

Genshin's Discovery of the Easy Way to
Receive Confirmation for Enlightenment
in the Present Life

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Genshin's Discovery of the Easy Way to Receive Confirmation for Enlightenment in the Present Life¹

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In the *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集 (Essentials of Birth in the Pure Land), Genshin 源信 (942-1017),² a Japanese Tendai Master, introduced a novel interpretation that Pure Land practitioners can receive confirmation for future enlightenment (*juki* 受記) simply by hearing the Buddha's name from the Buddha. Prior to Genshin, it was commonly understood that practitioners aspiring to attain birth in Amida's Pure Land must first cultivate *bodhicitta*, recite Amida's Name, and practice visualization of Amida Buddha so that their future enlightenment will be confirmed by the Buddha.

In the *Ōjōyōshū*, Genshin developed a unique interpretation that Pure Land practitioners' confirmation for enlightenment can be accomplished in this very life even without giving rise to the mind aspiring for enlightenment (*bodhicitta*) by their own effort. Citing various Mahayana sutras, Genshin maintained that as long as Pure Land practitioners cultivate sincere faith for attaining birth in the Pure Land, their future enlightenment will be confirmed effortlessly simply by hearing Amida Buddha's Name in this very life.

Genshin, however, did not claim that practitioners can attain birth in the Pure Land in the next life simply by hearing Amida's Name. Rather, he advocated contemplation on Amida Buddha and doing meritorious deeds with the aspiration to attain birth in the Pure Land. His work reached its apogee with the understanding that the simple act of hearing Amida's Name is virtually equal to receiving the confirmation of future awakening by seeing Amida Buddha in the Pure Land. In this brief essay, I examine Genshin's discussion of his theory in the *Ōjōyōshū*, and how his interpretation inspired Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1262) to develop the theory of attaining the stage of the truly settled in the present life (*genshō shōjōju* 現生正定聚).

1. How to Be Awakened by Amida Buddha in the Pure Land

The most important reason that Pure Land Buddhist practitioners aspire for birth in Amida Buddha's Pure Land is not only that they can avoid falling into hell realms (*naraka*, or *jigoku* 地獄), but that once there Amida guarantees all that they will attain enlightenment quickly and easily. The process of awakening in Amida's Pure Land is explained, for example, in "Verses on Bodhisattvas' Visits" (*Ōgonge* 往觀偈) in the *Larger Sutra on Amitāyus* (*Dai Muryōjūkyō* 大無量壽經), as follows.

When you go to his glorious Pure Land,

You will instantly acquire supernatural powers.

Having, without fail, received predictions [*juki* 受記] from
Amitāyus,

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You will attain perfect Enlightenment.

By the power of that Buddha's Original Vows,
All who hear his Name [*monmyō* 聞名] and desire birth,
Will, without exception, be born in his land
And effortlessly enter the Stage of Non-retrogression [*futaiten* 不退轉].³

至彼嚴淨國	便速得神通	必於無量尊	受記成等覺
其仏本願力	聞名欲往生	皆悉到彼國	自致不退轉 ⁴

The process of receiving confirmation for the ultimate realization of perfect enlightenment in Amida's Pure Land, according to the verses of the *Ōgonge*, can be schematized as follows.

1. Working of the Power of Amida's Original Vows (*honganriki* 本願力)
2. Hearing the Name (*monmyō* 聞名)
3. Birth in the Pure Land (*ōjō* 往生)
4. Entering the Stage of Non-retrogression (*futaiten* 不退轉)
5. Seeing Amida Buddha (*kenbutsu* 見佛)
6. Receiving Prediction of Enlightenment (*juki* 受記)

According to the verses in the *Ōgonge*, practitioners' process of awakening begins with their experience of hearing Amida's Name in this life. The

confirmation of ultimate enlightenment is received upon meeting Amida Buddha in his Pure Land. The experience of hearing the Name of Amida, the first step for confirmation, is enacted by the power of Amida Buddha's Original Vows (*honganriki* 本願力).

