

The Logic of Nonduality and Absolute Affirmation Deconstructing Tendai *Hongaku* Writings

Ruben L. F. HABITO

Tendai hongaku thought has come under scrutiny and severe criticism recently on two counts, one ontological and the other socio-ethical. The ontological critique maintains that hongaku thought espouses substantialistic notions inconsistent with the teaching of early Buddhism. This article examines passages from hongaku writings and offers a reading that takes into account enlightenment practice in the Tendai tradition as the context within which these texts were written and used. Noting the role of “deconstructive disclaimers” imbedded in the text, it suggests a way of reading that can allow the contents to avoid the pitfall of substantialism.

HONGAKU SHISŌ 本覚思想, or the doctrine of originary enlightenment,¹ is a thought-movement that took shape within Japanese Tendai Buddhism and exerted a profound influence in the wider circle of Japanese thought, culture, and society. Its essential proposition is that no distinction exists between the phenomenal and the absolute, that is, between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* [*shōji soku nehan* 生死即涅槃], delusive passions and enlightenment [*bonnō soku bodai* 煩惱即菩提], and ordinary beings and Buddha [*bon soku shō* 凡即聖]).

Hongaku thought has been the subject of a recent controversy, sparked by claims from reputable scholars that it is “not Buddhist” (HAKAMAYA 1989 and 1991; MATSUMOTO 1989, 1993; see SWANSON 1989b, 1993). These critics assert that *hongaku shisō* is a heterodox set

¹ Here I depart from some of my own previous articles (1991a, 1991b, 1991c) in rendering *hon* 本 in the term *hongaku* 本覚 with the awkward but less limiting English term “originary.” The particular disadvantages of terms such as “innate” or “inherent” or “original” have been noted (see SWANSON 1987, p. 74), and “originary” would seem to encompass the meanings of these terms in a way that need not carry their limited nuances. The term also implies a dimension that cuts across time and space and that embraces the affirmation of the here-and-now.

of ideas deeply influenced by indigenous Japanese elements—including a kind of naturalism and pragmatic this-worldliness—that for centuries has tainted much of what has passed for ‘Japanese Buddhism.’ They maintain that *hongaku shisō*, with the attitudes and worldviews related to it, must be repudiated if we are to return to the “pure” form of Buddhism taught by Śākyamuni.²

The criticism of *hongaku shisō* has been multipronged, but for purposes of convenience it can be classified into an ontological critique and a socio-ethical critique. The ontological critique holds that *hongaku* thought is non-Buddhist because it is based upon a substantialistic conception—a Brahmanical philosophical view that Śākyamuni disclaimed and that the orthodox early Buddhists guarded against. Nor does this critique confine itself to the Japanese Tendai concept of *hongaku*: its precursors, the Indian Mahāyāna notion of *tathāgatagarbha* and the Chinese “Buddha nature,” plus many related concepts from the sutras and commentaries, are similarly “exposed” as substantialist and thus incompatible with the basic Buddhist view of *anātman*.³

The socioethical critique maintains that *hongaku* thought has led to a pernicious tendency in Japanese Buddhism to engage in what might be called *aku-byōdō* 悪平等 (evil equalization). This is the tendency to use the *hongaku* doctrine of nondistinction in a way that legitimizes historically conditioned attitudes and structures of discrimination against certain sectors of Japanese society (mainly, but not exclusively, descendants of the medieval outcaste group known as the *burakumin* 部落民; HAKAMAYA 1989, pp. 134–58). The socioethical critique also attacks the militaristic and nationalistic stance taken by prominent Buddhist leaders and intellectuals during World War II, attributing this failure in ethical judgment to the influence of a doctrine that conflates the absolute with historical reality. The critics see the same nationalistic forces motivating the actions and words of certain contemporary intellectual and political leaders (HAKAMAYA 1990, pp. 47–92.) Another prong of this critique points to the historical role of *hongaku* thought as an ideological buttress for the powerful politico-religious establishment that controlled the life of the masses and maintained a rigid and oppressive hierarchical structure during the medieval period.⁴

² The three basic elements of this “pure” form of Buddhism as described by HAKAMAYA (1989, pp. 9–10) are: the law of causation (*pratītya-samutpāda*), the standpoint of *anātman*, and a view of reality informed by faith (*śraddhā*) and wisdom (*prajñā*). See SWANSON 1992, pp. 126–28.

³ MATSUMOTO coined the term *dhātu-vāda* to describe this substantialistic viewpoint, seeing it as a corollary view to the heretical *ātma-vāda* (1989, pp. 1–9).

⁴ See KURODA 1975 and 1990. On the basis on his study of actual documents of the period,

The recent controversy surrounding *hongaku* thought and its role in the formation of Japanese religion and culture has made it necessary to map out with greater precision the historical parameters of this thought-movement and the set of ideas it espouses, and to clarify the meaning of the various texts identified with it. This paper is one modest contribution in this direction.

