Title	Tendai Hongaku Shiso and Japanese Culture
Sub Title	
Author	
Publisher	三田哲學會
Publication year	1998
Jtitle	哲學 No.103 (1998. 12) ,p.21- 34
JaLC DOI	
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Notes	
Genre	Journal Article
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00150430-00000103-0021

Tendai Hongaku Shiso and Japanese Culture

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Tendai hongaku shiso ("Tendai teaching of original enlightenment") has been criticized as a non-Buddhist teaching because it presumably denies the cardinal principles of Buddhism. This paper briefly highlights the distinct features of *Tendai hongaku shiso* and examines the particular case of such criticism. By exploring *Tendai hongaku shiso's* new interpretation of a notion of "identity" (*soku*), it argues that though being basically Buddhist the development of *Tendai hongaku shiso* was greatly influenced by an indigenous Shinto religiosity.

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Tendai hongaku shiso (天台本覚思想, "Tendai teaching of original enlightenment" hereinafter THS) is one of the most interesting themes in the history of Japanese Buddhism, and is one that has become actively discussed recently. THS is not a traditional term, but was created by Meiji period academics to define the teaching developed in the medieval Tendai school. Previously THS was often called simply the teaching of the "middle ancient" Tendai school (中古天台), referring to the period of its formation that corresponds to a span of time from the end of the Heian to the middle of the Edo era. However, the whole cluster of different trends which developed in the Tendai school in that period is not limited to THS only.

In the traditional classification THS was defined as an ultimate teaching of the founder of the Tendai school, Chih-i 智顗 (538-597). However THS is quite different from the original teaching of Chih-i. Attempts to present THS only as further clarification of Chih-i's ideas can be explained by the usual habit of adding prestige to a new interpretation claiming its ancient origin.

Another name for THS is a "tradition of oral transmission" (*kuden homon* 口伝法門) that reveals a specific method of THS dissemination: it was transmitted orally or in the form of written notes (*kirigami* 切紙) directly from a teacher to a disciple.

This distinctive feature of THS transmission presents the main difficulty for researchers. First, the surviving written records of oral THS transmission (or compilations of fragments-*kirigami*) are not systematic and elaborated treatises like those of the Tendai founder Chih-i (for example like *Mo-ho chih kuan* 摩訶止観 or *Miao fa lien hua ching hsuan i* 妙法蓮華経玄義), but mostly loose collections of instructions given on several occasions. Furthermore, THS texts were not created for general public use or even an intellectual elite[1]. Most likely these THS texts were sort of methodical manuals for

[1] See Habito, Ruben L. F. "The Logic of Nonduality and Absolute Affirmation," Japanese Journal of Religious Studies JJRS 1995, 22/1-2, 88.

mentors and were not devised for unconstrained reading even by disciples studying THS. It is likely that an instructor interpreted topics one by one according to the actual progress of a disciple on a scale of spiritual experience. "It follows that a "proper" 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[2]".

This disposition is typical for Esoteric Buddhism, where keeping in secret particular doctrines was explained by the possibility of a wrong and potentially dangerous interpretation of them by those who do not possess the required preliminary knowledge for correct understanding. This method is also akin to the Zen tradition, which emphasised an inadequacy of teaching transmission as a certain sublime set of abstract ideas (不立文字) while ignoring direct "live" instruction (以心伝心). Obviously, adherents of THS attempted to develop a method most adequate to the general Buddhist belief that a quest for enlightenment is not only an abstract notional ascent but creates a real transformation of a practitioner or knower, deepening his or her ability to perceive truth. Though the final stage of enlightenment was eventually identified in THS with the initial one, or even with the stage of delusion, a gradual approach to the revelation of this truth was preserved as a necessary propaedeutic method.

The distinct features of THS

Specific interpretation of the basic Mahayana Buddhism belief that samsara is identical to nirvana (生死即涅槃), and delusion to enlightenment (煩悩即菩提) etc., is the core innovation of THS. These formulas were not devised by THS and can be found in many Mahayana texts created long before it. The distinctiveness of the THS interpretation does not involve a new understanding of nirvana,

[2] Ibid.

samsara, delusion or other significant members of these formulas. What is new is an innovative interpretation of correlation between them; i.e. an interpretation of "identity (*soku* 即)" that determines the uniqueness of THS.

