of Ippen's religious experience finally went beyond faith and lack of faith, and there discerned the full promise of Pure Land rebirth.

## VI

In the *Myōgi shingyō sbū* 明義進行集, a treatise on the Jōdo sect's doctrine and practice, the following quotation from Hōnen is recorded.

At first, in addition to doing the Nembutsu, I too used to read the *Amida Sutra* three times a day, once according to the T'ang pronunciation, once according to the Wu pronunciation, and once according to the Japanese reading. But since in effect this sutra preaches just to pronounce the Nembutsu, I have now ceased the practice of sutra-reading, and devote myself singlemindedly to the Nembutsu.

The *Amida Sutra* instructs, "Keep and maintain Amida's Name singlemindedly and without wavering." Are we to be remiss in our practice of Nembutsu for the sake of benefits sought in sutra readings? Is not the practitioner of singleminded Nembutsu the true Nembutsu devotee? This led Hōnen and his followers to the practice of a "continual" Nembutsu recited from morning till night.

In the letters of Shinran's wife Eshin-ni a similar story is related of Shinran. Shinran embarked on a plan to recite for the benefit of sentient beings the entire text of the three Pure Land sutras one thousand times. Then, recalling that there was nothing lacking in the Name by itself, he ceased reading the sutras and returned to singleminded Nembutsu practice. Later, however, when he was once feverishly ill, he is said to have babbled off what seemed words from the sutras. After the fever had run its course and he was told what had transpired, he is said to have been deeply ashamed and to have reproved himself for conceiving he should need anything other than his faith in the Nembutsu. To do away with even sutra-readings and concentrate exclusively on pronouncing the Name is the way of the Nembutsu school.

Yet in order to preach about this Nembutsu school both Hōnen and Shinran left behind them tens of thousands of written words; Hōnen has his *Senjaku bongan nembutsu sbū*, and Shinran the *Kyōgyōshinbō*. Both works employ a great many quotations from scriptural sources, and marshal logic and rhetoric for the purpose of elucidating the other-power doctrine. Why did they bequeath such voluminous literary legacies? Actually, it was simply to explain the incomprehensible mystery contained in the Name. It should be noted too that the followers of the Jōdo and Shin sects revere as their basic religious texts the above works of their respective founders.

Yet, are not these works merely in the interest of the six syllables of the

Name? No. Such verbal abundance is but a shadow before the Nembutsu. The Nembutsu should not, in the interests of any "other words," become a shadow of itself. When Ippen realized his death was approaching, he took all the religious writings in his possession as well as works he himself had written in the course of his life, and committed them to the fire. To his disciples in their profound sorrow, he spoke the brief instruction, "The religious teaching of my entire lifetime has been reduced to Namu-amida-butsu."

There the essence of the Pure Land teaching emerges in its entirety: to leave nothing at all behind and set the Name alone in bold relief. There can be nothing lacking if only we have the Name. The countless volumes spawned by the Pure Land tradition in China and Japan teach nothing beyond the pronouncing of the six syllables, Namu-amida-butsu. The Ji sect thus has no scripture for its followers to place their reliance on. For them it is the six syllables and the six syllables alone. No scripture could surpass that.

Although it is true some of Ippen's sayings have been handed down to us, they are merely the record his disciples later set to writing as they remembered it. For Ippen himself, the six syllables themselves filled all needs. Or, it would be better to say that they alone were truly valid. Nothing else could surpass them. No other words must be allowed to defile them or reduce their purity. In order to increase the efficacy of Nembutsu to the utmost, one should use the least possible number of other words, for they are all superfluous. Amida's Name alone and nothing but the Name! Has any other Pure Land teacher raised the Name to such heights? Drawing from his predecessors Hōnen and Shinran, Ippen gave the finishing touch to the Pure Land teaching. According to his recorded sayings, the *Ippen Goroku*:

Someone asked Ippen if he had made any decision about what should be done after his death. Ippen replied, "After me, make nonsuccession the way of succession . . . . I mean my 'succession' is the Nembutsu-calling of all sentient beings. Namu-amida-butsu."

Ippen is said to have once met the Zen master Hattō Kokushi (Kakushin, 1207–1298), the founder of the Fuke sect of Japanese Zen. Kakushin asked him to say something about the meaning of the words, "the arising of thought is in itself realization." Ippen responded with a poem:



IPPEN SHŌNIN

When the Name is recited  
There is no Buddha, no self,  
Only the voice of  
Namu-amida-butsu.

“You haven’t reached it yet,” Kakushin said, meaning that he thought Ippen still lacked full awakening. Ippen answered him with another verse:

When the Name is recited,  
There is no Buddha, no self.  
Namu-amida-butsu,  
Namu-amida-butsu.

When he heard this, Kakushin awarded Ippen his seal of approval as a Zen master.

Other-power, self-power, Pure Land teaching, Zen teaching—we see here again the truth of nonduality. Ippen elevated the path of Nembutsu to its ultimate summit.

Translated by Norman Waddell