

The Concept of the Stage of Non-Retrogression  
(*futaiten*) in Genshin's *Amidakyō-ryakki*  
(Brief Notes on the *Amida Sūtra*)<sup>1</sup>

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# The Concept of the Stage of Non-Retrogression (*futaiten*) in Genshin's *Amidakyō-ryakki* (Brief Notes on the *Amida Sūtra*)<sup>1</sup>

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## Summary

While the doctrine of non-retrogression (*futaiten*) is a hallmark of Jōdo Shinshū, 200 years before Shinran, Genshin had already developed a unique interpretation of the stage of non-retrogression as dual benefits established by Amida Buddha. In his *Amidakyō-ryakki*, Genshin explains that, in the present life, practitioners receive the benefit of non-retrogression through hearing the Name; in the afterlife, they realize enlightenment through the virtues of the Pure Land. However, even if practitioners are assured of non-retrogression, birth in the next life is made certain only through practice. To avoid falling back into realms of suffering, Genshin recommends entrusting Amida and demonstrating faith by reciting the Name. Shinran later developed the similar idea of *genshō shōjōju* (the realization of the stage of the truly settled in this life). Similarities and differences between these two figures are explored, suggesting new ways for thinking about their methodologies and intellectual identities.

## Introduction

Although not as well known as Shinran's theory of *genshō shōjōju* 現

生正定聚 (the realization of the stage of the truly settled in this life), two hundred years earlier Genshin had already developed a similar understanding that the stage of non-retrogression (*futaiten* 不退転, Skt. *avinivartanīya*) can be realized in this life.<sup>2</sup> In his last work, the *Amidakyō-ryakki* 阿弥陀經略記 (Brief Notes on the *Amida Sūtra*, comp. 1014), Genshin employs major (non-Pure Land) Mahayana sutras, such as the *Avatamsaka* and *Prajñāpāramitā*, and commentaries related to these sutras to construct a theory of Pure Land practice that would have tremendous repercussions in later centuries: namely, that those who have heard Amida's name, sincerely aspire for birth in his Pure Land and recite the Name single-heartedly can swiftly attain the stage of non-retrogression in the present life — even without eliminating blind passions — and are assured of birth in the Pure Land in the afterlife.

In this essay, I will first briefly introduce the *Amidakyō-ryakki* and Genshin's understanding of the concept of non-retrogression in this text. I will particularly pay attention to two terms Genshin employs: *sho futai* 処不退, the “place of non-retrogression”; and *gen futai* 現不退, “the stage of non-retrogression in the present life.” I will then discuss the implications of Genshin's interpretation for faith and practice, and suggest what connections may exist between Genshin's theory and Shinran's later understanding of the same concept.

### The *Amidakyō-ryakki* and Genshin's Ideas on Non-retrogression

The *Amidakyō-ryakki* (hereafter *Ryakki*) has been largely overlooked by scholars of Japanese Buddhism. Compared to Genshin's more popular work, the *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集 (Essentials for Birth in the Pure Land, comp. 985), this text is little known and has yet to be fully examined. Here I would like to suggest that this text is extremely important for our understanding of later (Kamakura) developments in Pure Land Buddhism. The few studies of the text agree that, as it was compiled three years before Genshin died, it reflects a deep and mature understanding of the

Pure Land teaching (Jan and Ishida 1992, pp. 330-334; Hayami 1988, pp. 242-244; Takada 2002; Koyama 2002 and 2004). Moreover, it should be stressed that Genshin's understanding of the stage of non-retrogression discussed in this text is one of the most significant doctrinal contributions to the development of the Pure Land teaching in Japan.

In the introduction to the text, Genshin (942-1017) states that he compiled the *Ryakki* in 1014 (Chōwa 長和 3) at the request of a certain former Fujiwara general of the imperial guards (*shinei tōshōgun* 親衛藤將軍), who had retired and become a recluse monk on Mount Hiei, aspiring for birth in the Pure Land (*ESZ*, vol. 1, p. 381).<sup>3</sup> Genshin explains that he composed the *Ryakki* as a supplement to the *Amidakyō-giki* 阿弥陀經義記 (Chn. *Amituojingyiji*, T. 37, no. 1755), a standard commentary on the *Amidakyō* (Chn. *Amituojing*, T. 12, no. 366)<sup>4</sup> composed by Zhiyi (智顓 538-597), the founder of the Tiantai school in China (*ESZ*, vol. 1, p. 381). What is remarkable about Genshin's interpretation of the *Amidakyō* is that he often goes beyond standard Tendai understandings of the Pure Land teaching (Nagano 2000, 2002, and 2003). He ranges broadly through the Mahayana corpus, drawing on, for example, the early Mahayana *pranī-ñāpāramiatā* sutras; the *Avatamsaka sūtra*, usually associated with the Huayan school; and even a commentary written by a Chinese Faxiang monk. The significance of this is that Genshin clearly sought to go beyond Tendai boundaries, instead rooting his ideas in a broad Mahayana context. I will argue below that this methodology had a profound influence on Shinran.

