

Genshin's Development of the  
Contemplation on Amida's *byakugō*  
and Its Influence on Japanese  
Pure Land Practice

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# Genshin's Development of the Contemplation on Amida's *byakugō* and Its Influence on Japanese Pure Land Practice<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Prior to writing the *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集 (Essentials for Birth) in 984, Genshin 源信 (942-1017) composed his first work on the Pure Land, a short text introducing a new method for contemplating Amida's *byakugō* 白毫 (Skt. *ūrṇā*, the white tuft of hair between the Buddha's eyebrows, Skt. *ūrṇā*) in 981. In this text, titled *Amida Butsu byakugōkan* 阿弥陀佛白毫觀 (Contemplation on Amida Buddha's *byakugō*), Genshin presents the interpretation that the light emitted from Amida's *byakugō* illuminates all the worlds in the ten directions, protects all sentient beings, and guides them to enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> According to Genshin, the salvific power of the light from Amida's *byakugō* embraces all sentient beings who practice the nembutsu, including those who are not able to see the light because of their blind passions, and never abandons them. In this paper, I introduce Genshin's interpretation of the contemplation on Amida's *byakugō* and discuss its influence on the later development of Japanese Pure Land

practice.

## The Scriptural Source for the Contemplation on Amida Buddha's *byakugō*

*Amida Butsu byakugōkan* (also known as *Byakugō kanbō* 白毫觀法)<sup>3</sup> is known as Genshin's first writing on the Pure Land teaching, composed a few years before the famous *Ōjōyōshū*.<sup>4</sup> In this brief text, he discusses the benefits of contemplation on Amida's *byakugō*, one of the buddhas' thirty-two auspicious marks.<sup>5</sup> The scriptural source for this practice is found in the ninth of the sixteen contemplations discussed in the *Sutra on Contemplation on Amitāyus* (*Kan Muryōjubutsukyō* 觀無量寿仏經,<sup>6</sup> hereafter *Contemplation Sutra*). The ninth contemplation is given the title the "Contemplation on the True Body of Amida" (*shinshinkan* 真身觀).<sup>7</sup> Here I will review the entirety of the text of the ninth contemplation in order to understand Genshin's later reformulation of this practice.

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi, "After you have succeeded in seeing these images [of Amida], next envision the physical characteristics and the light of Amitayus. Ananda, you should realize that his body is as glorious as a thousand million kotis of nuggets of gold from the Jambu River of the Yama Heaven and that his height is six hundred thousand kotis of nayutas of yojanas multiplied by the number of the sands of the Ganges. The white tuft of hair curling to the right between his eyebrows is five times as big as Mount Sumeru. His eyes are clear and as broad as the four great oceans; their blue

irises and whites are distinct. From all the pores of his body issues forth a flood of light, as magnificent as Mount Sumeru. His aureole is as broad as a hundred kotis of universes, each containing a thousand million worlds. In this aureole reside transformed Buddhas numbering as many as a million kotis of nayutas multiplied by the number of the sands of the Ganges. Each Buddha is attended by innumerable and uncountable transformed bodhisattvas.<sup>8</sup>

The purpose of this contemplation practice is to visualize the entire physical characteristics of Amida and the flood of light emanating from the buddha's body. The sutra continues then to describe the virtues of this light:

The Buddha Amitayus possesses eighty-four thousand physical characteristics, each having eighty-four thousand secondary marks of excellence. Each secondary mark emits eighty-four thousand rays of light; each light shining universally upon the lands of the ten quarters, embracing, and not forsaking, those who are mindful of the Buddha. It is impossible to describe in detail these rays of light, physical characteristics and marks, transformed Buddhas, and so forth. But you can see them clearly with your mind's eye through contemplation.<sup>9</sup>

Although visualizing all the physical characteristics of the buddha results in infinite merit, the sutra emphasizes the characteristics and virtues of the compassionate rays of light emitted from all the pores of the buddha's

body.

The virtue the practitioners receive through this contemplation is enormous since the sutra claims that it is equal to seeing all the Buddhas in the ten quarters. Moreover, they will realize the buddha's compassionate mind embracing them with unconditional benevolence.