Once practitioners have heard the Name of Amida, however, they must diligently practice *nembutsu* so that they can attain birth in the Pure Land to enter the stage of non-retrogression. The rest of the process of awakening in the Pure Land is guaranteed to be swift and easy because of the presence of Amida Buddha.

2. Genshin's Discovery of the Easy Way to Receive Confirmation in the Present Life

In the *Ōjōyōshū*, Genshin emphasizes the significance of the experience of seeing Amida in the present life and encourages Pure Land practitioners to practice visualization of Amida.⁵ The advantage of seeing the Buddha in the present life is, obviously, practitioners can attain the stage of non-retrogression and receive confirmation for their future enlightenment prior to their birth in the Pure Land. In the *Ōjōyōshū*, Genshin discusses how to visualize Amida in the Pure Land, in detail following the protocol of the practice of the five gates of mindfulness (*gonenmon* 五念門)⁶ presented in *Vasubanshu's Discourse on the Pure Land*.⁷ Therefore, for those who can visualize Amida in the present life, there remains awaiting them only swift and easy enlightenment in the Pure Land. However, Genshin admits that this practice is only available for those practitioners who are equipped with an advanced spiritual

capability.⁸

Therefore, Genshin encourages Buddhist practitioners who have only lesser abilities for practice to follow the Pure Land path. In order to demonstrate the advantage of the Pure Land path for Buddhist practitioners of all different levels, in Chapter 4, “Virtues of Nembutsu Practice” (*nembutsu riyaku* 念仏利益)⁹, especially in the section “Superior Virtues in the Future” (*tōrai shōri* 当来勝利)¹⁰, Genshin introduces the novel interpretation that any Pure Land practitioner can receive confirmation for enlightenment simply by hearing Amida’s Name.¹¹ In this section, Genshin cites three major Mahayana sutras to encourage practitioners with lesser capabilities to continue Nembutsu practice:

In a verse of the *Lotus Sutra*, it says,

If people, even with scattered minds, enter a Buddha’s stupa,
And recite Namō-Buddha, they all have already accomplished the
Buddhist path.

法華經偈云。若人散亂心。入塔廟中。一稱南無佛。皆已成佛道。¹²

In the third volume of the *Great Compassion Sutra*, it says,

The Buddha told Ananda, “If a person hears a Buddha’s Name,
I say, “This person can certainly enter the perfect *nirvana*.”

大悲經第三。佛告阿難。若有衆生聞佛名者。我說是人畢定當得入般涅槃。¹³

In the verse of the Dharma Banner Bodhisattva in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, it says,

If there are sentient beings who have not yet given rise to the mind aspiring for enlightenment (*bodaishin* 菩提心) but who hear a Buddha's Name even once, they are all certain to accomplish enlightenment.

華嚴經法幢菩薩偈云。若有諸衆生。未發菩提心。一得聞佛名。決定成菩提。¹⁴

It is especially noteworthy that Genshin, in citing this verse from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, seems to understand that, in the Pure Land practice, the practitioner's mind aspiring for enlightenment (*bodaishin* 菩提心) is not something they must raise by their own effort. It rather naturally arises in Pure Land practitioners' minds when they hear Amida's Name.

After citing these texts, Genshin concludes that if even simply hearing any Buddha's Name produces such great merit, how much more so if practitioners could contemplate on Amida Buddha and perform other meritorious deeds for their birth in the Pure Land.

Even hearing a Buddha's name can produce such great merit. How

much more so, if practitioners can contemplate on [Amida Buddha's] wonderful physical features and his virtues for even a very short period, or if they can make offerings of a single flower or a pinch of incense. What is more, the merits being accumulated diligently for the rest of their lives cannot possibly be wasted. Know this: that which guides us to encounter the Buddha Dharma and to hear a Buddha's Name is in no way a lesser [karmic] cause. Therefore, in the verse of the "True Wisdom Bodhisattva" in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, it says,

One should prefer even to endure the sufferings of hell in order to hear the Names of the Buddhas.