Turning now to Genshin's interpretation of the concept of non-retrogression, there are two terms that he uses to explain passages in the *Amidakyō* that discuss the stage of non-retrogression. These terms are 1) *sho futai*, a term describing the Pure Land as the "place of non-retrogression"; and 2) *gen futai*, meaning that the stage on non-retrogression is achieved in the present life. While neither of these terms is original to Genshin, his interpretation of them in terms of faith and

practice would have great repercussions for the Pure Land tradition in Japan.

The term *sho futai* first appears in Genshin's explanation of a passage in the *Amidakyō* discussing the stage of non-retrogression realized in the Pure Land (*ESZ*, vol. 1, pp. 404-407). The passage of the sutra reads:

Again, Shariputra, all sentient beings born in the Land of Utmost Bliss dwell in the Stage of Non-retrogression. Many of them are in the Stage of Becoming a Buddha after One More Life. Their number is so great that it is beyond reckoning; it can only be described as innumerable, unlimited and incalculable. (Inagaki 2000, p. 356)

Genshin raises the question, why can all sentient beings who realize the stage of non-retrogression simply by born in Amida's Pure Land? (*ESZ*, vol. 1, pp. 405) Genshin answers by citing a text called the *Saihō yōketsu* 西方要決 (Chn. *Xifangyaojue*, T. 47, no. 1964) attributed to Chi 基 (632-682), the founder of the Faxiang 法相 school in China. According to the *Saihō yōketsu*, the environment of Amida's Pure Land is so excellent that there is no fear for the practitioners to retrogress from their realizations as they do in the present life. Thus, through the virtues of the Pure Land, all sentient beings can continue practicing until they completely realize the ultimate enlightenment. Therefore, Amida's Pure Land is known as the "place of non-retrogression" (*sho futai*) (*ESZ*, vol. 1, p. 406).<sup>5</sup>

Next, referring to the *Shōsan Jōdokyō* 稱讚淨土經 (Chn. *Chengzanjing-tujing*, T. 12, no. 367), Genshin reiterates that all sentient beings, once born in the Pure Land, will certainly and swiftly attain ultimate enlightenment (*anokubodai* 阿耨菩提, Skt. *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*) without any fear of falling back into the realms of suffering again (*ESZ*, vol. 1, pp. 405 and 407). The passage of the *Shōsan Jōdokyō* reads:

Again, Shariputra, sentient beings born in that land all dwell in the Stage of Non-retrogression, and will not fall again into an evil realm, be born in a border-land or in the state of debased people or mlecchas. They always enjoy visiting pure lands of other Buddhas. With their excellent vows and practice advancing and developing every moment, they will unfailingly realize the highest, perfect Enlightenment. (Inagaki, “Amida-sutra-b”)

Genshin further explains, “Those who have heard the Buddha’s Name and aspire to be born in his Pure Land in fact already dwell in the stage of non-retrogression due to the Mahayana teaching” (*ESZ*, vol. 1, p. 406).<sup>6</sup>

This explanation of the Pure Land as the “place of non-retrogression,” while not unique to Genshin, represents a break with the standard Tendai thought of the time (Nagano 2001, p. 113). But more than the idea itself, it was Genshin’s use of a Faxiang commentary that was daring for a Tendai monk. In other words, in this part of Genshin’s explanation it is not his ideas but his methodology that is important.

The second term that Genshin uses in his explanation is *gen futai*, “non-retrogression in the present life.” The term is explained in Genshin’s discussion of the three benefits accrued by hearing the name of Amida and the title of the *Amidakyō* (*ESZ*, vol. 1, p. 425). The passage of the sutra reads:

Shariputra, why do you think this teaching is called the ‘Sutra of Protection by All Buddhas’? Shariputra, all good men and women who hear the Name of Amida Buddha expounded by all the Buddhas and the name of this sutra are protected by all the Buddhas and dwell in the Stage of Non-retrogression for realizing the highest, perfect Enlightenment. This is why, Shariputra, you should accept my words and the teachings of all the Buddhas. (Inagaki 2000, p. 359)

Genshin summarizes the three benefits for the practitioners discussed in this passage as (1) protection by all Buddhas in the present; (2) dwelling in the stage of non-retrogression in the present; and (3) attaining ultimate enlightenment in the future (*ESZ*, vol. 1, pp. 425).