Those who have envisioned them see all the Buddhas of the ten quarters. Because they see the Buddhas, this is called the Buddha-Recollection Samadhi (*neubutsu zanmai* 念仏三昧). To attain this contemplation is to perceive the bodies of all the Buddhas. By perceiving these, one also realizes the Buddha's mind. The Buddhas' mind is Great Compassion. It embraces sentient beings with unconditional Benevolence. Those who have practiced this contemplation will, after death, be born in the presence of the Buddhas and realize the insight into the non-arising of all dharmas. For this reason, the wise should concentrate their thoughts and visualize Amitayus.<sup>10</sup>

Given the huge size of the buddha's body and the nearly limitless number of qualities, the practitioner might be daunted by the vastness of the project. However, the sutra advises where to start:

In contemplating him, begin with one of his physical characteristics. Visualize only the white tuft of hair between his eyebrows until you see it quite clearly and distinctly. When you visualize it, all the eighty-

four thousand physical characteristics will spontaneously become manifest. When you see Amitayus, you will also see innumerable Buddhas of the ten quarters. Having visualized these innumerable Buddhas, you will receive from each the prediction of your future Buddhahood. This is the general perception of all the physical characteristics of the Buddha and is known as the ninth contemplation. To practice in this way is called the correct contemplation, and to practice otherwise is incorrect.<sup>11</sup>

The *Contemplation Sutra* explains that even with this first visualization the practitioner will see not only Amida but innumerable buddhas, and even receive the prediction of future buddhahood. However, for the sutra, this is only the beginning of the practice. To complete this practice would require extreme effort.

Indeed, according to the sutra, the “Contemplation on the True Body of Amida” is considered the greatest challenge for practitioners, and they can do this practice only after having completed eight previous contemplations. Thus, it is not very easy to accomplish this practice.<sup>12</sup>

### Genshin’ Reformulation of the Contemplation on Amida’s *byakugō*

In the *Amida Butsu byakugōkan*, Genshin takes up the contemplation on Amida’s *byakugō* found in the *Contemplation Sutra*, focusing on this practice alone and abandoning all other visualization of the buddha’s physical characteristics. The text consists of the following five sections.

1. Contemplation on the cause of Amida's acquiring the auspicious mark of *byakugō*
2. Contemplation on the auspicious features of Amida's *byakugō*
3. Contemplation on the salvific working of Amida's *byakugō*
4. Contemplation on the original nature of Amida's *byakugō*
5. Contemplation on the benefits of Amida's *byakugō*<sup>13</sup>

First, Genshin praises Amida obtaining the auspicious sign of the *byakugō* through his diligent practices as bodhisattva Dharmākara, stating, "even a single hair [of the buddha's *byakugō*] is the result of his boundless ocean like vow and practice" 此一毛由無邊際諸願行海之所証得.<sup>14</sup>

In the second section, he discusses the overwhelming virtues of the light emitted from the *byakugō*. The light projects the entire eighty-four thousand auspicious features of Amida, and Genshin notes "even a single hair of Amida's *byakugō* contains all the right teaching of every one of the buddhas, all right Dharmas, and all wise and holy sages" 此一毛具一切諸仏一切正法一切賢聖衆.<sup>15</sup>

In the third section, instead of introducing how to contemplate on Amida's *byakugō*, Genshin recommends that practitioners meditate on the working of the light emanating from the white tufts with reference to the *Contemplation Sutra*.

Each ray of light illuminates all the worlds of the ten directions, embracing sentient beings who practice the nenbutsu, never to abandon them 念仏衆生攝取不捨. ... I, too, am within the embrace (of

the light). Even though evil passions obstruct my vision, (Amida's) great compassion shines on me at all times without tiring 煩惱眼障雖不能見大悲無倦常照我身.<sup>16</sup>

In this section, Genshin also suggests that the virtue of Amida's light that embraces all sentient beings is the "covert (or invisible) benefit" (*myōriyaku* 冥利益), in contrast to the "overt (visible) benefit" (*kenriyaku* 顯利益), which represents the actual preaching of Dharma in person.<sup>17</sup>

In the fourth section, Genshin, as a Tendai master, explains that the Pure Land contemplation on Amida's *byakugō* is in line with the fundamental Tendai doctrine of the "perfectly interfused the three truths (*santai ennyū* 三諦円融)."<sup>18</sup>

The most striking part of Genshin's interpretation of this practice is in the final section in which he explains the benefit of this contemplation. In the beginning of the fifth section, he says:

For those who joyfully accept in faith (*kangi shinju* 歡喜信受) the aspects of the Buddha's *byakugō* with no surprise or doubt in their hearts (*shinpu kyōgi* 心不驚疑), the evil karma committed during eighty kotis of kalpas of samsara will be extinguished.<sup>19</sup>

In the text, although Genshin encourages practitioners to make diligent efforts to contemplate on Amida's *byakugō*, he also suggests that even if they cannot accomplish this practice because of "evil passions" obstructing them, as long as they have faith in the working of Amida's light



unconditionally embracing them, they may have a chance to accomplish it at the moment of their death. Thus, Genshin concludes with the following verse.

