

# From Henological Reduction to a Phenomenology of the “Name”

A Reinterpretation of Japanese  
Pure Land Thought

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Pure Land Thought, Jōdo Shisō (浄土思想), included in Buddhist scriptures since ancient times, was radically transformed by a Japanese priest named Hōnen-bō Genkū (法然房源空, 1133–1212), who was deeply inspired by a Chinese master, Shandao (善導; Jp. Zendō 613–681). This Chinese–Japanese transformation of Pure Land Buddhism has had considerable influence on Japanese religious history since the Medieval Period. It has also stimulated modern philosophers such as Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime to remold their philosophies. These thinkers did not abandon philosophy for the sake of religion, but intrinsically deepened their philosophies by contemplating the “logic” of salvation in Pure Land Thought.

Under the guidance of such modern interpretations, I propose in what follows to examine Hōnen’s central teachings to highlight the “logical” structure of his Pure Land Buddhism. Such an attempt will suggest that there are highly interesting convergences between Japanese religious thought and recent phenomenological arguments regarding “trace” and “the unapparent.”

First, I will interpret the characteristic simplicity of Hōnen’s teaching as a religious and philosophical radicalisation of his Buddhist thought, instead of a compromise on behalf of propagation among uneducated people. He claimed that *nenbutsu* (念仏), the recitation of *Namu Amida Butsu* (南無阿弥陀仏, total reliance upon or devotion to Amida Buddha) is the ultimate way of salvation. To put it in the extreme, this is the sole teaching of Hōnen. His concept of selection (選択) can be regarded as a consequent reduction to *nenbutsu*, which may be tentatively called henological reduction. The reason for this is that, from Hōnen’s perspective, the *nenbutsu* refers to the ultimate “One” to which everything can be reduced and from which all meaningfulness springs.

It may be said that the *nenbutsu*, in terms of its place in the overall structure, is comparable, though not equivalent, to that of the One (τὸ ἓν) in Plotinus’ philosophy. Such a comparison is too demanding to carry out here in any detail. Instead, I will use the term “henological” only to characterize the reduction to the *nenbutsu*, the ultimate One of religious life in Hōnen’s sense.

Although the *nenbutsu* can be characterized by its ultimate Oneness, it cannot be interpreted as the cosmological reason behind all forms of life. *Nenbutsu*, despite being the center of life and the world, decisively rejects hypostatization and a logic of objective identification. It admits no identical substantiality that can be objectified. Rather, it is something intrinsically fleeting or transient in the sense that it is nothing other than *reciting the name* of Amida Buddha. By reciting the name we neither come to possess the ultimate nor merge into the all-embracing absolute. What we have is only the name and never its possessor or the ultimate truth itself. In this respect, the name of Buddha in *nenbutsu* can be interpreted as a “trace” in a sense similar to that discussed by Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida.

Thus, in my view, the core of Hōnen’s thought entails first, a radical form of henological reduction, and second, a phenomenology of the “name” as commitment to a “trace” of the transcendent. In this essay, I will discuss this interpretation by examining Hōnen’s and other relevant texts. On the basis of such an interpretation I will then evaluate the possible relevance of Hōnen’s thought to contemporary philosophical thinking.

## HENOLOGICAL REDUCTION: THE RADICAL SIMPLICITY OF HŌNEN'S THOUGHT

### *Simplicity as Purpose*

As mentioned above, Hōnen's teachings are prominently characterized by extreme simplicity. He emphasizes that nothing other than the *nenbutsu* or the reciting of *Namu Amida Butsu* is required to attain salvation or birth in the Pure Land (往生). In his testamentary writing for his disciples entitled the *One Sheet Document* (一枚起請文), he states: "If I am withholding any deeper knowledge beyond the simple recitation of the *nenbutsu*, then may I lose sight of the compassion of Śākyamuni and Amida Buddha and slip through the embrace of Amida's Original Vow" (that is to say, be unable to attain salvation) (SHHZ 1955, 416). He authorizes this document with his handprint and declares, "The Jōdo school way of practice and settled mind is completely imparted here. I, Genkū, have no other teaching than this" (416; WATTS 2005, 158).

Hōnen's era was a time of transition from the Heian era to the Kamakura, and was characterized by innumerable political conflicts and natural disasters. At this time, the Buddhist teaching of *mappō* (末法), a period of decline that appeared long after Śākyamuni's death, "became not just a theory but a reality" (HATTORI 2000, 19). Many Buddhist monks propagated frightful ideas of hell, which drove people to despair. These people believed that they were unable to live up to the demands of Buddhist precepts and to attain enlightenment. Hōnen taught such ordinary people that death was nothing to be afraid of, and that it simply meant birth (rebirth) in the Pure Land, if one would but recite the *nenbutsu*. This interpretation of death would change one's entire image of life through a new image of death insofar as death represents the terminal point of life and makes it a totality. In other words, for Hōnen, life is surrounded by death, and to go into this surrounding sphere implies ultimate salvation merely by reciting the *nenbutsu*.