Texts belonging to the *hongaku* tradition abound in statements that negate the conventional duality between concepts normally in polar opposition, like the notions of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.⁵ We will examine certain *hongaku* texts in an attempt to understand the logic of nonduality and absolute affirmation that they present.⁶ Then, focusing on the ontological critiques of *hongaku shisō*, we will offer some reflections relating to the social and religious role of *hongaku* thought in Japan.

Birth-death and Nirvāṇa: The Hongaku Logic of Nonduality

The negation of dualities is a recurrent theme not only in Tendai *hongaku* thought but in Mahāyāna Buddhism as a whole. Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamika treatises built on this theme, and the various philosophical schools and systems that later arose in China, Tibet, Korea, and Japan all developed their own individually nuanced logic of nonduality.⁷ One question that arises then is whether there is a logic of nonduality in Japanese Tendai *hongaku* thought that distinguishes it from previous traditions in Mahāyāna.⁸

Kuroda devised the term *kenmitsu taisai* 顯密体制 to denote this medieval politico-religious establishment that is ideologically supported by the conceptual framework of *hongaku shiso*. Kuroda's historical critique comes independently of and from a different angle than Hakamaya's and Matsumoto's critiques. (See also Sueki's article in this issue, pp. 3–16.)

⁵ See TADA et al. 1973, for a handy anthology of important texts in the *hongaku* cluster. These are but a few of the many texts known to espouse Tendai *hongaku* ideas.

⁶ For a background study on different kinds of nonduality, see LOY 1988.

⁷ To offer a sweeping summary, the Mādhyamika conception of the two truths and the Yogācāra conception of the three natures can be seen as attempts to provide a logical framework for nonduality in the Buddhist tradition (HARRIS 1991). The doctrine of *tathāgatagarbha* represents an attempt to use nonduality as a basis for a system of thought (TAKASAKI 1966 and 1974; RUEGG 1969 and 1989). The T'ien-t'ai conception of the threefold truth (SWANSON 1989a) and the Hua-Yen conception of the interpenetration of part and whole (COOK 1977) are philosophical expositions of nondual standpoints.

⁸ Tamura Yoshirō presents a neat schema tracing the development of different logics of nonduality (*sōsoku-ron* 相即論) from the "fundamental logic of nonduality" (*kihonteki sōsoku-ron* 基本的相即論) found in Mādhyamika texts to the "immanent" (*naizaiteki* 內在的) logic of nonduality of *tathāgatagarbha* thought, the "manifestational" (*kengenteiki* 顯現的) logic of nonduality in early T'ien-t'ai and Hua-yen thinkers, and finally the "actualized" (*kenzaiteki* 顯在的) logic of nonduality found in *hongaku* writings. This schema places the last of these as

Let us examine a passage from the *Gozu hōmon yōsan* 牛頭法門要纂, a text dated to the late twelfth century (TAMURA 1973, p. 523).

All the awakened ones are not separate from the realm of birth-death, and at the same time are separated from birth-death; they do not cling to nirvāṇa, and thus attain nirvāṇa. Having abandoned the way and its practice, they are in eternity, bliss, self, purity. The living beings of the three worlds, due to their views of birth and death, are submerged in the six realms; wishing to cut themselves off from birth and death, they do not escape birth and death; wishing to hold on to nirvāṇa, they do not attain nirvāṇa.

The effortless (*musa* 無作) birth-death is from the outset beginningless and endless. In the Perfect Teaching [of our school] the phenomenal world and emptiness fall into neither the eternalistic nor the nihilistic view. Contemplate this, and do not fear birth and death. Birth-death is originary bliss (*shōji wa moto raku nari* 生死ハ本樂ナリ). Human beings are deluded and perceive this as suffering. Remove this erroneous view at once, and you will arrive at the Buddha-land.

(TADA et al. 1973, p. 38)

The central theme of this passage—the negation of the conventional opposition between birth-death on the one hand and nirvāṇa on the other—echoes that of other Mahāyāna texts. Examples in *Prajñā-pāramitā* literature can be pointed out, such as the following:

Maitreya: If, O Lord, the Bodhisattva in the interest of others does not renounce saṃsāra, how is it that through his non-renunciation of saṃsāra he has not also renounced nirvāṇa? If the Bodhisattva has in his own interest not (completely) renounced nirvāṇa, how is it that as a result of his non-renunciation of nirvāṇa he has not also renounced saṃsāra?