One should not choose to receive immeasurable pleasures if you cannot hear a Buddha's Name.

但聞名號勝利如是。況暫觀念相好功德。或復供養一華一香。況一生勤修。功德終不虛。則知。值佛法聞佛號。非是少緣。是故華嚴經真實慧菩薩偈云。寧受地獄苦。得聞諸佛名。不受無量樂。而不聞佛名。¹⁵

In the *Ōjōyōshū*, Genshin does not claim that practitioners can attain birth in the Pure Land in the next life simply by hearing Amida's Name. That is why he advocates contemplation on Amida Buddha and doing meritorious deeds with the aspiration to attain birth in the Pure Land. However, Genshin does understand that the simple act of hearing Amida's Name is virtually equal to receiving the confirmation of future awakening by seeing Amida Buddha in the Pure Land in this very life.¹⁶

3. The Mind becomes Equal to the Buddha by Hearing the Teaching of Amida Buddha

The remaining question is why Genshin so confidently states that the simple act of hearing Amida's Name is virtually equal to the experience of seeing the Buddha for receiving confirmation of future awakening. Following the above sutra citations, Genshin answers this question.

Question: The *Sutra of Contemplation of the Buddhas* says, "The mind of this practitioner becomes just like the mind of the Buddhas. There is no difference between his mind and the mind of Buddhas."¹⁷ Also the *Contemplation Sutra* says,

The Buddha said to Ananda, "Because Buddhas, Tathagatas, have cosmic bodies, so they enter into the meditating mind of each sentient being. For this reason, when you contemplate on a Buddha, that mind itself takes the form of his thirty-two physical characteristics and eighty secondary marks. Your mind produces the Buddha's image, and is itself the Buddha. The ocean of perfectly and universally enlightened Buddhas thus arises in the meditating mind."¹⁸

How should we understand this?

Answer: Master Chikō, in his Commentary on Vasubandhu's *Treatise on the Pure Land*, says, "When a person contemplates on [Amida]

Buddha in his mind, all physical aspects of the Buddha are manifested in the mind of the person.”

又觀經云。佛告阿難。諸佛是法界身。入一切衆生心想之中是故汝等心想佛時。是心即是三十二相八十隨形好。是心作佛。是心是佛。諸佛正遍知海從心想生已上。此義云何。答。往生論智光疏釋此文云。當知衆生心想佛時。佛身相皆顯現衆生心中。譬如水清即色像現。而水與像不一不異。故言佛相好身即是心想。¹⁹

This passage, however, does not clearly explain the relation to practitioners' hearing Amida Buddha's Name. It only addresses the merits received by visualizing Amida Buddha's physical features. Therefore, Genshin continues:

Question: When we understand that our mind can produce [the image of] the Buddha, what kind of superior virtues does it produce?

Answer: When we can directly contemplate on the truth (理) itself of this teaching, we can also completely realize the teachings [of all Buddhas] in the past, present, and future. But simply hearing this teaching just once, instantly, we can be liberated from the sufferings of the three evil realms. The verse of the Tathagata-forest Bodhisattva in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* says,

If anyone should desire to know all the Buddhas in the past, present, and future, one should contemplate as follows. It is our mind that produces all tathagatas.”

問。知心作佛有何勝利。

答。若觀此理。能了三世一切佛法。乃至一聞即得解脫三途苦難。如華嚴經如來林菩薩偈云。若人欲求知三世一切佛。應當如是觀。心造諸如來。²⁰

In these passages, we can see Genshin's effort to incorporate Mahayana Buddhist practice into the Pure Land teaching to justify his understanding of the virtue of simply hearing the teaching of Amida's Name.