Realization of the second benefit is the most crucial for Pure Land practitioners because their attainment of the stage of non-retrogression confirms their future realization of ultimate enlightenment in the Pure Land. According to the sutra, the simple acts of hearing the name of Amida and the title of the *Amidakyō* are sufficient causes for the realization of the benefit of the stage of non-retrogression. Genshin then recommends that those who have heard the name of Amida Buddha and the title of the *Amidakyō* should entrust (*kanjin shinju* 勧進信受) these virtues and demonstrate faith by reciting the Name and the sutra (*ESZ*, vol. 1, pp. 425-426).<sup>7</sup>

Again, it is not that the idea is original to Genshin—it appears already in the *Amidakyō* itself. Rather, it is the significance of this teaching for faith and practice, which Genshin next addresses, that is important for the development of the Japanese Pure Land tradition.

### The Necessity of Faith and Practice for Birth in the Pure Land

Genshin stresses the significance of faith and practice for those who have realized the stage of non-retrogression in the present life. In the next section of the *Ryakki*, he explains the significance of aspiration for birth in the Pure Land (*ganshō* 願生) discussed in the *Amidakyō* (*ESZ*, vol. 1, pp. 426-431). The passage of the sutra reads:

Shariputra, those who have already aspired, now aspire, or in the future will aspire to be born in Amida Buddha's land, all dwell in the Stage of Non-retrogression for realizing the highest, perfect Enlightenment. They have already been born, are now being born, or will be born in that land. Hence, Shariputra, good men and

women of faith should aspire to birth there. (Inagaki 2000, p. 359)

After citing the passage, Genshin introduces the three benefits of aspiring for birth in the Pure Land (*ESZ*, vol. 1, pp. 426). The three benefits are: (1) the benefit of dwelling in the stage of non-retrogression in the present (*gen futai no yakui* 現不退益); (2) the benefit of attaining birth in the Pure Land in the near future (*gonka ojo no yakui* 近果往生益); and (3) the benefit of realizing enlightenment in the distant future (*onka bodai no yakui* 遠果菩提益). In order to receive all these benefits, Genshin explains that practitioners need only experience the simple act of hearing the Buddha's name (*mon butsumyo* 聞佛名), which settles them in the stage of non-retrogression in the present life (*ESZ*, vol. 1, p. 428):<sup>8</sup>

Yet Genshin does not believe that, simply by dwelling in the stage of non-retrogression in the present life, practitioners are guaranteed swift realization of birth in the Pure Land.<sup>9</sup> He agrees that practitioners can realize the stage of non-retrogression in the present life by the virtues of hearing Amida Buddha's name and aspiring for birth in the Pure Land, even without practicing any virtuous deeds. However, he refers to the *Bodaisshiryō-ron* 菩提資糧論 (Discourse on the provisions for bodhi, Chn. *Puizhianglun*) to argue that there remains the fear of again falling into the realms of suffering unless birth in the Pure Land is settled (*ESZ*, vol. 1, pp. 428-429).<sup>10</sup>

In order to overcome the possibility of falling into the realms of suffering, Genshin, citing the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, recommends that one should be mindful of even the small virtues of the Buddha and worship him wholeheartedly for even a single thought-moment (*ESZ*, vol. 1, p. 429).<sup>11</sup> For Pure Land practitioners, Genshin more specifically recommends reciting Amida's Name and contemplating on him single-mindedly (*issnin shonen* 一心稱念), in addition to hearing the names of all Buddhas (*mon shobutsu myō* 聞諸佛名) and aspiring to be born in Amida's Pure Land (*gansho Gokuraku* 願生極樂) so that future birth in Amida's Pure



Land will be assured (*ESZ*, vol. 1, p. 430).<sup>12</sup> In conclusion, Genshin says,

One can swiftly attain the stage of non-retrogression even without eliminating a single blind passion as if one had already entered the treasure mountain. One should not leave there with empty hands. (*ESZ*, vol. 1, p. 430)<sup>13</sup>

In the Pure Land, one is guaranteed not to fall into the realms of suffering again because of the virtue of the “place of non-retrogression” (*sho futai*). But until practitioners attain birth, it is necessary for them to hold on to faith and practice, even though they have already attain the stage of non-retrogression in the present life (*gen futai*).