The Lord: Here, Maitreya, the Bodhisattva, the great being who courses in perfect wisdom, neither discriminates saṃsāra as saṃsāra, nor nirvāṇa as nirvāṇa. When he thus does not discriminate, they, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, become exactly the same. And why? Because, when he does not discriminate saṃsāra as saṃsāra, he does not become alarmed by saṃsāra; and so, when he does not discriminate nirvāṇa as nirvāṇa, he does not fall away from nirvāṇa. Thus one should know that

the highest stage of development in Buddhist thought (see TAMURA 1973, pp. 480–83). But since it is precisely Tamura's hyperbolic claims about the place of *hongaku shisō* in the history of Buddhist thought that is now being challenged, we will not rely on his schema but will instead reexamine the textual evidence in light of the recent critiques.

for one who is established in the indiscriminate realm there can for this reason be no renunciation of saṃsāra and no renunciation of nirvāṇa.

(CONZE 1975, pp. 650–51)

The well-known verses in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* on the nonduality of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa also loom in the background:

There is no difference whatsoever between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa
 There is no difference whatsoever between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra.
 The boundary of saṃsāra is the boundary of nirvāṇa
 Between these two there is not the slightest space-in-between.

(chapter 25, verses 19, 20; see STRENG 1967, p. 217)

Needless to say, these affirmations of nonduality are presented in the context of *śūnyatā*. This of course raises the question of what the concept of *śūnyatā* signifies in the Mahāyāna tradition. Here we are indebted to the recent Buddhist scholarship that has demonstrated how the exposition of *śūnyatā* is meant to lead, not to an intellectual comprehension of the term as an ontological concept relating to ultimate reality, but to an illuminative understanding of it as a soteriological principle.⁹ To employ the classic categories of John Henry NEWMAN, the proper understanding of *śūnyatā* does not merely involve a “notional assent” but a “real assent” that transforms the subject in the very act of understanding (1947).

Thus the expositions of nonduality in many of the Mahāyāna texts from India, Tibet, and China are meant to be read in conjunction with an attempt to realize *śūnyatā*, that is, with an attempt to attain an

⁹ See STRENG 1967 for a notable study that called attention to the soteriological implications of the epistemological process involved in understanding *śūnyatā*. In this paper I am adapting Streng's use of this term *soteriological*, described “in a broad sense to mean ‘ultimately transforming’; and it is this transformation which is seen in terms of ‘purifying,’ ‘becoming real,’ ‘being free,’ and ‘knowing the truth’ in various traditions all over the world” (p. 171). See also HUNTINGTON (1989, p. xii):

The significance of the words and concepts used within the Mādhyamika system derives not from their supposed association with any objectively privileged vocabulary supporting a particular view of truth or reality, but from their special efficacy as instruments which may be applied in daily life to the sole purpose of eradicating the suffering caused by clinging, antipathy, and the delusion of reified thought.... The critical distinction here is between systematic philosophy, concerned with the presentation of a particular view or belief (*dr̥ṣṭi*), and edifying philosophy, engaged in strictly deconstructive activity (the Mādhyamika *prasaṅgavākyā*). The central concepts of an edifying philosophy must be ultimately abandoned when they have served the purpose for which they were designed. Such concepts are not used to express a view but *to achieve an effect*. They are a means (*upāya*).

illuminative understanding that is at the same time transformative of the one who understands. This is the common thread uniting the various Buddhist texts from ancient times to the present.

If the above standpoint is to be adopted in the reading of certain Mahāyāna texts, it follows that a “proper”¹⁰ understanding of these texts requires that one situate one’s reading in the context of Buddhist enlightenment practice, that is, in the context of a personal quest for enlightenment. This is not, of course, to dismiss other ways of reading as “improper” nor to deny the validity of other approaches for different purposes, but simply to accept the proposition that the soteriological dimension can be a decisive factor in the understanding of these works.

The implication for the present study is, needless to say, that *hongaku* texts too can be seen and hopefully better understood within the particular context of enlightenment practice. This possibility is supported by what we know of the actual situation in which *hongaku* documents were written and read. The present scholarly consensus is that the oral transmissions (*kuden* 口伝) of the Tendai tantric tradition were the matrix out of which these writings emerged. The first stage, according to Tamura, was the appearance of short note-like writings on separate pieces of paper (*kirikami-sōjō* 切紙相承); these short documents may have served as prompt-notes in the face-to-face encounters between teacher and disciple that were part of enlightenment practice. This stage, in Tamura’s opinion, continued until around the twelfth century. The next stage of documentation (from the late Heian period until the thirteenth century) involved the collection of these pieces of paper, followed by the systematization of their content (mid-thirteenth century onwards). There was then a commentarial stage (fourteenth to fifteenth centuries) in which the content was elaborated upon (TAMURA 1973, p. 479).

If, indeed, the *hongaku* texts emerged from the context of enlightenment practice and were intended not for the general public nor even for the intellectuals of the time, but for those engaged in meditative and devotional practice, it goes without saying that the true intent of the texts can only be understood if the factor of praxis is taken into account.