Conclusion

As examined in this essay, in the *Ōjōyōshū*, Genshin, as a Mahayana scholar, used his extensive knowledge in Mahayana sutras to expand the exegetical flexibility in reading the Pure Land sutras. As a result, he discovered that it is possible that Pure Land practitioners can receive confirmation of their future awakening simply by hearing Amida Buddha's Name. As a Tendai Buddhist practitioner, then, he applied the Tendai meditative practice to Pure Land practice, instead of simply following the standard protocol of visualization practice on Amida as prescribed in the Pure Land sutras. The insight Genshin gained from his study and practice was, as we see in the *Ōjōyōshū*, an extremely easy way to receive confirmation of one's future enlightenment simply by hearing the Name of Amida Buddha.

Did Genshin's interpretation of the virtue of hearing Amida Buddha's Name inspire Shinran? Did Genshin's insight help Shinran develop his theory of attaining the stage of the truly settled in the present life? Genshin's understanding of the Pure Land practice is very different from

the exclusive recitation of Amida's Name as the sole practice to attain birth in the Pure Land, which Shinran inherited from his master Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212).²¹ But we can see a striking similarity in Genshin's and Shinran's understanding of the hearing of Amida Buddha's Name in the present life as something that does not occur by the practitioners' self-effort.

Genshin and Shinran both agree that the working of Amida's Original Vows naturally guides practitioners to contemplate on Amida Buddha and makes them aspire to be born in his Pure Land. Attainment of practitioners' future awakening is guaranteed by the Buddha at the moment of hearing the Buddha's Name. Genshin gained this insight during his cultivation of Tendai meditative practices. Shinran rediscovered it as the experience of awakening of Shinjin through the working of Amida's Other Power (*tariki* 他力).

Notes

- 1 This essay is based on the paper delivered at the Sixteenth Biennial Conference of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies held in 2013 at University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, in 2013.
- 2 For the recent study on Genshin's Pure Land thought, see Robert Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū and the Construction of Pure Land Discourse in Heian Japan* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2017).
- 3 English translation is adopted from "The Larger Sutra of Amitāyus," translated by Hisao Inagaki, in *The Three Pure Land Sutras: A Study and Translation* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 2000), p.237.

かの厳浄の国に至らば、すなはちすみやかに神通を得、かならず無量尊において、記を受けて等覚を成らん。その仏の本願力、名を聞いて往生せんと欲へば、みなことごとくかの国に到りて、おのづから不退転に致る。

- Jōdo Shinshū seiten: Chūshakuban dainihan* [hereafter *Chūshakuban*], (Kyoto: Hongwanji Shuppansha, 2004), p.46.
- 4 *Taisho* 12, p.273a, and *Jōdo Shinshū seiten zensho* [hereafter *Seiten Zensho*], vol. 1 (Kyoto: Hongwanji Shuppansha, 2013), p.46
 - 5 In the “Conclusion” of Robert Rhodes’s *Genshin’s Ōjōyōshū*, he concisely summarizes Genshin’s understanding of the nembutsu practice as follows:
[T]he *Ōjōyōshū* presents a comprehensive and systematic typology of the nembutsu, which classifies this practice from lofty visualization exercises focused on Amida Buddha to the simple recitation of the phrase “*Namu Amidabutsu*.” It is important to note that, in this classification, the contemplative form of nembutsu is presented as being superior to its recitative form. This reflects the great importance placed on meditative practices in Tendai Buddhism and, more specifically, the fact that Amida Buddha had originally been recognized as an object of meditation in the *Mohe zhiguan*, the central meditation text of Tendai Buddhism” (Rhodes, *Genshin’s Ōjōyōshū*, p.298-299).
 - 6 For the practice of the five gates of mindfulness, see Hisao Inagaki, “Vasubandhu’s System of Pure Land Practice,” in *Ōjōronchū: T’an-luan’s Commentary on Vasubandhu’s Discourse on the Pure Land* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 1998), p.58-64.
 - 7 See *Ōjōyōshū*, Chapter 4, “On True Nembutsu Practice [*Shōshū nemubutsu* 正修念仏],” (*Taisho* 84, p.47c-57b, *Seiten Zensho*, vol. 1, p.1073-1113. For Genshin’s interpretation of the five gates of mindfulness, see Rhodes, *Genshin’s Ōjōyōshū*, p.231-262.
 - 8 In the opening passage of his discussion on the gate of contemplation (*kanzatsumon* 観察門), Genshin says, “The contemplation of beginners cannot withstand the profoundness of the practice” 初心観行不堪深奥 (*Taisho* 84, p.53a, *Seiten Zensho*, vol. 1, p.1094), 「初心の観行は深奥に堪へず」, *Jōdo Shinshū seiten shichisohen: Chūshakuban* [hereafter *Chūshakuban Shichisohen*], [Kyoto: Hongwanji Shuppansha, 1996], p.934).
 - 9 *Taisho* 84, p.71b-76c, and *Seiten Zensho*, vol. 1, p.1171-1193.
 - 10 *Taisho* 84, p.72c-73c, and *Seiten Zensho*, vol. 1, p.1176-1181.
 - 11 It is also noteworthy that, in the *Amidakyō ryakki*, which Genshin wrote in 1013 and which is most likely his last work, he maintains that practitioners