At the hour of my death, may my mind remain undisturbed.  
May I be able to perceive the light from Amida's *byakugō*,  
Immediately attain birth in the Country of Peace and Bliss,  
And realize this contemplative practice in front of (Amida Buddha).

願我臨終心不亂 得見弥陀白毫相  
即得往生安樂刹 現前成就此願行<sup>21</sup>

Conclusion: Influence of the Contemplation on Amida's *byakugō* on the Later Development of Japanese Pure Land Practice

In the *Amida Butsu byakugōkan*, Genshin reformulated the contemplation on Amida's *byakugō* into a relatively easy practice by taking it out of the context of the formula in the *Contemplation Sutra*. His interpretation gives more credit to the working of Amida's light embracing all sentient beings including those who cannot see the light because their vision is obstructed by evil passions. He also emphasizes the significance of faith in the salvific power of Amida's light. However, as shown in the closing verse, Genshin himself, at least at the time he composed this text, had yet to completely accomplish this contemplation.<sup>22</sup>

Genshin's promotion of an easy practice for contemplating Amida's *byakugō* directly influenced the writing of the *Ōjōyōshū* three years later.<sup>23</sup>

His emphasis on the salvific power of Amida's light is also found in the *Amidakyō ryakki* 阿弥陀經略記 (Brief Notes on the *Amida Sutra*) which is considered his last known writing in 1014.<sup>24</sup> Thereafter, the easy practice of contemplating the *byakugō* became popular not only within the Japanese Tendai tradition but also influenced the thought of Nara and Shingon Buddhist masters, such as Yōkan 永觀 (1033-1111), Jippan 実範 (?-1144), and Kakuban 覚鑊 (1095-1143).<sup>25</sup>

It is also known that Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212) cites a significant portion of this text in his *Gyakushu seppō* 逆修説法.<sup>26</sup> However, he does not mention this practice in the *Senjakushū* 選択集, once he established the teaching of the sole practice of recitation of nembutsu (*senju nembutsu* 専修念仏). Hōnen's disciples did talk about the benefit of Amida's embracing light grasping all sentient beings never to abandon them. However, they no longer mention the practice of the contemplation on Amida's *byakugō*.<sup>27</sup>

Among Hōnen's disciples, Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1262), the founder of Jōdo Shinshū, cites a passage in the *Ōjōyōshū* discussing the *byakugō* contemplation, but he elides the *byakugō* part and focuses only on the virtues of Amida's light.

Although I too am within Amida's grasp, blind passions obstruct my eyes and I cannot see [the light]; nevertheless, great compassion untiringly and constantly illumines me.<sup>28</sup>

我亦在彼攝取之中、煩惱眼障雖不能見、大悲無倦常照我身<sup>29</sup>

Chapter on Shinjin 17, *Kyōgyōshinshō*

Shinran also repeats Genshin's language extolling the light as all-pervading and encouraging even practitioners obstructed by passions. But there is no mention of the practice of *byakugō* contemplation at all.

The person burdened with extreme evil should simply say the Name:  
Although I too am within Amida's grasp,  
Passions obstruct my eyes and I cannot see him;  
Nevertheless, great compassion is untiring and illumines me always.<sup>30</sup>

極重悪人唯称仏 我亦在彼攝取中  
煩惱障眼雖不見 大悲無倦常照我<sup>31</sup>

“Shōshinge,” in Chapter on Practice, *Kyōgyōshinshō*

My eyes being hindered by blind passions,  
I cannot perceive the light that grasps me;  
Yet the great compassion, without tiring,  
Illumines me always.<sup>32</sup>

煩惱にまなこさへられて  
攝取の光明みざれども  
大悲ものうきことなくて  
つねにわが身をてらすなり<sup>33</sup>

“Genshin san” in *Kōsō Wasan* 94

Genshin's version of the contemplation on Amida's *byakugō* was virtually lost with Hōnen's reformation of the Japanese Pure Land tradition under the banner of the sole practice of recitation of nembutsu.