In the above-mentioned passage from the *Gozu hōmon yōsan*, the perception of birth-death as suffering and nirvāṇa as bliss is described as the product of delusion. It is the very yearning for nirvāṇa, mistakenly thought to transcend the realm of birth-death, that plunges

¹⁰ In the sense of the Latin *proprio*, that is, “referring to its own particular character.”

sentient beings all the more deeply into the world of suffering and prevents them from *truly* realizing nirvāṇa. The various statements in the passage work together to help the reader-practitioner recognize and overcome the erroneous view that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are separate, oppositional realities.

On one level, this standpoint of nonduality appears to be grounded on concepts highly susceptible to the charge of substantialism. For example, the terms eternity, bliss, self, and purity (*jō-raku-ga-jō* 常樂我淨)—terms first seen in sūtras and commentaries expounding the doctrine of *tathāgatagarbha* (TAKASAKI 1974)—are lined up as attributes of the mode of being of an awakened one. The frequent appearance of such terms in *hongaku* texts, and of others like “one mind” (*isshin* 一心), “suchness” (*shinnyo* 真如), and “Dharma-realm” (*hokkai* 法界), serves to confirm critics in their opinion that we are dealing with a form of *dhātu-vāda* (MATSUMOTO 1989). However, if we keep in mind the idea that the text is to be read in the context of enlightenment practice and in such a way as to lead the reader to a transformative experience of awakening, then we can see the passage as something more than a conceptual explanation based on substantialist notions.

The statement “birth-death is originary bliss” is one instance of what the critics describe as “an absolute affirmation of phenomenal reality.” Similar affirmations are found throughout *hongaku* writing, and are indeed characteristic of this entire cluster of texts. Our question is whether there is a way to read these statements that does not fall into self-contradiction or enter the trap of substantialism.

A clue can be found in the short disclaimer, “The phenomenal world and emptiness fall neither into the eternalistic nor the nihilistic view.” Immediately after this comes the pivotal statement, “Do not fear birth-death. *Birth-death is originary bliss.*” The reader-practitioner is enjoined not to look for a nirvāṇa beyond or separate from this phenomenal world of saṃsāra. “What you are looking for, what you yearn for as true Bliss, is to be found right from the start in this very world of birth-death, and nowhere else.” Birth-death, in other words, is the very field wherein the middle path that avoids the two extremes of substantialism and nihilism is attained. Neither the phenomenal world characterized by saṃsāra nor the world of emptiness identified with nirvāṇa is to be hypostatized as eternal, yet neither are they to be denied or dismissed as nothingness. Birth-death, in other words, is not to be denigrated and nirvāṇa is not to be hypostatized, and conversely, birth-death is not to be hypostatized and nirvāṇa is not to be denied (i.e., viewed simply as extinction).

We must stress here that the statement “birth-death is originary

bliss” comes after the disclaimer, “The phenomenal world and emptiness fall neither into the eternalistic nor the nihilistic view.” The reader is being cautioned not to take the statement “birth-death is originary bliss” as simply another affirmation of eternalism, that is, not to fall into the mistaken view of hypostatizing birth-death. An absolute affirmation is made, but in such a way that it cannot be confused with the extreme view of eternalism already repudiated in the disclaimer.

How, then, are we to understand this absolute affirmation? Taking the disclaimer in a straightforward way, we can say that the birth-death that is absolutely affirmed as originary bliss is no longer the birth-death that is viewed in opposition to *nirvāṇa*. The latter birth-death is the suffering of everyday experience, a reality that no human (or sentient) being can ignore or deny. In this sense, “birth-death is originary bliss” is not an unrealistic viewpoint that ignores the fact of suffering, since the “birth-death” of this affirmation is not the birth-death of suffering but the effortless (*musa* 無作) birth-death that transcends all oppositions. It is a beginningless and endless birth-death that is totally independent of linear time. Likewise, the “originary bliss” predicated on this effortless birth-death is not the *nirvāṇa* opposed to birth-death, but the *nirvāṇa* that transcends the opposition of birth-death and *nirvāṇa*, suffering and bliss.

The substantialistic nuances of such terms as “eternity,” “bliss,” “self,” and “purity” remain, of course, a problem. The same problem is found in other texts of the *tathāgatagarbha* lineage that employ these terms when describing the absolute, most notably the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga* (T #1611) and the *Ta-sheng ch’i-hsin lun* 大乘起信論 [The awakening of faith] (T #1666, #1667). It is helpful to recall in this regard that these treatises were written in part to counter the tendency to interpret *śūnyatā* from the standpoint of nihilism. In the *Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, for example, *tathāgatagarbha*, *tathāgatadhātu*, *nitya-sukha-ātma-śubhā-pāramitā* (supreme eternity, bliss, self, and purity) and other such characteristics of the *dharmakāya* in its perfected state (NAKAMURA 1962, p. 65: 20–23) are presented as “positive notions” that function as antidotes to the nihilistic view of *śūnyatā* (TAKASAKI 1966, pp. 54–57). Much the same can be said concerning the concept of one mind, the key notion that ties the *Awakening of Faith* together and another term that figures prominently in *hongaku* texts (HIRAKAWA 1973, pp. 71–80; TAKASAKI 1974, pp. 751–71).