can attain the stage of non-retrogression (from future attainment of awakening) by hearing Amida's Name. See Eisho Nasu, "The Concept of the Stage of Non-Retrogression in Genshin's *Amidakyō-ryakki*," *Shinshūgaku* 121 (2010): p.1-13.

- 12 *Taisho* 84, p.73a, and *Seiten Zensho*, vol. 1, p.1178. See also the *Lotus Sutra*, vol. 1, "Chapter on Skillful Means" (『法華經』「方便品」, *Taisho* 9, p. 9a). Unless otherwise mentioned, translations of the *Ōjōyōshū*'s passages are by the author.
- 『法華經』の偈にのたまはく、「もし人、散乱の心にして、塔廟のなかに入り、一たび〈南無仏〉と称すれば、みなすでに仏道を成ず」と。(Chūshakuban *Shichsohen*, p.1073)
- 13 *Taisho* 84, p.73a, and *Seiten Zensho*, vol. 1, p.1178. See also, the *Great Compassion Sutra*, vol. 3 (『大悲經』, *Taisho* 12, p.957a)
- 『大悲經』の第三に、「仏、阿難に告げたまはく、くもし衆生ありて、仏の名を聞かば、われ説かく、《この人は畢定してまさに般涅槃に入ることを得べし》」と。(Chūshakuban *Shichsohen*, p.1073)
- 14 *Taisho* 84, p.73a, and *Seiten Zensho*, vol. 1, p.1178. See also, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (80 vols.), vol. 23 (『華嚴經』80巻本, *Taisho* 10, p.124a)
- 『華嚴經』の法幢菩薩の偈にのたまはく、「もしもろもろの衆生ありて、いまだ菩提心を発さざらんも、一たび仏の名を聞くことを得ば、決定して菩提を成ぜん」と。(Chūshakuban *Shichsohen*, p.1073)
- 15 *Taisho* 84, p.73b, and *Seiten Zensho*, vol. 1, p.1178-1179. See also, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (80 vols.), vol.16 (『華嚴經』80巻本, *Taisho* 10, p.83a)
- ただ名号を聞くすら、勝利かくのごとし。いはんやしばらくも相好・功德を觀念し、あるいはまた一華・一香を供養せんをや。いはんや一生に勤修する功德、つひに虚しからじ。すなはち知りぬ、仏法に値ひ、仏号を聞くことは、これ少縁にあらず。このゆゑに『華嚴經』の真実慧菩薩の偈にのたまはく、「むしろ地獄の苦を受くとも、諸仏の名を聞くことを得よ。無量の樂を受くとも、仏の名を聞かざることなかれ」と。(Chūshakuban *Shichsohen*, p.1073-1074)
- 16 It is also noteworthy that in the following section of the *Ōjōyōshū*, of "Additional Virtues of Amida Buddha" (*Mida betsu-yaku* 弥陀別益), Genshin cites Amida's thirty-fourth and forty-seventh Vows from the *Larger Sutra* to support his claim that nembutsu practitioners can attain the stage of non-

retrogression in the present life by virtue of hearing the Name.