Nevertheless, as shown in Shinran's writings, the spirit of Genshin's reformulation of this difficult contemplation into an easy practice for even a person whose eyes are hindered by blind passions, formed the basis for the development of the Japanese Pure Land tradition.

### Notes

- 1 This paper is based on my presentation at the 19th Biennial Conference of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies held at Dharma Drum University in Taiwan R.O.C. in 2019.
- 2 Regarding this text and its influence on the *Ōjōyōshū*, see Robert Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū and the Construction of Pure Land Discourse in Heian Period* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), p. 126–129.
- 3 For the study of the manuscripts of this text, see Nishimura Keishō's, "Amida Butsu byakugōkan no kenkyū," *Eizangakuin kenkyū kiyō* 21 (1998): p. 15–25, and "Daigo Sanbōin zō Genshin sen *Byakugō kanbō nit suite*," *Eizangakuin kenkyū kiyō* 25 (2003): p. 1–13, and Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*, p. 336 (note 1). The original text is available in *Eshin sōzu zenshū*, vol. 3, p. 579–584, and *Dainihon Bukkyō zensho*, vol. 39 (Tendai bu 3), p. 70. A modern Japanese translation by Sueki Fumihiko is available in *Annen, Genshin*, Daijō butten, Chūgoku Nihon hen 19 (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1991), p. 123–131.
- 4 See Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*, p. 129, and note 10, p. 337.
- 5 For the general discussion on the concept of Buddha's *byakugō* in Buddhist scriptures, see Fukuhara Ryūzen, "Butten ni okeru byakugō sō," *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 40–1, (1991), 1–11.
- 6 *Taisho* vol. 12, no. 365; *Jōdo Shinshū seitenzensho*, vol.1, p. 73–100.
- 7 *Taisho* vol. 12, p. 343b-c; *Jōdo Shinshū seitenzensho*, vol.1, p. 87–89.
- 8 Hisao Inagaki, trans., "The Sutra on Contmplatation on Amitāyus," in *The Three Pure Land Sutras: A Study and Translation* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 2000), p. 332–333. Emphasis added by the author.
- 9 Hisao Inagaki, trans., "The Sutra on Contmplatation on Amitāyus," in *The Three Pure Land Sutras: A Study and Translation* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 2000), p. 333. Emphasis added by the author.

- 10 Hisao Inagaki, trans., “The Sutra on Contmplatation on Amitāyus,” in *The Three Pure Land Sutras: A Study and Translation* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 2000), p. 333. Emphasis and *kanji* characters added by the author.
- 11 Hisao Inagaki, trans., “The Sutra on Contmplatation on Amitāyus,” p. 333–334. Emphasis added by the author.
- 12 The formation of the sixteen meditative practice in the *Contemplation Sutra* are contemplations on: 1. the setting sun; 2. water of the Pure Land; 3. treasure-earth of the Pure Land; 4. jeweled trees of the Pure Land; 5. treasure-ponds of the Pure Land; 6. jeweled towers of the Pure Land; 7. the lotus-seat of Amida Buddha; 8. the image of Amida; 9. the real body of Amida; 10. Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara; 11. Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta; 12. the Practioners’ birth in the Pure Land; 13. various manifestation of Amida and two bodhisattvas; 14. the higher grades of birth in the Pure Land; 15. the middle grades of birth in the Pure Land; 16. the lower grades of birth in the Pure Land. See Hisao Inagaki, *The Three Pure Land Sutras: A Study and Translation*, p. 7–12.
- 13 *Eshin sōzu zenshū*, vol. 3, p. 579–584; *Dainihon Bukkyō zensho*, vol. 39, p. 70.
- 14 *Eshin sōzu zenshū*, vol. 3, p. 580; *Dainihon Bukkyō zensho*, vol. 39, p. 70a.
- 15 *Eshin sōzu zenshū*, vol. 3, p. 580; *Dainihon Bukkyō zensho*, vol. 39, p. 70b.
- 16 Translated and cited in Rhodes, *Genshin’s Ōjōyōshū*, p. 127. For the original text, see *Eshin sōzu zenshū*, vol. 3, p. 581; *Dainihon Bukkyō zensho*, vol. 39, p. 70b. A similar passage is also found in the *Ōjōyōshū*, in the section discussing *zōryakukan* 雜略觀 (mixed abbreviated contemplation), Taishō vol. 84, p. 56; *Jōdo Shinshū seitenzensho*, vol.1, 1108. See Rhodes, *Genshin’s Ōjōyōshū*, p. 337, note 10. Underlines and *kanji* characters are added by the author.
- 17 It is interesting to read that Genshin identifies the working of the “light” of Amida’s *byakugō* as “invisible benefit.” According to Genshin, even though people might not be able to see the light itself, when the salvific light from the *byakugō* touches them, it “transforms itself into a form appropriate to each person to instruct him or her in the Buddhist teaching (Genshin calls this the ‘visible benefit’ [*kenriyaku* 顯利益] of the light).” (Rhodes, *Genshin’s Ōjōyōshū*, p. 127.)
- 18 *Eshin sōzu zenshū*, vol. 3, p. 581; *Dainihon Bukkyō zensho*, vol. 39, p. 70b. See also Rhodes, *Genshin’s Ōjōyōshū*, p. 128.