Moreover, when *Tathāgatagarbha* treatises use notions with substantialistic nuances they accompany them with important disclaimers, indicating that the authors were aware of the problem. These disclaimers caution the reader not only against the extreme view of

nihilism when considering *śūnyatā*, but also against the equally false view of eternalism.¹¹

In other words, though a surface reading suggests that the notion of a substantial absolute is implicit in the argumentation of these texts, the disclaimers imbedded in the texts themselves can be said to *deconstruct* the substantialistic notions and bring the reader back to the matter at hand: the overcoming of the erroneous views that keep sentient beings trapped in the dualistic world, suffering in the realm of birth-death and seeking bliss in nirvāṇa.

This ruling out of both eternalism and nihilism leaves the reader-practitioner with no rational, coherent way of resolving the issue. In the above passage from the *Gozu hōmon yōsan* a “way out” of this quandary is opened through the deconstructive power of the text’s disclaimers. Thus the statement “The phenomenal world and emptiness fall into neither the eternalistic nor the nihilistic view” deconstructs the substantialist interpretations not only of the terms “eternity,” “bliss,” “self,” and “purity,” but also of the statement “birth-death is originary bliss” that follows in the next paragraph.

This disclaimer can, however, do more: it can open the practitioner to a new understanding of what the text may be conveying beyond its actual words. In giving way to the deconstructive power of the disclaimer (“neither eternalistic, neither nihilistic”), the key statement (“birth-death is originary bliss”) can serve to open a new dimension of understanding that is none other than the experience of awakening: “Remove this erroneous view, and at once you will realize the Buddha-land.”

However, the statement “birth-death is originary bliss” can also be read simply as a *proposition making an absolute affirmation* (i.e., as a statement affirming the absoluteness of birth-death as originary bliss). In this case, the discourse about absolute affirmation itself succumbs to a crucial pitfall, namely, the conceptualization of absolute affirmation. The logical difficulties inherent in such a conceptualization are easy to point out. For one, since the key terms are used in a way that goes beyond the boundaries within which they are conventionally employed—i.e., *birth-death* as the realm of suffering and *bliss* as the

¹¹ In the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, for example, the Jewel of the Dharma is described as “neither non-being nor being, nor both being and non-being together, and neither different from being nor from non-being” (NAKAMURA 1962, pp. 17–18; TAKASAKI 1966, p. 163, for a translation). This classic disclaimer, from the fourfold negation expounded in such texts as the *Madhyamaka-kārikā* (I,7) and *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (VI,1), expresses a basic Mahāyāna position. In the *Awakening of Faith* there is a noted phrase suggesting that knowledge of the ultimate (*shinnyo*, suchness) is through a process whereby “words are used to eradicate words” 因言遣言 (T #1666, 32.576a; see HIRAKAWA 1973, pp. 71–75, for commentary).

opposite of this suffering—the proposition makes no sense from a linguistic-analytic point of view. If the proposition is understood as an attempt to bring the reader beyond the parameters of normal discourse by transcending the conventional meaning of the terms involved, the preceding arguments fail to make the case and simply beg the question. Again, if one assents to the proposition that birth-death is qualified in an absolute way by the predicative notion of “originary bliss” despite experiential evidence that birth-death does indeed involve suffering, one cannot explain oneself out of the resulting conceptual contradictions. A literal acceptance of the proposition leads not to illuminative understanding but to an ontological position unwarranted by ordinary experience and by the sense of the terms involved—a more subtle form of delusion than the dualistic view the proposition was meant to deny.

Our passage from the *Gozu hōmon yōsan* thus offers a good example of the conclusions that can result from a reading that fails to go beyond the surface meaning of the words (eternity, bliss, self, purity, etc.). One can easily end up believing that what is being espoused is a substantialist absolute affirmation founded on weak premises, with contradictory implications and indefensible conclusions. But by considering the specific context in which the text is used (enlightenment practice) and examining the deconstructive function of the disclaimers imbedded in the writing, one can detect the source of the text’s latent liberative power: the “emptying” of concepts that leads to an opening of illuminative understanding.