It is true that Hōnen's teachings were an inspiration mainly to uneducated laity such as farmers, those regarded as morally depraved such as prostitutes, and even samurai and fishermen whose professions entailed killing (something Buddhist teachings explicitly forbid). Although this fact should not be underestimated, neither should it be overlooked that

Hōnen did not expressly set out to propagate his teachings among lay people when he devised his Pure Land interpretations (see KATSUKI 1970, 187–95).<sup>1</sup> It represented his personal breakthrough to a truly universal mode of thought. It is the exceptional universality, intensity, and logical consistency of his thought itself that enabled it subsequently to spread among all levels of society—not only the lower classes and the rising samurai class, but also among certain members of the aristocracy. As Tamura Enchō has noted, Hōnen’s way of salvation, though not intended by him, implied that all people could discover the way to salvation (TAMURA 1948, 130). Thus Hōnen’s personal pursuit of salvation, carried out in a logical consistency while being strongly influenced by the Chinese master Shandao, culminated in “selection,” which led exclusively to the recitative *nenbutsu*. The simplicity of his thought is not a means of proselytizing. Rather, it is derived from the inner logic of his religious thinking and experience. Simplicity is considered a higher path to the realm of religiosity.

#### “SELECTION” AS HENOLOGICAL REDUCTION

The method for attaining such simplicity is that of “selection.” This can be interpreted as a thoroughgoing *reduction* whose structure is similar to that of the “phenomenological reduction.”

Before Hōnen posited his concept of selection, the *nenbutsu* was only one among various Buddhist practices. It was a general term for practices that included prostration, veneration, meditation (礼拝, 讚歎供養, 觀察), and so on. The recitation of the name of Amida was nothing more than a supplementary practice among others. Hōnen positioned himself against this prevailing view, selecting the recitative *nenbutsu* as the sole and ultimate principle of salvation. His was not a simple elimination of all other practices, but rather a radical conversion of attitude, similar to what Husserl calls *Einstellungsänderung*. We may characterize Hōnen’s *nenbutsu* as

1. This is in clear contrast to Nichiren, founder of the Nichiren-shū (日蓮宗). As Tamura Enchō has pointed out, the social conditions of Hōnen’s day were not of much interest to him. “It was not the state of affairs on Earth but the very human existence [or human nature] that agonized Hōnen” (TAMURA 1948, 127).

a sort of reduction, because Husserl's idea of "phenomenological reduction" entails a selection of what is evident and reliable, whose essence consists of a drastic change in perspective (TAGUCHI 2006, ch. 2).

As his starting point, Hōnen takes an ordinary view, juxtaposing various Buddhist practices, as it were, in front of us. He then leads us through the way of the "selection" to another view wherein the recitative *nenbutsu* constitutes the absolute zero point. From this exclusive viewpoint, we are able to organize all practices of Buddhism and of everyday life in a new order with the *nenbutsu* as its zero point. In this new perspective everything is centered on the *nenbutsu*. As Katsuki points out, Hōnen did not objectively classify methods of Buddhist practices; "selection" implies a subjective and practical change through which everything in Buddhism is rediscovered from a new perspective (KATSUKI 1970, 15).

In fact, Hōnen stated that "the scriptures of Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna Buddhism are all embraced in the Pure Land School" (SHHZ 261). Katō Shūichi also regarded Hōnen's selection as a "replacement of the objectivistic access to Buddhist scriptures by a subjectivist attitude," making the "internalization of faith" into a pivotal event in the history of Japanese Buddhism (KATŌ 1978, 99).

As a result of this "reduction," everything in Buddhism and everyday life is, as mentioned above, was centered on the *nenbutsu* as the ultimate One in relation to which all forms of meaningfulness are to be measured. Because of this centering on the One, the change in perspective worked out by Hōnen can tentatively be called a *henological reduction*.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE ONENESS OF THE *NENBUTSU* AND ITS MEANINGFUL MEANINGLESSNESS

The question this leave us with is, What is the meaning of that selection or reduction and the radical transformation of perspective? What is, in fact, gained through this? To our ordinary way of thinking,

2. This term also appears in DUMÉRY 1964. Although there are certain convergences with Hōnen's thought, for Duméry, the One to which all is reduced is "God."

does not the recitation of the name of Amida Buddha seem insignificant and meaningless?