The supposition that the problem of "identity" is a core theme in THS (and Mahayana Buddhism in a whole) can be proved by the fact that the basic criteria for a classification of Buddhist teachings in THS is the notion of "identity". Different interpretations of "identity" are considered in THS as the principle standard by which Buddhist teachings are evaluated.

In the classification found in the THS text, "Kanko ruiju" (漢光類聚)[3], the lowest level is reserved for two interpretations, defined as typical for those previous to the Lotus Sutra Buddhist sutras (爾前経). The first is called a "teaching of non-identity" (不即門) and the second, a "teaching of non-separation" (不離門). The "teaching of non-identity" is criticised as simply denying identity of the "principle" (true reality, 理) with "dharmas" (phenomena, 法), while the second one because, though claiming a "non-separation" of the "principle" and "dharmas", it stops just before a positive assertion of identity.

The third and the fourth interpretations are referred to the first part of the Lotus Sutra (法華迹門). This is "teaching on removing individual characteristics and return to the true suchness" (断相帰真門, it is also called "teaching reducing all phenomena to the true suchness", 万法帰真門) and "teaching on that the true suchness includes all phenomena" (真如具法門). They are also not satisfactory enough for THS.

The fifth and the sixth interpretations are identified as the second part of the Lotus Sutra teachings (法華本門). This is "teaching on mutual distinction of all phenomena" (三千相対門), which explains "phenomena" as separate everlasting entities (諸法本有常住), and

[3] *Tendai hongaku ron* 天台本覚論, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1973, 192–200.

"teaching that all phenomena are three bodies of buddha". But this level of identity is also considered insufficient.

The higher, seventh form of identity that is called "teaching on inconceivable (unity) of true suchness and a perceiving wisdom" (寂照不思議門), where identity of true reality ("true suchness") and phenomena explained by the assumption that they consist of the content of an enlightened mind and thus are unified in it. The last, eighth interpretation is called "teaching on a return to the presence of individual characteristics (還同有相門) because all phenomena in this interpretation are conceived as being identical with supreme reality without losing its individual distinctions. After perceiving their identity as one "true suchness" an enlightened mind "returns" to the phenomenal world.

This supreme type of identity can be realised through the "shikan" (止観) contemplation, which is interpreted as a "contemplation of all phenomena in one thought" (一念三千). It is a realisation of the supreme identity, that is practically attainable through simultaneous contemplation of the world's unity (*ichinen* 一念) and its multiplicity (*sanzen* 三千)[4].

In this interpretation, "true suchness" is understood as ever-changing dynamic reality non-distinguishable from a multiplicity of individual phenomena. Many THS texts clearly emphasise that to consider "true suchness" as an immovable and unchangeable entity is a false view. The essential characteristic of "true suchness" is only its "constant presence" (*joju* 常住). But this "constant presence" does not imply its rigidity; changes also can be constant[5]. Therefore, "true suchness" considered in the THS interpretation as a dynamic entity, enclosing all possible phenomena "as they are" without eliminating their individual characteristics.

A correlation between "true suchness" and "dharmas" can be inter

[4] Ibid., 193.

[5] *Sanjushika-no kotogaki* 三十四箇事書, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1973, 157.

preted as the relationship between a system and its elements, or a whole and its parts. It seems that the interpretations previous to the THS of relation between "true suchness" and "dharmas" are based on understanding of a system ("true suchness") as a certain entity existing apart and aside from its elements ("dharmas", while THS understands a system ("true suchness") as sum total of its elements ("dharmas") and thus indistinguishable from them.

This "ontological" interpretation of identity was also applied in THS to "epistemology" e. g. attaining enlightenment. To describe the process of a realisation of identity THS uses notions originally introduced in a text called *Ta chih tu lun* 大乗起信論. One of these notions—an "original enlightenment"—became a descriptive term for THS teaching in a whole.

Ta chih tu lun suggests that an initial state of human beings is "non-enlightenment" (*fukaku* 不覚), but from the very beginning exists a potential possibility of enlightenment called "original enlightenment" (*hongaku* 本覚). When an unenlightened one achieves "true understanding" he realises "first time enlightenment" (*shikaku* 始覚), which is actually not different to "original enlightenment".