In the [*Larger*] *Sutra* in two volumes, [Amida] Buddha's vows says:

[If, when I attain Buddhahood,] sentient beings in the immeasurable and inconceivable Buddha-lands of the ten quarters, who have heard my Name, should not gain the bodhisattva's insight into the non-arising of all dharmas and should not acquire various profound dharanis, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment [34th Vow].

[If, when I attain Buddhahood,] bodhisattvas in the lands of the other quarters who hear my Name should not instantly reach the Stage of Non-retrogression, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment [47th Vow].

(*Ōjōyōshū*, *Taisho* 84, 74b-c, and *Seiten Zensho*, vol. 1, p.1184)

English translation is adopted from "The Larger Sutra of Amitāyus," translated by Hisao Inagaki in *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, p.246 and 249.

『双卷経』(大経・上)に、かの仏の本願にのたまはく、「く諸仏の世界の衆生の類、わが名字を聞きて、菩薩の無生法忍、もろもろの深総持を得ずといはば、正覚を取らじ」(第三十四願)と。く他方の国土のもろもろの菩薩衆、わが名字を聞きて、すなはち不退転に至ることを得ずといはば、正覚を取らじ」(第四十七願)」と。(Chūshakuban Shichsohen, p.1082)

17 The *Sutra of Contemplation of the Buddhas*, vol. 1 (『観仏三昧海経』, *Taisho* 15, p.646a)

18 English translation of the *Contemplation Sutra* is adopted from "The Sutra on Contemplation of Amitāyus," translated by Hisao Inagaki, in *The Three Pure Land Sutras: A Study and Translation* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 2000), p.330.

19 *Taisho* 84, p.73b, and *Seiten Zensho*, vol. 1, p.1179.

問ふ。『観仏経』にのたまはく、「この人の心は、仏の心のごとくにして、仏と異なることなし」と。また『観経』にのたまはく、「仏、阿難に告げたまはく、く諸仏はこれ法界の身なり、一切衆生の心想のうちに入りたまふ。このゆゑに、なんぢら心に仏を想ふ時、この心すなはちこれ三十二相・八十随形好なり。是の心、仏に作る。是の心、是仏なり。諸仏の正遍知海は、心想より生じたまふ」と。以上この義いかん。

答ふ。『往生論』(天親の浄土論)の智光の『疏』にこの文を釈してはく、「衆生の心に仏を想ふ時に当りて、仏の身相みな衆生の心のなかに顕現

す。」 (*Chūshakuban Shichsohen*, p.1074)

- 20 *Taisho* 84, p.73c, and *Seiten Zensho*, vol. 1, p.1180. See also, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (60 vols.), vol. 10 (『華嚴經』60巻本, *Taisho* 9, p.466a)

問ふ。心、仏に作ることを知るに、なんの勝利かある。

答ふ。もしこの理を觀ずれば、よく三世の一切の仏法を了す。乃至、一たびも聞かば、すなはち三途の苦難を解脱することを得。『華嚴經』の如来林菩薩の偈にのたまふがごとし。「もし人、三世の一切の仏を知らんと欲せば、まさにかくのごとく觀ずべし。心もろもろの如来を造る」と。

(*Chūshakuban Shichsohen*, p.1075-1076)

- 21 For the influence of Genshin's *Ōjōyōshū* on Hōnen's thought, see Chapter Eleven "Hōnen's Appropriation of the *Ōjōyōshū*," in Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*, p.286-296.