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Women and Religion in Japan

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# You Get Salvation! (Almost) Everyone Can!: Hōnen in Women's Religiosity

You knew you were a hot topic when Buddhist high priests were writing 'nine wrongdoings' on you. Hōnen held many identities throughout his life, mirroring the tumultuous times he lived in. He was a hermit, a warrior-class preacher, and the founder of an exclusive-nembutsu sect of Pure Lands Buddhism, or the belief that chanting nembutsu was the only path to enlightenment. Such a path holds universal appeal on paper, especially considering women's contested place in Buddhism. Believed to spread pollution, evil thoughts, and other various sins, women were often barred from temples, not allowed to participate in the same religious rituals as men, and were even believed to boil in their own uterine blood hell when they died. Among Buddhist exclusionary sentiments against women, Hōnen's Buddhist practices and views were unusually progressive, such as his belief in absolute mercy for anyone, women included. Yet even absolute mercy was conditional, tainted by popular ideas of the time reflecting ongoing problems of misogyny policing women's bodies and lives. Overall, while Hōnen espoused progressive Buddhist principles for women, it was ultimately a byproduct of his egalitarian stance of enlightenment for all people, which in turn was a pointed retaliation against exclusionary, classist temple practices.

Born as Seishi-maru in modern-day Okayama, Hōnen was exposed to death early. His father Uruma was killed in front of him by a rival clan leader, Akashi Gen'nai Musha Sadaaki,

for refusing to pay Sadaaki respect. His mother's fate, like many women of the time, is unknown, but she was part of a clan of craftspeople that worked with silkworms, considered dirty work. Hōnen was therefore exposed to classism as well, which may have fueled his later egalitarian approach to Buddhism. At this time, Japan had also just experienced a famine, its major temple Todaiji had burned down, and the government was — to put it bluntly — not doing well. For the people of Japan, "it was not a time for abstract religion but one of crisis" (Machida 26). In other words, people sought a concrete way to escape death, which offered ripe opportunities for temples to gain monetary support, political connections, and often both at the same time. Hōnen was exposed to corruption in the name of religion, which inherently relied on hierarchy and separating people based on how 'worthy' they were of saving (i.e. how much they were willing to pay).

Hōnen's values of equality were further evolved in his time as a religious hermit on Mount Hiei. But while he learned Pure Lands Buddhism, his version with exclusive-nembutsu, though progressive in historicization, may be more accurately characterized as a rebellion against the aforementioned hierarchy within Buddhism. Despairing at his inability to internalize religious values, Hōnen wrote, "Were there other teachings suitable for someone like me? In search of a practice I could endure, I visited numerous scholars and men of knowledge, but none of them could help me" (50). All alone in the big bad world, Hōnen's slow adoption of exclusive-nembutsu was specifically geared towards enlightenment for all, if they followed his practice. "All", however, was a term of particular contention when it came to Japanese women.

"Do not despair that, because you are women," writes Hōnen in his text *Nembutsu ōjōyōgishō*, "you are corrupt and sinful" (11). On its surface, such philosophies are intended to bring women into Hōnen's practice — because after all, nembutsu is for everyone. Unlike many

other religious figures of the time, Hōnen also actually engaged with women, albeit in less than savory ways. In a popular literary work *Soga Monogatari*, two sisters who later become nuns and join Hōnen's community, cite Hōnen when discussing what they have learnt: "'Women bear the special burdens of the Five Obstacles and the Three Duties, and thus cannot aspire to immediate Buddhahood" (Faure 220). Ouch. Notice the specificity in using 'immediate Buddhahood', since for Hōnen enlightenment depended not just on practicing nembutsu, but in practicing nembutsu ideally as a man. Like many Buddhist practitioners of the time, he believed that women were impure and polluted the world. The state of womanhood was either an inferior state or a stepping stone towards manhood. Even in his most universal statements, such as professing that even the most evil could attain enlightenment by practicing nembutsu: "What matters is that a terrible sinner can be reincarnated into a higher life just as faithful students of sacred texts can be reborn as lowlife" (Machida 11), was more targeted towards elitist Buddhist temples rather than women as a marginalized group. Many interpretations of his work as unusually progressive for women are therefore more focused on the effect of his words, rather than the intention behind them, which did not originally center on women. In fact, quotes such as this actively imply that women are the sinners in question, and that while they can be saved by exclusive nembutsu, they led terribly dirty lives first.