### Conclusion

In the *Ryakki*, Genshin explains the concept of non-retrogression discussed in the *Amidakyō* as dual benefits established by Amida Buddha. In the present life, Pure Land practitioners receive the benefit of dwelling in the stage of non-retrogression simply by hearing the name of Amida Buddha. This is *gen futai*. In the afterlife, those who attain birth in his Pure Land are guaranteed to realize ultimate enlightenment naturally and swiftly because of the virtues of the land, i.e., as the “place of non-retrogression” (*sho futai*). Genshin, however, argues that even though practitioners may dwell in the stage of non-retrogression in the present life, unless they practice in accordance with the teaching, attainment of birth in the Pure Land in the next life is not certain, and they may even fall back into realms of suffering again. In order to avoid falling back into realms of suffering, Genshin recommends that one should entrust Amida Buddha and demonstrate faith by reciting the name.

As regards our understanding of later Pure Land developments, there are two points to take away from this very brief examination of Genshin's ideas on non-retrogression. First, the protocol for salvation presented by

Genshin, with the stage of non-retrogression thought of as dual benefits of Amida Buddha, shares a great deal of similarity with Shinran's theory of *genshō shōjōju* 現生正定聚 (the realization of the stage of the truly settled in this life). While more detailed studies are needed before we can make a definitive link between Genshin and Shinran (there is no evidence that Shinran was directly influenced by Genshin's work), it is certainly possible that Shinran was introduced to Genshin's writings by Hōnen, who is known to have cited the *Ryakki* (Koyama 2004, pp. 323-325). We could in particular look at each man's emphasis on Amida's working and the significance of the entrusting mind. However, there are differences as well. Shinran's understanding of the stage of non-retrogression differs substantially from Genshin's, particularly in Shinran's emphasis on simultaneity in the process of salvation. That is, Shinran understands that practitioners become certain of their birth in the Pure Land (*ketsujō ōjō* 決定往生) at the same moment they become aware that they are dwelling in the stage of non-retrogression in the present life.<sup>14</sup> And, at the moment of death, they immediately realize ultimate buddhahood (*ōjō soku jōbutsu* 往生即成仏).<sup>15</sup> Genshin, in contrast, believes that practitioners must follow a gradual process, cultivating bodhisattva practices toward the eventual goal of enlightenment, once they have settled in the stage of non-retrogression both in this life and the afterlife.

The second point to note concerns methodology, and, by extraction, the problem of the intellectual identity of figures like Genshin and Shinran. Genshin's re-examination of fundamental Buddhist concepts, such as the stage of non-retrogression, from a broad Mahayana context should be taken as a major consideration in examining his thought and teaching. As I have shown elsewhere, this very same methodology lies at the heart of Shinran's manner of studying the Pure Land teaching (Nasu 2006). This leaves us with a fascinating question: Did Genshin and Shinran, in terms of their own thought, consider themselves to be Pure Land thinkers, or perhaps something greater—Mahayana thinkers?