The “logic of nonduality” in this *hongaku* passage can be described as triple-layered. The first layer involves the recognition that sentient beings are lost in dualistic thinking, despising *saṃsāra* and aspiring for *nirvāṇa*; they are sunk deep in the six realms because of their erroneous views of birth-death. The second layer involves the affirmation that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are not separate. Truly awakened ones (Buddhas) do not seek to separate themselves from *saṃsāra* “in order to” attain *nirvāṇa*, and are thus liberated from all attachments, even to *nirvāṇa*. For this precise reason they dwell in *nirvāṇa*. The third layer is the dimension opened by the disclaimer “neither eternalistic, neither nihilistic,” which denies not only that *nirvāṇa* is eternal and *saṃsāra* impermanent, but also that *nirvāṇa* is impermanent and birth-death eternal. Freed from both erroneous views by this disclaimer, and left with no logical alternative, the reader-practitioner is prepared for an absolute-affirmation-leading-to-awakening: “Birth-death is originary bliss.”

As Such—The Logic of Absolute Affirmation

Let us now examine two other passages to see if *hongaku* texts may be read in such a way that the surface meanings can be transcended.

The notion of the “three bodies of effortlessness” (*musa no sanjin* 無作三身) is one that finds frequent mention in *hongaku* texts. The following, from the *Sanjū-shi ka no kotogaki* 三十四箇事書, is but one example:

The term “the three bodies of originary effortlessness” (*honji-musa no sanjin*) usually signifies that with the first realization of the path the three bodies [of the Buddha] become the effortless three bodies. Now we say, consider carefully the term “originary effortlessness.” There is no beginning whatsoever to the three bodies. By “the three bodies of originary effortlessness,” we do not mean the three bodies that attain enlightenment upon the first realization of the path. Everything (*issai shohō* 一切諸法) is the embodiment of the three bodies, since everything is beginningless and originary. The efforts of the Buddha have nothing to do with it, nor do the efforts of asuras and heavenly beings. Everything is just as it was at the outset, and since there is nothing that is not an embodiment of the three bodies, each and every delusive thought of ours is the entirety of the wisdom of the Glorious Body. All our activity, passivity, sitting, and lying down is the embodiment of the Body of Transformation. All of our sufferings and all of the onerous tasks in this world of birth-death are the embodiment of the Dharma-body in the fullness of perfection. It is thus with sentient beings (*shōhō* 正報) as well as with the environment (*ehō* 依報). Cherry trees and plum trees, peaches and apricots and the like, the inexhaustible myriad of phenomena, are all embodiments of the body of transformation. Also, flowers and fruits and the inexhaustible variety of such things, as they grow and mature and come to be from moment to moment, are no other than the Glorious Body. Everything twisted and straight, everything that comes to be from moment to moment, is just as it is, and embodies the Dharma-body. Sentient beings as well as the environment are already the three bodies. Moreover, sentient beings *as* sentient beings are the three bodies, the environment *as* the environment is the three bodies. There is no point even in calling them “the three bodies.” Sentient beings *as such* embody all the qualities of the three bodies. The environment *as such* embodies the qualities of the three bodies.

(TADA et al. 1973, p. 173)

First, a note on the background of the key term, the “three bodies.” The notion of the threefold body of the Buddha is but one of many Buddha-body theories that developed over the long history of Mahāyāna speculative thought. These theories may be seen as attempts to address the relationship between the historical and the transhistorical, the phenomenal and the absolute, as well as between practice and enlightenment, self-oriented and other-oriented action, and wisdom and compassion (HABITO 1978, 1985, 1991a).

Japanese Tendai *hongaku* texts, as I have argued elsewhere, simply “take the pre-packed notion of the three bodies of the Buddha and other related notions, ‘cooking’ them and dealing them out in line with a particular menu, that is, the affirmation of all phenomenal reality as absolute and abiding” (HABITO 1991a, p. 59). This description remains valid, but a second look at some of the texts that discuss the three bodies—notably where the term appears in the context of the compound *musa no sanjin*—may be of interest, since it reveals something more than a naive, conceptual “affirmation of all phenomenal reality as absolute and abiding.”

The passage just quoted is a case in point. Our clue again is in the disclaimer, “There is no point even in calling them ‘the three bodies’.” The passage first makes a conceptual identification of cherry trees, etc., as embodiments of the three Buddha-bodies, then, with this disclaimer, invites the reader-practitioner to cast aside the very concept of the three bodies and simply encounter “cherry trees, plum trees, peaches and apricots and the like” *as such*. The text, in other words, overturns the initial predication of the subject “cherry trees” by “the three bodies” to present cherry trees *as* cherry trees, plum trees *as* plum trees, etc. It prompts the reader to take this as a cue and experience the awakening in which every particular event, encounter, and element is, as such, just as it is; it invites us to accept “all our activity, standing up, sitting, or lying down,” “all our sufferings and all of the onerous tasks in this world of birth-death” *as such*, and to not predicate the concept of “the three bodies of the Buddha,” or any other concept for that matter, onto these concrete particularities of our experience. It is in the very midst of these particular things *as such* that an illuminative understanding, an awakening, can take place.