In THS this sequence was also revised from the standpoint of an absolute identity, applied not only to "spatial", but to "temporal" relations as well—if there is no differences between phenomena and absolute, there is no differences between delusion and enlightenment. That is to say an initial state of delusion turns out to be identical with "original enlightenment", and thus the notion of "initial enlightenment" appears in the THS interpretation to be superfluous. Thus the process of enlightenment according to THS does not bring any real changes, but simple understanding that everyone initially is **already** an enlightened person. And this initial enlightenment does not depend on whether one conceives it or not.

There is a seemingly inconsistent explanation in *Sanjushika-no kotogaki*, another THS text, that concerns the level on which enlighten-

ment is realised. Traditionally in the Tendai school the process of enlightenment has been divided into six consequent stages called "six identities" (六即). In *Sanjushika-no kotogaki* we can read in the first instance that enlightenment is reached on the level of "identity in principle" (理即), which traditionally corresponds to a completely unenlightened state on which someone has not even heard about Buddhism. But somewhere else we come across an assertion that enlightenment is achievable on the second level—an "identity in names and signs" (名字即); the stage on which a future adherent hears Buddhist teaching for the first time. However, there is no contradiction here. On the second level a person is simply informed about an initial already-existing true state of affairs, but this knowledge does not change anything—an "original enlightenment" is already actual. Transformation as a subsequent development and becoming is clearly denied in THS. Moreover, even the notion of "becoming buddha" (成仏) is refuted as an inappropriate one.

Of course, this THS interpretation of enlightenment contains a possibility of potentially dangerous interpretations. THS was accused by its critics of denying the necessity of practice and attainment of supreme wisdom (*prajna*), which were thought indispensable parts of Buddhist doctrine. Of course, such conclusions could be reached, but we have no decisive evidence that it was accepted as an official interpretation of THS. Actually it reminds me of the controversy aroused by the famous Hegel dictum—"What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational". As well as the THS assertion of perfect identity between phenomena and true reality it can not be correctly understood out of the context; in case of THS out of the context of a specific practice, all nuances of which still remain unclear.

Critics of THS often cited the corruption of the Tendai clergy in the late medieval period as evidence of the negative influence of THS ideas. However, this argumentation can not be accepted as undeniable evidence of the THS influence, because corruption of Bud-

dhist monks was a ubiquitous phenomena in that period in Japan, and was not limited only to the Tendai school. Moral degradation is a general problem for religious bodies, which managed to gain substantial political and economic weight.

But in the case of THS and Mahayana Buddhism in general we come across another real problem—without clear established notions of an absolute good and bad it is impossible to create normative practical ethics, suitable for the maintenance of social order in an entire nation. This inability to offer normative ethics and an ideological back-up for a social hierarchy, established in the Tokugawa period, was one of the major reason for the decay of Buddhism as a state-sponsored ideology after the Muromachi period.

In conclusion of this theme we must admit that an absolute identification of phenomenal and absolute in THS could be used as a reason for a one-sided assertion of the real value of the phenomenal world (現実肯定), while an assertion of oneness of illusion and enlightenment could serve as a motivation for the negation of necessity of any kind for devotional practice aimed at achieving enlightenment. But this danger of misinterpretation seems to be clearly perceived by the THS tradition itself. *Sanjushika-no kotogaki* ends with a warning: "Because of a careless attitude to this profound teaching, both teacher and disciple would descend into hell... It is necessary to be very careful while transmitting this profound teaching. If there is no capable person who can accept [this teaching], it should be buried under a wall."[6]

THS in the context of Mahayana Buddhism

The above mentioned specific features of THS caused a controversy in the evaluation of this tradition in the context of Buddhist thought.