The reduction to the Oneness of the *nenbutsu* effects a kind of concentration. This does not mean that those who recite the *nenbutsu* are concentrating their attention on something objective (a real thing, an image, a vision, an idea, and so on). Rather, it is a *concentration without an identical object* that can occur in the recitation.<sup>3</sup> Repeated recitation can cut off all forms of attention to an object with a distinct identity, and this in turn brings about a freedom of consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Such liberation is highly important in Buddhism, which tend to view consciousness as obsessed with all kinds of objective identities that cover the truth of the reality we live through, and as a consequence engender the sufferings of human life. Hōnen indicates that if one can recite the *nenbutsu*, there is nothing else that is significant:

If you cannot recite ascetically, you can recite while married. If you cannot recite while married, then you can recite ascetically. If you cannot recite in one place, then you can recite while traveling. If you cannot recite while traveling, then you can recite at home.... If you cannot recite alone, then you can recite with others. If you cannot recite in a group, then you can recite while living alone... everything is done only to support the *nenbutsu*. (SHHZ 462–3; cf. 640–1).

Why is the *nenbutsu* able to break the human attachment to objective identities? In my view, the reason lies in a radical *meaninglessness* of the recited *nenbutsu*, which enables an interruption in the natural flow of everyday consciousness, which is fixed on meanings and objective identities. The *nenbutsu* as the absolute One cannot be explained by reference to other things or systems because it is, in Hōnen's view, the absolute zero point in relation to which everything can be measured and evaluated. The things and activities that structure our everyday lives draw their value and their meaning from that structure. In contrast, the *nenbutsu*, as the ultimate point of reference for all meaning, cannot be measured,

3. NISHIDA stresses the non-objectivism of Pure Land Buddhism (2004, 326–7).

4. SUZUKI analyzes the break from attention to objective identities from a psychological point of view (1968, 315, 325–9).

and consequently has no meaning corresponding to its place in the value system of everyday life.<sup>5</sup>

From this viewpoint, one can say that the *nenbutsu* is “meaningless” *in the strict sense of the term*. Ordinary meaninglessness denotes the “less meaningful.” Words and phrases—even those described pejoratively as “meaningless”—are assigned their “meaning” on a scale of “more meaningful/more meaningless.” But the *nenbutsu*, after the radical transformation it brings about, becomes the absolute zero point of all scales and measures. One might as well say it transcends measurement altogether. Its meaninglessness is not a relative one often observed in everyday life, but an absolute one.

It may be said that for the one who is reciting it, the *nenbutsu* has become a primal fact that can only be accepted. This being so, the very practice of the recitation is an example of the kind of “fact that surpass all explanation” which we observe so frequently in different religions. Still, this does not make the *nenbutsu* something mysterious or just another example of the barbarous obscurantism of religion. It has its own logic and as such demonstrates a particular form of religious rationality.

Nishida Kitarō points out that “the reason of the unreasonable does not mean an irrationality, but, according to Shinran (親鸞), an understanding of the meaning of meaninglessness.”<sup>6</sup> It is not that the *nenbutsu* is simply lacking in adequate explanation; it does not, properly speaking, allow of *any* explanations. Something that is immediately comprehensive and fully explicable in a meaningful context cannot be the final support of religious faith. This is so because its meaning directly attracts our consciousness and involves it in the “mundane” system of meanings in which we are normally caught up and from which religions seek to liberate human consciousness.

Thus, the seeming meaninglessness and absurdity of the *nenbutsu* is the reverse side of its religious superiority. It refuses to be integrated into a conventional system of meanings and has no place in it. This is

5. Its place as “zero point” in the structure of the Pure Land view of the world is only apparent, since it is measured in reference to all other items whose positions are originally given in reference to the One as the zero point. Its apparent position is produced as a secondary effect of a reflexive nature.

the consequence of that selection or of the reduction to the *nenbutsu* recitation as an incomparable religious center of the world. At the same time, in Pure Land Buddhism this center does not constitute a substantial “origin” that accounts ontologically for the production of all things. It is merely a recitation of Amida’s name, which takes place as a “voice” and instantly passes us by. As Machida Sōhō puts it, it can be called a “hierophany of voice.”<sup>7</sup> It is to this non-substantiality that we turn our attention next.