The first part of the passage sets the stage for this awakening by affirming that “all our activity,” etc., is the embodiment of the Body of Transformation, that “all our sufferings,” etc., are the embodiment of the Dharma Body in the fullness of perfection. But stopping here would leave one with a mere conceptual identification or conflation of these things with the three bodies of the Buddha. To rest content

with this affirmation would be to stop with a notional assent to an apparent assertion of absolute affirmation, and thus succumb to the pitfall of essentialism. But the passage adds the crucial disclaimer and thus overturns this conceptual identification by inviting the practitioner to simply take things “as such, just as they are.”

The same kind of disclaimer is found in another passage from the *Sanjū-shi ka no kotogaki* that expounds the relationship between the realm of Buddha and the realm of sentient beings.

In the Perfect Teaching [of our school], we do not say that sentient beings are transformed and attain Buddhahood. Realize that sentient beings as such, and Buddha-realm as such, are both abiding [as they are].

(TADA et al. 1973, p. 176)

The passage earlier builds up a careful argument, backed by traditional Buddhist concepts, that affirms the nonduality of sentient beings and Buddha and the oneness of the phenomenal and the absolute. Then the disclaimer comes, rejecting the *conceptual* identification of sentient beings and Buddha. But this rejection, coming *right after* the said identification, cannot be interpreted as a mere return to the other extreme of naively denying the nonduality of sentient beings and Buddha. What this disclaimer does is deconstruct the *conceptual* absolute affirmation, and thus open the reader-practitioner to a transformative awakening experience wherein erroneous views are eliminated. In this case, “as such” functions as a turning word with a deconstructive effect.

The above passages from the *Sanjū-shi ka no kotogaki* expound the nonduality of sentient beings and Buddha in a way that first proposes arguments for the absolute identity of these two polar concepts, then at a crucial point deconstructs the argument with a disclaimer. But what we have in each case is not a passage that contradicts itself, but a carefully crafted text that, when read in the context of enlightenment practice, can serve to open the practitioner to a transformative awakening experience.

The logic of absolute affirmation in the above texts likewise exhibits a threefold layer, which can be summarized in the following manner. The first layer is the level of ordinary delusive thinking, wherein cherry trees are identified as cherry trees and not as plum trees, human beings, or hungry ghosts, much less as bodies of the Buddha. The second layer, one that we could call the level of conceptual absolutization, is where “cherry trees [and] the inexhaustible myriad of phenomena are all the embodiments of the body of transformation.” And the third, crucial layer, is the level that disclaims this conceptual affirma-

tion in order to open one anew to the fact that cherry trees are cherry trees, but with a difference. This “difference” is the realization in which “cherry trees” are absolutely affirmed *as such*. This third layer is made manifest with the “emptying of concepts” effected by the disclaimer.

These are only examples of how *hongaku* texts, though susceptible on first reading to logical misunderstandings and accusations of substantialism, may actually convey far more than the conceptual content of the terms would suggest if read within the context of enlightenment practice. The final entry in the *Sanjū-shi ka no kotogaki*, which prefaces a transmission lineage chart situating the supposed author (Kōkaku 皇覚) in the Eshin lineage, corroborates this suggestion.

This *Teaching of Thirty-four Items* is the transmission of our school, a compendium of contemplative practice (*kanjin* 観心). If this teaching is transmitted perfectly and completely, everyone will understand all the doctrines. Herein the main points of our school are made clear. It has been passed down to this stupid one (*gushin* 愚身) from teacher to disciple in a six-generation lineage. In order that it might be handed down to later disciples I manifest it here in writing, not omitting any profound teaching. May later generations of disciples find herein a looking-glass mirror. Even at the cost of one’s life one should not give this [to those unworthy]. Because it concerns the profound teaching, both teacher and disciple would fall into hell if this were to happen. But if there is someone who has the capacity to receive this teaching, and only then, at last it must be transmitted. Because this is the profound teaching that has been transmitted in our lineage, one must be very discreet, very discreet indeed. If there is no one that can be found who has the capacity to receive this, let it be buried deep beneath the walls. Those of you who are disciples of this lineage, take this intent to heart. Anyone who violates this intent is not a disciple, much less a teacher.

(TADA et al. 1973, pp. 184–85)

This entry makes it clear that the document was not meant for a general audience. It may have been intended as a “companion text” for the face-to-face teacher-disciple encounters that are part of enlightenment practice, to be given only to those “worthy ones” whose state of practice showed them capable of reading it “properly.”