For example, Tamura Yoshiro 田村芳朗 highly valued THS and

[6] Ibid., 184.

called it a pinnacle of Mahayana philosophy of non-duality, while another Japanese scholar, Hakamaya Noriaki 袴谷憲昭, proclaimed that THS is essentially a non-Buddhist teaching. To substantiate his position, Hakamaya claims that THS denies the cardinal principles of Buddhist teaching: —(1) the "law of dependent origination "(縁起) and "causation" (因果), (2) the "no-self nature principle" (無我); as well as (3) the necessity of "faith" (信仰) and "wisdom" (智慧) for attainment of enlightenment. According to Hakamaya, THS was formed under an influence of "local teachings" in China that "completely distorted" (換骨奪胎) the genuine Buddhist position. He mentions the notion of primordial "nature" of Taoism, which is interpreted as a spatial, unchangeable "topos". This "spatial" notion, according to Hakamaya, is completely alien to the Buddhist "temporal" interpretation of "true suchness"[7].

Leaving aside the question of whether THS could be considered Buddhist teaching or not, it is worth mentioning that "true suchness" in THS interpretation is not a static unchangeable "locus" but a dynamic continuum where the law of "dependant origination"and "causation" are fully applied to its elements (dharmas). This is clearly stated in THS texts, but this law of causation is not applicable to "true suchness" as a whole. Though there is no clear explanation of this topic in THS, it can be understood that otherwise "true suchness" also should be considered as just another element of a higher system, a certain "super-true suchness" which includes many other "true suchnesses" as subjects of the causation law.

As mentioned above, the real innovation of THS was an reinterpretation of identity between "true suchness" and "dharmas" as a dialectical dynamic identity between a system and its elements. But if Hegelian dialectics imply a notion of a development and progress, THS theory denies them. And if we accept the suggested explanation, it

[7] Hakamaya Noriaki 袴谷憲昭, "*Hongaku shiso hihan-no igi*" 本覚思想批判の意義 Hongaku shiso hihan 本覚思想批判, Tokyo: Daizo shuppan, 1990, 1–34.

becomes clearer how it is possible to assert that "dharmas" (elements of a system) are clearly distinguishable entities, but in their multiplicity they are not distinguishable from a "true suchness" system) as whole and thus possess no "self-nature" different from the "true suchness"

The necessity of "wisdom-knowledge" also not denied in THS. But "wisdom" according to THS interpretation does not cause unambiguous transformations of knower as were considered before. "Knowledge" is understood as more like "awareness" of a status quo rather than a radical insight causing fundamental transformations—a knower does not "become buddha" because he is a buddha from the very beginning. But it should be taken into consideration that such "knowledge" is revealed only after a substantial preliminary process of education and spiritual perfection. Thus it would be difficult to agree that THS completely denied practice, "wisdom" etc., but at the same time it should be admitted that THS interpretation potentially can be used as justification for the "any practice is not necessary" attitude.

Therefore, we can conclude that THS does not disagree with basic notions of Mahayana Buddhism and can be justly seen as a further development of the "non-duality" attitude so peculiar to this tradition. On the other hand, the problem of influences on the Mahayana tradition that promotes its development in this direction is quite admissible. And here it is wholly possible to comply with the opinion of Hakayama Noriaki that the development was influenced by so-called "local teachings". However, to my mind, this influence was not distorting, but rather orientating. This influence just prompted a development of Buddhist thought in a certain direction.

The relationship between THS and the Japanese ethos

In this connection it is quiet proper to raise a question about relations between THS and Japanese culture.

Many scholars admit that THS exercised a substantial influence upon different concrete forms of Japanese culture like, tea ceremony, Noh etc[8]. However, I think that it is necessary to consider first of all the influence of Japanese spiritual culture on Buddhism. I mean here a way of thinking, a certain mindscape, the ethos of Japanese people, which only afterwards has been revealed and developed in particular forms of art and literature.

It can definitely be said that a certain spiritual mindscape existed in Japan even before the introduction of Buddhism. Japan was not a land of spiritual vacuum, just a "reception plate" for foreign culture. Its spirituality was not systematised or rationally structured. Even the very word "Shinto" was coined to distinguish it from Buddhism in the 6th century. But it was Shinto, an initially non-verbalised world view, that exercised a decisive influence on the development of Buddhism in Japan. And one of the many fruits of this influence was the formation of the THS tradition.