What to make of Hōnen's views and the people who followed them, then? His personality and commitment to exclusive nembutsu meant he staunchly (stubbornly, even) defended exclusive nembutsu as the path to salvation, even as he still practiced the ten precepts required for monastic life. This extended even to female prostitutes, in an alleged conversation Hōnen had with one when she asked him whether she was eligible to practice nembutsu. To this, he replied, "If you believe deeply in your salvation and chant *namu Amida butsu, namu Amida butsu*, then

good or not, man or not, ten out of ten, a hundred of a hundred, all will be saved eventually" (Machida 12). Again with the 'eventually' — popular belief dictated that women could only attain salvation when they reincarnated as men in the cycle of rebirth, but Hōnen did not invest much into that idea, only believing that as long as one practiced nembutsu, they were golden. The ease of this idea, plus (it must be acknowledged) his status as a man, enabled him to spread this idea more easily to his followers. It was women who interpreted this as a freeing school of thought, especially since there were not many requirements and salvation was not just a fantasy, but a state of mind: "an existential reality that could be imagined through the five senses" (66). Perhaps because of this very theoretical way of thinking, Hōnen did not think much of earthly matters, including that of menstruation. **"**Is it okay to read sutras when I am having a period?" a woman asks. "I don't see why not," Hōnen replies in his "145 Questions and Answers" (122). Therefore, while his views could now be construed as progressive, it is unclear whether this was intentional. Scholars of Hōnen assert that rather than considering women within religion as a distinct group, Hōnen's contrarian views were sourced more from perceived inaccuracies within the larger system, especially moralizing from rich and powerful temples. Hōnen academic Fukuhara Ryūzen, discussing Hōnen's theory of women in the cycle of rebirth, posits that Hōnen's interpretation of Amida's eighteenth vow of salvation for everyone who calls on Amida's name "erases the divide between men and women, with gender just one of many incorrect assumptions about rebirth" (Gillson 14). While we may consider Hōnen one of the less sexist figures of Japanese Buddhism, it is important to consider that Hōnen's larger mission of spreading exclusive nembutsu inherently required universal appeal, and such an audience necessarily included women. Harking back to the nine wrongdoings levied against him, such criticisms were levied because Hōnen's stance on salvation was intended to send the rich to the

back of the line to be saved, thus equating them with the poor who could not pay to be saved. While some of the wrongdoings: “preventing good deeds” and “disturbing national order”, for example, were a bit far fetched, Hōnen was nevertheless exiled along with his protege Shinran and six other followers in the Ken’ei Persecution of 1205. Over his lifetime, Hōnen became more cautious about voicing his principles since nembutsu had gained so many practitioners that it was no longer feasible to speak for everyone. His magnum opus *Senchakushū* was only published after his death, which came while he was, predictably, chanting nembutsu.

Hōnen was a controversial monk in his lifetime, but he was also widely celebrated. The effect of his inclusive nembutsu practices were wide-reaching for women and allowed for more flexibility in bending more granular religious norms such as menstruation. Criticism can nevertheless be brought against him for not specifically including women in his vision of salvation for all, since his vision was focused on classism and calling out inaccuracies in other Buddhist paths. As an inadvertent supporter of women in Buddhism, however, the impact of his words cannot be denied. Along with the guilty, the sinners, and even the rich, women could attain salvation despite being hindered by their inherent evil nature (as popular thought at the time declared). Despite watering down his views on nembutsu as it became more widely adopted throughout Japan, Hōnen cuts a fascinating figure in Japanese history for his stubbornness, inadvertent vision of equality, and how he revised Buddhist notions of salvation.

Works Cited

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