In these Tendai *hongaku* documents, therefore, we are dealing with texts intended for use in the context of religious praxis. The teacher-disciple encounters that occur in this context obviously involve exchanges of meaning that cannot be recorded in written form. The

disciple is repeatedly challenged to demonstrate a grasp of the matter at hand, not only in the form of propositional statements, but also through gestures, noises, or even silence. The very manner in which these things are done is itself part and parcel of the way one “presents” one’s understanding of the text at hand. The teacher responds with words or gestures intended to deconstruct those concepts at either extreme that the disciple may still be clinging to. The teacher thereby creates a conceptual impasse that can open the disciple to awakening. It may even happen that this deconstructive disclaimer (the “turning word,” to borrow Ch’an/Zen vocabulary) is uttered in the course of the face-to-face encounter, so that no trace is left in the written text.

An understanding of the way in which these texts were used may help the prospective critic avoid taking the passages “out of context” and attempting definitive pronouncements on their content and intent. This caution about attempting definitive pronouncements applies, of course, to the present paper, which is no more than an attempt to suggest a way of reading Tendai *hongaku* texts that might not fall entirely off the mark.

Concluding Reflections

This paper has explored the possibility of reading *hongaku* texts in a way that takes into consideration the particular context of enlightenment practice out of which they may have arisen. By no means do our quite limited efforts permit conclusions that might apply to all *hongaku* texts; we can only say that further attempts along these lines may lead to a better understanding of *some* other texts as well.

This position is corroborated by evidence that the earliest texts identifiable as part of the Tendai *hongaku shisō* cluster—the loose sheets of paper known as *kirikami sōjō*—were written notes intended to supplement or supplant oral transmission in the Japanese Tendai tradition (TAMURA 1973, p. 479). A fuller understanding of the *hongaku* writings thus requires that we take into consideration the various aspects of Tendai enlightenment practice, aspects such as monastic life, contemplation (*kanjin* 觀心), individual study, and tantric ritual. Further studies of the aspect of praxis will inevitably throw new light on *hongaku shisō*, situating it in a wider context than studies (including this one) that are limited to textual, philological, and philosophical considerations.¹² It is precisely this that will make a difference in the

¹² The studies of Michael Saso on tantric rituals (see, for example, his “Kuden: The Oral

way we read some of those texts. It is indeed ironic that these texts, which emerged from the matrix of Tendai enlightenment practice, later came to be seen as having fostered laxity in practice or even as having advocated the abandonment of practice altogether. The critiques of *hongaku* thought by Dōgen (1200–1253) and Hōchibō Shōshin 宝地房証真 (a Tendai monk of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries) indicate that this cluster of texts had already come to be seen in this way over seven centuries ago (TAMURA 1984).

This reputation may not have been entirely unwarranted, of course, given the wording of some of the texts: “All the Buddhas...abandoning the path and its practice altogether, are in eternity, bliss, self, and purity” (TADA et al. 1973, p. 38); “Without our subjecting ourselves to difficult practice for innumerable kalpas, without practicing the six pāramitās, if one now, for a moment, bears in mind the thought that ‘this body of mine is suchness itself’, one becomes a Buddha and realizes the way to birth in the land of bliss” (p. 123); “If at this very moment, without making any effort at all, without casting away our lives, we simply bear in mind the thought that we are suchness itself, in an instant we become Buddha” (p. 128). This is just a random sampling of the types of statements in the Tendai *hongaku* texts that have always been difficult to defend from criticism. The very fact that such criticism was made by those like Shōshin and Dōgen who sought to re-emphasize the importance of praxis suggests that even then these texts were being read in ways divorced from their original context of enlightenment practice.

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate that in at least some texts the ontological critique—the charge of substantialism—may be avoided by taking into account the context of enlightenment practice. My hope has been to show that the sweeping attacks on *hongaku shisō* risk throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. My intent is not, however, to suggest that the baby remain unwashed, much less that we keep the bathwater. Although beyond the scope of this paper, the socio-ethical critique against *hongaku* thought calls for serious consideration.

The *hongaku* texts also provided a conceptual framework that proved eminently useful as an ideological buttress for the religio-political establishment of the time. Tendai *hongaku shisō* thus came to represent the “orthodoxy” that upheld and, conversely, was upheld by

Hermeneutics of Tendai Tantric Buddhism” in SWANSON 1987, pp. 235–46) are noteworthy in this regard, venturing into an important area that merits further exploration. On another plane, the still-developing academic field of ritual studies has much to contribute for a more well-rounded understanding of certain aspects of the *hongaku* genre.

the Buddhist establishment of the time (KURODA 1975 and 1990) But this was an “orthodoxy” divorced from “orthopraxis” (see HABITO 1991b).

The ontological critique against *hongaku shisō*, though daunting, may not be insurmountable, and certain prominent Buddhist scholars have already presented thoughtful responses in this regard.¹³ The socio-ethical critique, however, continues not only to question the role of *hongaku shisō* in Japanese culture and society, but also to challenge the entire Japanese Buddhist establishment both past and present.

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¹³ See HIRAKAWA 1990, pp. 78–96; TAKASAKI 1994, pp. 1–7; SCHMITHAUSEN 1991, pp. 53–62.

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