The specific world view of Shinto characterised by the absence of any sharp boundary between the spiritual and natural world, sacred and profane, nature and human beings, religion and secular life, individual and community, and thus between the human mind or ego and the surrounding world. As a result the whole external world is charged with powers that may be called mental or spiritual. The Japanese called these spiritual powers "kami" which are sometimes distinguished as separate entities residing in awesome places—mountains, trees, rocks, rivers etc., but they are not ultimately separated and share a common essence. This essence is common to some extent to human beings as well, because they were not created, but born of kami. It can be said that the early Japanese took it for granted that

[8] For example, see Sueki Fumihiko 末木文美士, Nihon bukkyo shi 日本仏教史, Shinchosha, 1992, 137–138, or Okubo Ryoshun 大久保良峻, "*Hongaku shiso*" 本覚思想, Nihon bukkyo ron 日本仏教論, Tokyo: Shunshusha, 1995, 110.

they were integrally part of the cosmos, which they saw as a "community of living beings", all sharing the "kami" (sacred) nature. Much of this world view is preserved in the Shinto tradition even now. The Japanese myths mention the existence of eight hundred myriads of "kami", a metaphor employed to express belief in the sacredness of the whole universe.

Shinto never considers life to be unconditionally bad, or that a life fundamentally is "suffering" as original Buddhism implies. Shinto also does not share the Christian view that a human being is sinful from the moment of birth. Thus Shinto considers misfortunes or unhappiness not as evidence of the fundamental badness of life in this world, but as a sign of a temporal disharmony, which should be overcome here and now.

Shinto shows a lack of interest in any radical notion of salvation. Shinto does not require radical transformation and does not look for salvation after death. Salvation is attainable in this life; it is just an overcoming of temporal disharmony. Members of the Shinto community are expected to solve their problems here and now. And this "here and now" is everlasting.

Shinto lacks a notion of history as a time-limited development from the beginning to the end. History is just a repetition of endless cycles of birth and death. There is no notion of development or progress in Shinto.

And this attitude is basically similar to the Buddhist world view and maybe somewhat eased the naturalisation of Buddhism on Japanese soil.

But the initial Buddhist attitude to these cycles of birth and death was negative, and probably this attitude has changed under the influence of the life-asserting Shinto mindscape. Also it can be said that the Shinto perception of the world as a unity of distinguished entities simultaneously sharing the common essence influenced the development of an initial Buddhist idea of "non-duality" which was

finally interpreted as positive unity in the THS tradition.

The similarity of the THS interpretation with the Shinto world view allows us, with certain exaggeration, of course, to consider THS as a systematical manifestation of the Shinto mindscape with the help of Buddhist terminology. Buddhist philosophical language was used purportedly to formulate Shinto ideas in Watarai, Yoshida Shinto etc., but THS also can be considered as a theoretical expression of the Shinto mindscape, though, probably, an unintended one.

But Buddhism shares with Shinto one substantial "weakness" I have already mentioned above that it is impossible to establish in Buddhist teaching based on the "non-duality" assumption a clear-cut absolute distinction between good and bad. Many times "identity" between good and bad is clearly stated in Mahayana Buddhist texts.

And we cannot find any absolute authority on what is good and what is bad in Shinto as well. There is no absolute criterion for judgement. As George Sansom pointed out, "The conception of sin in Shinto, as distinct from uncleanness, is wanting, or rudimentary"[9].

"The consummation of a marriage is no less defiling than adulterous intercourse, a blow or a wound pollutes both parties to a conflict, and generally we find that the early religion is almost entirely deficient in abstract ideas of morality"[10].

Thus when the establishment of the Tokugawa regime brought a sense of relative stability , and the main question was not of how to escape the world, but how to live in this world, the problem of practical ethics came into light. A traditional case-by-case judgement was not already efficient in a more sophisticated society, but Buddhism also was of little help because of the above mentioned reasons. And it was Confucian moral teaching that was used for theoretical justification of moral principles. Perhaps here we can find a partial explanation for the decline of Buddhism and the rise of Confucianism in the

[9] Sansom, George Japan: A Short Cultural History. Tokyo: Tuttle, 1974, 53.
[10] Ibid., 52.

Tokugawa period. If Buddhism was efficient as a medium for verbalising the "metaphysics" of the Shinto mindscape and formulating its creed, Confucian ethics were used with certain modifications as a moral code of Shinto, which was supplemented with some Christian notions after Meiji.