## Notes

- 1 This essay is based on a paper delivered at the Twelfth Biennial Conference of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies held in 2005 at Musashino University in Tokyo, Japan. I would like to thank Rev. Koyama Masazumi for his insightful comments during the preparation of this manuscript.
- 2 The stage of non-retrogression indicates the stage at which a bodhisattva is assured of attaining enlightenment without falling back to a lower stage. There are, however, many different theories within Mahayana tradition regarding the definition and the level of bodhisattva practice at which this stage can be reached. For the details of the historical development of the concept of the stage of non-retrogression, see Igarashi 1999.
- 3 The identity of this Tendai monk and the exact date of the compilation of the text have yet to be determined. A recent study of an old manuscript of the *Ryakki* by Koyama Masazumi has shown that it was most likely written at the request of Fujiwara no Narifusa (藤原成房, 982-? [later ordained to become a Tendai monk, Sokaku 素覚, in 1002]) in the spring of 1014. See Koyama 2004, pp. 305-310.
- 4 The *Amidakyō* is a Chinese translation of the smaller *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra* which is one of the three Pure Land Sutras first identified by Hōnen, the founder of Japanese Pure Land school (Jōdo-shū 浄土宗). For an English translation of the sutra and study of the text, see Inagaki 2000.
- 5 Genshin, in his *Ōjōyōshū*, also cites the *Saihō yōketsu* in his explanation of the Pure Land as the place of non-retrogression (*sho futai*) (*ESZ*, vol. 1, p. 228).
- 6 The original text reads: 前聞佛名及発願時。皆於大乘得不退転。
- 7 It is also noteworthy that, in the previous section of the *Ryakki*, Genshin identifies the single hearted practice of recitation of the name of Amida Buddha as the cause for attaining the stage of non-retrogression by referring to the passage of the *Jūjūbibasharon* (十住毘婆沙論) of Nāgārjuna (*ESZ*, vol. 1, p. 423). The original text cited by Genshin reads: 十住毘婆沙說不退因云。阿弥陀等諸佛。及諸菩薩稱名。一心念。亦得不退転。(T. 26, no. 1521, p. 42c11-12).
- 8 Again Genshin uses unexpected sources, citing the *Avatamsaka* and *prajñāpāramitā* sutras. Genshin's citation of these reads: 華嚴經云。一得聞佛名。決定成菩提。一念発願道心。必成無上道。(T. 10, no. 279, 124a7-9) 大般若經云。一經其耳。善根力故。定得無上正等菩提。(T. 7, no. 220, p. 556a 17-18).
- 9 In previous studies on the *Ryakki* by Ishida Mizumaro, Genshin's understanding of the concept of the stage of non-retrogression in the present life

(*genshō futaiten* 現生不退轉) is discussed with simple assumption that it is identical to the concept of the settlement of birth in the Pure Land (*ketsujō ōjō* 決定往生) in the next life (Ishida 1976, p. 142; Ishida 1991, p. 453; and Ishida and Jan 1992, p. 333). However, in a recent study by Koyama Masazumi, he points out that, in the *Ryakki*, the realization of the stage of non-retrogression in the present life is not equivalent to the settlement of birth in the Pure Land in the next life (Koyama 2005, pp. 537, 539-542, and endnotes 3, 5, 6, and 8). Ishida is, I believe, right to point out Genshin's influence on Shinran's understanding of the stage of non-retrogression in the present life (Ishida 1991, p. 453). Genshin, however, in the *Ryakki*, does not identify the accomplishment of the cause for birth in the Pure Land with the attainment of the stage of non-retrogression in the present life, which is clearly a later development in Shinran's works (e.g. *Mattōshō* 1, in *Shinshū shōgyō zensho*, vol. 2, p. 656). We need to be careful not to read Genshin's work under the influence of Shinran's thought.

- 10 T. 32, no. 1660, 527b16-528c29.
- 11 The original text of the *Avatamsaka* cited by Genshin reads: 如華嚴云。若念如來少功德。乃至一念心專仰。諸惡道怖悉永除。智眼於此能深悟。(T. 10, no. 279, p. 9c8-9).
- 12 Genshin adds that the visualization of the Buddha's Dharma-body (*kanhosshin* 觀法身) has the same virtues as recitations of Amida's Name single-mindedly. The original text reads: 一心称念。即第三緣。若觀法身。亦具第三 (*ESZ*, vol. 1, p. 430).
- 13 The original text in *kanbun* reads: 未制一毫惑。速得不退地。既如入宝山。莫空手歸矣。I have translated this passage following the reading of the *Dainihon Bukkyō zensho* edition of the text (*DBZ*, vol. 31, p. 22a).
- 14 For example, Shinran says in the *Yuishinshō mon'i* (Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone'), "*They then attain birth* means that when a person realizes shinjin, he or she is born immediately. 'To be born immediately' is to dwell in the stage of non-retrogression. To dwell in the stage of non-retrogression is to become established in the stage of the truly settled. This is also called the attainment of the equal of perfect enlightenment. Such is the meaning of *they then attain birth*" (*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 455).
- 15 In the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, Shinran writes, "Because sentient beings of the nembutsu have perfectly realized the diamondlike mind of crosswise transcendence, they transcend and realize great, complete nirvana on the eve of the moment of death" ("Chapter on Shinjin," in the *Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 123).

## Abbreviations

- DBZ* *Dainihon Bukkyō zensho*, 151 vols., edited by Bussho kankōkai. Tokyo: Bussho Kankōkai, 1912-1922.
- ESZ* *Eshinsōzu zenzhū*, 5 vols., edited by Eizan gakuin, 1927-1928. Reprint. Kyoto: Shibunkaku Shuppan, 1971.
- T* *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, 85 vols., edited by Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaikyoku. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924-1932.

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