



Mark L. Blum, *The Origins and Development of Pure Land Buddhism: A Study and Translation of Gyōnen's Jōdo Hōmon Genrushō*

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THE ONE-FASCICLE work *Jōdo hōmon genrushō* (“The Origins and Development of Pure Land Buddhism” in the translation under review) by the Kamakura period scholar-monk Gyōnen (1240–1321) is significant for two major reasons. First, it is a historical survey of the span of Pure Land Buddhist tradition written just a century after Hōnen’s establishment of Pure Land as a vital and developing school in Japan. The work presents a sympathetic view of the current understanding of the Pure Land tradition and treats the pressing issues and diverse stances of leading students of Hōnen at a point in history close to their period of activity. Following a pattern of traditional concerns, Gyōnen begins his treatise with a discussion of the scriptural basis for the Pure Land teaching (tacitly adopting Hōnen’s codification) as the *Larger, Contemplation, and Smaller Sūtras*, and Vasubandhu’s *Treatise on the Pure Land*. He chronicles the various Chinese translations and then discusses the interrelationships of these texts, pointing out the importance of Vasubandhu’s interpretation for clarifying the actual practice of the path.

In the remainder of the first half of his work, Gyōnen surveys the transmission and study of the Pure Land teaching, beginning with Śākyamuni in Rajagrha. As a historian, he adopts the framework of the “transmission across three nations” (*sangoku denzū* in an expression used by Gyōnen)—India, China, and Japan—and is concerned to identify the figures of the tradition by name and period and to clarify the significance of the more important persons and writings. Much of the text consists of brief biographies, including major writings, central doctrines, and lists of disciples.

It is perhaps the second half of *Genrushō* that is of greatest interest to present readers. There, in successive sections, Gyōnen summarizes in some detail the teachings of five disciples of Hōnen: Kōsai (identified as teaching *ichinengi* thought,

emphasizing the accord of practitioner and Buddha), Ryūkan (*tanengi*, emphasizing nembutsu recitation), Shōkū (founder of the Seizan branch of the Jōdo school), Shōkō (founder of the Chinzei branch, now the central stream of the Jōdo school), and Chōsai (known for recognizing the efficacy of various practices in addition to nembutsu). Of particular note are the relatively sustained discussions of Kōsai, including quotations from three works no longer extant, and Shōkū, who is known for his distinctive use of various sets of technical terms drawn from the tradition. These two disciples recast Hōnen's teaching on the basis of Tendai thought, emphasizing the oneness of practitioner and Buddha, and the former was eventually repudiated by Hōnen.

The second major reason for the importance of *Genrushō* is Gyōnen's stature as a broadly learned and prolific scholar-monk, accredited with more than 1200 fascicles of writings. He studied Pure Land Buddhism under Chōsai, but is known chiefly for his scholarship in Kegon doctrine and in Vinaya, serving as Vinaya Master at Tōdaiji's Kaidan-in for forty-four years. His *Hasshū kōyō*, a compendium of the teachings of eight schools of Buddhism transmitted to Japan with appendices on Zen and Jōdo, is still widely read by students of Buddhism today (see PRUDEN 1994). Gyōnen is known to have written over twenty works on Pure Land Buddhism, although only *Genrushō* survives. His evident interest in Hōnen's stream and his recognition of it as a genuine line of Buddhist transmission stands in marked contrast to the animosity of some earlier representatives of the Nara schools.

In the book under review, Mark Blum provides a heavily annotated translation of *Genrushō* together with a detailed study (140 pages) of its contents and its place in the body of Gyōnen's writings. As befits a book developed from a doctoral dissertation, it is equipped with a hefty scholarly apparatus, including not only an index, bibliographies, glossary, and appendices listing all Gyōnen's extant works and summarizing his treatment of Pure Land Buddhism in other writings, but even a facsimile of a 1814 xylograph of the original text on seventy pages. Gyōnen's work is short but is packed with names, titles, dates, and terms from the entire Buddhist tradition down to the Kamakura period, and Blum has sought to be as thorough as possible in providing annotation and bibliographic information, with references in Sanskrit, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. His book is a very welcome contribution to the small body of works on Japanese Pure Land Buddhist traditions in English.

I have one general reservation regarding the book as a whole. There appear to be two possible focuses for a major study involving *Genrushō*. Blum names them in the title of the study portion of his book, "Gyōnen and Kamakura Pure Land Buddhism" (1–141). The problem is that neither focus can be treated with any thoroughness within the limits of Blum's book, and a theme linking the two—for example, Gyōnen's understanding of the significance of the Japanese Pure Land tradition, or Pure Land doctrinal debate as viewed by a Kegon scholar-monk—proves elusive. Partly because of Gyōnen's inclusivist view of Buddhist traditions, his sanguine perception of the stability of Buddhist traditions in society (with little concern about

*mappō*), and his avoidance of polemics, it is difficult even to speculate about the nature of his interest in the topic.

Blum discusses Gyōnen as a historian attentive to the sectarian traditions, but a fuller picture of the scholar-monk and Kegon thinker would require a treatment of more than one out of hundreds of fascicles of writings. Further, even if we overlook the Pure Land figures Gyōnen fails even to mention (Blum lists Shinran, Genchi, Ippen, and Seikaku), a treatment of any of the thinkers he discusses would require attention to their own writings and not only Gyōnen's concise summary. This situation need not detract from the value of Blum's book as a meticulous reading of *Genrushō* and a consideration of Gyōnen as historian. Nevertheless, Blum's adoption of Gyōnen's title as his own ("A Fourteenth-century History of Pure Land Buddhist Tradition" might have been more accurate) highlights the question of precisely what his book is about.