- 19 *Eshin sōzu zenshū*, vol. 3, p. 582; *Dainihon Bukkyō zensho*, vol. 39, p. 70c.  
The passages are translated by the author.
- 20 Translated and cited in Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*, p. 128.
- 21 *Eshin sōzu zenshū*, vol. 3, p. 583; *Dainihon Bukkyō zensho*, vol. 39, p. 70c.
- 22 In the closing remarks of the text, Genshin says, "Now, I set forth to contemplate upon [Amida] Buddha's *byakugō*. If I practice this in accordance with the Buddha's teaching, certainly I should receive those benefits" 我今始觀彼仏白毫、若如說勤修、定得彼利益 (*Eshin sōzu zenshū*, vol. 3, p. 583; *Dainihon Bukkyō zensho*, vol. 39, p. 70c). Thus it seems that Genshin had the expectation to receive said benefits but had yet to actually realize them. See also Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*, p. 128-129.
- 23 In the *Ōjōyōshū*, Genshin introduces the practice of contemplation on *byakugō* mostly following the text of *Amida Butsu byakugōkan* in the section discussing *zōryakukan* 雜略觀 (mixed abbreviated contemplation), *Taishō* vol. 84, p. 56. In the *Ōjōyōshū*, Genshin further makes this practice easier by recommending those who are not capable of visualizing Amida's *byakugō*, to recite the name single heartedly (*isshin shōnen* 一心稱念), which he calls as an extremely simplified (*gokuryaku* 極略) version of the practice. See Sueki Fumihiko, *Annen, Genshin*, p. 355-356.
- 24 For the further development of Genshin's interpretation of the contemplation on *byakugō*, see Fukuhara Ryūzen, "Ōjōyōshū no *byakugōkan*," *Jōdo Shūgaku kenkyū* (1983), p. 129-147.
- 25 For the development of *byakugō* contemplation within the Tendai tradition, see Yanagisawa Masashi, *Nihon Tendai Jōdokyō shisō no kenkyū* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan), p. 172-188. See Fukuhara Ryūzen, "Nihon ni okeru byakugōkan no tenkai: Jippan wo chūshin ni," *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 41-2 (1993), p. 236-241.
- 26 See Fukuhara Ryūzen, "Amida Butsu no bettoku ni tsuite," *Jōdo shūgaku kenkyū* 20 (1993), 31-46.
- 27 Fukuhara Ryūzen, "Amida Butsu no bettoku ni tsuite," 43.
- 28 "Chapter on Shinjin" 17, the *True Teaching, Practice and Realization*, in the *Collected Works of Shinran* (Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997, hereafter CWS) p. 93. The same passage is also cited in Shinran's *Songō shinzō meimon*, *Jōdo Shinshū seitenzensho*, vol. 2, p. 653; CWS p. 510, and *Ichinen tanen mon'i*,

- Jōdo Shinshū seitenzensho*, vol. 2, p. 668; CWS p. 480.
- 29 *Jōdo Shinshū seitenzensho*, vol.2, p. 79. For the original text of the *Ōjōyōshū*, see Taishō vol. 84, p. 56; *Jōdo Shinshū seitenzensho*, vol.1, p.1108.
- 30 “Chapter on Practice,” in the *True Teaching, Practice and Realization*, CWS p. 73.
- 31 *Jōdo Shinshū seitenzensho*, vol.2, p. 64.
- 32 *Hymns of the Pure Land Masters*, CWS p. 385.
- 33 *Jōdo Shinshū seitenzensho*, vol.2, p. 453.