## HŌNEN’S LOGIC OF RECITATION

### *The Nenbutsu as a Fleeting but Concrete Center*

I have characterized Hōnen’s “selection” of the recitative *nenbutsu* as a *henological reduction* because of its centering on the One that effects a radical transformation of perspective. This One, however, is not God or an equivalent being that is the substantial, powerful source of all beings. On the contrary, it is only a reciting “voice” that is fragile and fleeting. At the same time, it is not, of itself, something abstract but a very concrete event that can be brought about at any time and by anyone. It is a perfectly banal event that is initiated by “me,” occurring on my tongue and then vanishing. But in the repeated recitation, the “I” as the initiator of this event is absorbed into the very event itself. The *nenbutsu* is now at the center, to which “I,” though the initiator, am subordinate.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it may be said that from Hōnen’s point of view, the fleeting event of recitation becomes a reliable foundation for the religious life.

Regarding the specificity of the *nenbutsu*, its *corporeality* is a central

6. NISHIDA 2004, 353. According to NISHIDA, this “reason of the unreasonable” is “what makes reason the true One.” See also page 351.

7. MACHIDA, 1997, 123–9. “Hierophany” is a term used by Mircea ELIADE to refer to a manifestation of the sacred (1957).

8. A famous passage in Shandao’s 『法事讚』, which Hōnen quotes in his *Senchakushū*, indicates the “me” as an accusative 「人能く仏を念ずれば、仏また念じたまう」(SHHZ 326). AOKI emphasizes this point in 『善導和尚』(1940, 2). In this respect, HASE refers to the “me-voici” and the absolute passivity in Levinas (2003, 79–82).

point of discussion, but there is space here only for a brief indication. Without doubt, the recitation cannot be “purified” of its bodiliness. This is one of main reasons why the *nenbutsu* cannot be sublimated into an abstract thought, but always remains concrete.<sup>9</sup>

*The Mediation of the “Name,” or Identifying Differentiation*

Another key point to note here is that the *nenbutsu* is the recitation of the *name* of Amida Buddha, and the essential “insubstantiality” of the *nenbutsu* is also a consequence of the “name” it contains. A name cannot be independent; of necessity it points to something else. That is, it is in the nature of a name *not* to be an independent substance. A name is useless if a substance can directly appear as itself; it functions as a substitute for something substantial and acts as if it were identified with the latter. In the case of complete identification, a name loses its being as a “name,” so that we may say that the name inherently differentiates itself from the named for which it is substituted. The mediation of the name consists of *identifying differentiation* (or identifying discontinuity).

Based on this characterization of the “name,” the recitative *nenbutsu* can never be accorded a substantial, self-contained origin. It cannot be self-contained but, as Aoki Takamaro notes, functions as a *medium* through which the transcendent, namely Amida Buddha, may reach us (cf. AOKI 1943, 24). According to Pure Land Buddhism, Amida Buddha absolutely transcends this world and there is no other mediation but the “name” of Amida. “Amida” is derived from the Sanskrit words “Amitabha” and “Amitayus,” meaning “immeasurable light” and “immeasurable life” respectively. This name, which can be experienced and measured in the world, mediates us with the immeasurable with which it identifies itself in a discontinuity.

Nishida points out that the relation of “inverse correspondence” (逆対応) between the absolute and human beings is only possible through an expression of the name. It mediates between the transcendent and worldliness without reducing the former to the latter because of *identifying differentiation*, which Nishida refers to as a “continuity of discon-

9. See SUZUKI, 1968, 331; MACHIDA Sōhō, 1997, 115–18; TSUCHIYA 1975, 143–5.

tinuity or mediation in a contradictory self-identity” (NISHIDA 2004, 350).

Thus, the *name* of Buddha in Japanese Pure Land thought provided a notion of transcendence that could break the image of a closed world filled with evil without degrading the transcendent to the mundane in the process. The attempt to secure so completely self-contained an intuition of the transcendent would end up either in degrading identification of the “immeasurable” with the worldly or in forfeiting everything in the world in order to leap to another dimension believed to lie “beyond” this world. A proper *medium* would not awaken such expectations for a complete intuition. The recitation of the *name* fulfills the requirements for such mediation perfectly.

As Tanabe Hajime repeatedly emphasized in *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, Pure Land Buddhism has the crucial advantage of avoiding abstract indifference typified in mystical insight or raptured vision. It naturally realizes a concrete mediation without positing a fixed identity. He remarks that “the concept of metanoetics is characterized by its rejection of abstract non-differentiation and the concrete realization of transforming mediation” (TANABE 1986, 156). This “transforming mediation” “always transforming and always mediating; it is always brought about in action [or practice 行], not in intuition” (191).