As a modern scholar approaching a significant text, Blum is concerned to situate it in its historical context and to probe critically the presuppositions of its author. This seems a promising tack, given the history of persecutions of Hōnen's teaching, the widely ranging internal debate among his disciples, and Gyōnen's own status in the more traditional schools. And yet, despite much reference in Blum's book to "discourses" and "epistemes," "speech communities" and "hermeneutic paradigms," in the end we can only conclude that Gyōnen is a remarkably even-handed and painstaking historian who is generous to all the figures he treats and who can scarcely be faulted for omissions when he has covered a broad and representative range of Pure Land thought. Undoubtedly, as Blum suggests, scholarship itself was for Gyōnen a form of praxis. One almost senses frustration when Blum describes *Genrushō* as "decidedly nonpolemic," noting "the almost total lack of value judgments added to Gyōnen's description of the various doctrines" (48). Gyōnen "shows no interest in any other aspect of society" outside of Buddhist tradition (72), so that "there is no sign of the world outside the monastery in this or any of Gyōnen's works" (19). As if to make matters worse, in *Genrushō* "monk after monk is described as sagacious, insightful, diligent, and so on" (48). Only the nenbutsu *hijiri* appear to have been marginal even to Gyōnen.

Blum's book shows some signs of having been written by accretion, both on the level of sentence structure and that of content. Some information in the notes seems crucial to Blum's discussion. For example, Blum ponders the fact that Gyōnen "does not explain why he chose" the particular disciples of Hōnen that he takes up for fuller discussion (27), but in a footnote several pages before we learn that the identical list of five may be found in earlier Kamakura period writings. Thus, the real question concerns his knowledge and acceptance of the previously existing list. Terms are sometimes translated or explained variously; for example, "nonbacksliding" is also "irreversibility," and *betsui no gugan* is footnoted twice, once as a "poignant phrase in Japanese Pure Land writings" (225) and several pages earlier, more accurately, as "taken from the *Kuan-ching shu*" of Shan-tao (222). The frequent brackets in the translation appear at times excessive, at other times wanting.

“[A]mida [Buddha]” is followed by a rendering of the single term *keshin* 化身 as “the figure of the buddha incarnate in a Transformation Body” (223).

Despite Blum’s attentiveness to Gyōnen’s historical context, in his commentary and translation he seems at times to impose modern Western categories or a misplaced concreteness in a way that both limits the level of “resolution” of his translation and skews the issues Gyōnen’s subjects were most concerned with. To give one example, he explains Kōsai’s *ichinengi* as teaching an “interpretation of Hōnen’s doctrine that saw the value of practice only insofar as it led to religious experience” (211). While this may be arguable, there are two problems here. First, Kōsai defines *ichinen* 一念 as “the one thought-moment of Buddha-wisdom” that a practitioner somehow shares or accords with, but invokes no concept of “religious experience.” Thus, Gyōnen explains Kōsai’s treatment of the nature and structure of the practitioner’s realization in terms of the accord or nonduality of practitioner (believing thoughts, subject, faith), on the one hand, and Buddha (Buddha-mind, one thought-moment, power of the Vow, Buddha wisdom, object of faith), on the other. Blum, however, produces a somewhat obscure translation, perhaps because his emphasis on achieving a “religious experience” leads him to discern a process in which the Buddha inspires the practitioner’s thoughts:

When the believing thoughts (信念) of someone engaged in practice correspond to the mind of the Buddha, the mind [of that person] becomes congruent with an [associated] single thought-moment (一念) expressed in the force of the Vows issuing from the Buddha’s wisdom. Subject (the buddha-mind) and object (the sentient being) are not two. Faith and wisdom are one and the same. As these continue, thought after thought (念念), one’s Birth is assured. (212)

In Blum’s translation, Kōsai’s transcendent and transtemporal “one thought-moment of Buddha wisdom” becomes instead “an [associated] single thought-moment” in time, with the Buddha as agent (subject) acting on the practitioner (object). The original, however, chiefly concerns the nonduality of the practitioner (faith), who is subject, and Buddha’s Vow or power (object), so that if words are to be added in the final sentence, it may be clearer to say that “[the condition of nonduality] continues moment by moment.”

This leads to the second problem, which concerns the crucial issue of the relationship of utterance of the nenbutsu and realization of the one thought-moment. Blum renders *gyōja* (“practitioner”) in the first sentence as “someone engaged in practice,” thereby adding to the original the implication that in the process of reciting the nenbutsu, one’s thoughts come into accord with Buddha wisdom. Once “samadhi” has thus been attained, only faith and wisdom persist. I suspect, however, that Kōsai’s understanding of the significance of nenbutsu utterance is expressed in the final sentence of the passage rather than the first: once the oneness of practitioner and Buddha wisdom is realized, authentic nenbutsu utterance may emerge moment by moment. I give this example of the texture of Blum’s transla-

tion to suggest that those portions treating doctrinal thought in particular need to be used with caution.

Overall, this book provides an extremely helpful guide to reading *Genrushō*. We can imagine that Gyōnen might have been appreciative of the kind of attention Blum has given his work, and Blum's readers surely will be also.

#### REFERENCE

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