### *The Recitation of the Name as “Trace”*

Let us now consider the possible relevance of Hōnen’s thinking to contemporary philosophical thought. Based on the preceding characterization of the *nenbutsu* as an intrinsic mediation that is free of fixation on objective identities, the recited name in Pure Land Buddhism may be associated with the concept of “trace” often discussed in contemporary philosophy, particularly in the writings of Levinas and Derrida.

Levinas argues that the transcendent “signifies as trace,” maintaining the transcendence of the transcendent (LEVINAS 1967, 198). Indeed, it may even be said that for Levinas transcendence *is* trace. (211). The transcendent never reveals itself as such, but this does not mean that it simply conceals itself behind things that appear, as if under the right conditions it could be revealed. In this sense, “trace” as transcendence

is “the presence of that which, strictly speaking, was never there, that which has always passed” (LEVINAS 1967, 201). These characterizations of “trace” seem well suited to the mediation of the “name” in Pure Land Buddhism. In this connection, we may also recall that LEVINAS emphasizes extraordinary characters of “sacred name” in his interpretation of the Talmud (1982). He notes that a “name” at the same time appears and retreats. This description also fits Amida’s name, and may lead us to illuminating comparisons of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism with the philosophy of Levinas.

Derrida also employs the term “trace” in a sense of his own. For him, “trace” is not, as is commonly thought, something derived from an originally given presence. Rather, it is a “trace” that enables presence without being its substantial origin. This follows from a careful examination of presence. We can never *have* a presence completely at hand, because what we *have* is either already a trace of the presence we seek to take hold of, or it is a “supposed presence” that has replaced the one we were set on. The same applies to the replacement presence we thought we had grasped. In trying to capture presence, we in fact lose sight of it. This means that “presence” enjoys its presence only in its disappearance or retreat, that is, in its “trace.” For Derrida, “presence” is “the trace of the trace, the trace of the erasure of the trace” (DERRIDA, 1972, 76–7).

In this way, the trace is “older” than presence and being. The trace never appears, but this does not mean that it is absent or latent. In the sense that it does not conceal itself behind the present, it “exposes” itself, but in this very “exposure” it wipes out its own presentation. For Derrida, the trace “produces itself as its own erasure... and it belongs to the trace to erase itself, to elude that which might maintain it in presence. The trace is neither perceptible nor imperceptible” (76).

This characterization of “trace” seems in many respects to fit the *nenbutsu* as we have been approaching it. The recitative *nenbutsu* appears as something present, and insofar as it can be heard and experienced as such, it seems incomparable with Derrida’s “trace.” But can we ever really grasp the *nenbutsu*? Is not the case that what we are able to grasp as *nenbutsu* is only a “trace of a trace” of the *nenbutsu*?

It may be argued that what Hōnen called *nenbutsu* and practiced as such was something that can never be taken hold of for what it is.

Through the henological reduction as a radical transformation of perspective, the *nenbutsu* manifests itself as an empty center that defies all attempts to identify it objectively or conceptually. As Hōnen emphasizes, there is nothing deeper or hidden behind the *nenbutsu*. It lies completely patent and exposed, and yet it cannot be captured as an object of consciousness. Insofar as we are involved in the practice of the recitation, our objectifying and identifying consciousness is dissolved. This may be considered an alternative way of *deconstruction*, one in which the bodily practice is of central importance.<sup>10</sup> The *nenbutsu* is a repeatedly reciting voice that cannot be seized in its actualization and whose functioning “dislocates” the systems of institutionalized experience. Seen in this way, Derrida’s words are almost a descripton of the *nenbutsu*: “Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating....”<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Hōnen’s *nenbutsu* is the result of a “selection” treated here as a “henological reduction,” not in the sense of merging into an indifferent unity. Rather, it enables a “mediation” between the worldly and the transcendent, liberating the one from its closure and opening it to the other. This follows from the uniqueness of the *nenbutsu* (and the recited “name”) which is never identifiable as a substance, but is always a “trace.” It has not been my intention to claim that Hōnen’s teaching of the *nenbutsu* can be applied as is to today’s world.<sup>12</sup> It does, however, seem to me that the measure of intensity originally attributed to Hōnen’s thought, as well as the analysis of its “logic” of salvation, can inspire

10. A similar interpretation of Buddhism in relation to Derrida’s deconstruction is suggested by LOY 1992.

11. DERRIDA 1972, 24. Later Derrida contemplated the problem of the “name” (see especially 1993), but space prohibits going into further detail here.

12. Unfortunately, the *nenbutsu* already has a rather banal meaning in modern Japan that has become such a part of ordinary usage. Therefore, it can hardly be expected to play the same role it did at the time of Hōnen.

contemporary philosophical reflection on the “mediation” of the “unapparent” and alternative attitudes to life.

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