MACHIDA Sōhō, *Renegade Monk: Hōnen and Japanese Pure Land Buddhism.* Translated and edited by Ioannis Mentzas. ix + 203 pp. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. Cloth $40.00. ISBN: 0-520-21179-0.

DESPITE THE BULK of Japanese works on Hōnen, the so-called "founder" of the first independent Pure Land sect in Japan has been remarkably underrepresented in Western studies on Japanese religion. Hence, the publication of Machida Sōhō's book *Renegade Monk: Hōnen and Japanese Pure Land Buddhism,* it seems, should be welcomed. The text on the dust jacket optimistically predicts that "this book will become the definitive source on Honen's life and thought for decades to come." To be candid from the outset: I hope and I believe that it will not!

The best thing that I can say about *Renegade Monk* is that its approach is quite original and unconventional indeed. An inspection of the bibliography reveals that Machida is not attempting a typical rendition of Japanese Hōnen studies. Most of the major Japanese works on Hōnen and the Pure Land tradition are missing. Western studies on Hōnen are completely absent, accept for Coates and Ishizuka's *Hōnen the Buddhist Saint* (1925). In his Introduction, Machida in fact claims that "the only anglophone publication to this day is Coates and Ishizuka's volume from almost half a century [sic!] ago" (p. 21). Machida entirely ignores journal articles on Hōnen in English, such as those by Allan Andrews. I will refrain from lamenting about the complete neglect of any "single full-length work of academic quality on Hōnen" in other European languages such as my own. Instead of standard works on Hōnen

and Japanese Buddhism we find names such as Bataille, Derrida, Foucault, Freud, Heidegger, Jung, Marx, and Nietzsche.

The table of contents fails to give the simple-minded reader the slightest idea of what might be the contents of the six chapters: "Constructed Death," "This Side of Despair," "Imagination and Experience," "Death and Imagination," "The Ethic of Inversion," "The Degeneration of Death." At least one thing is obvious: death plays a major role in Machida's study.

Machida distinguishes four different scholarly approaches to Hōnen: (1) "sectarian research"; (2) the historical approach of "historians of Japanese Buddhism"; (3) "the philosophical 'take'"; and (4) the "literary" approach (pp. 19–22). Machida describes his own approach—"intellectual history"—as being close to the second category. On page 87, however, he gets more to the point; namely, that he does not only disregard the existing scholarly works on Hōnen but that he is also not willing to engage in any kind of painstaking examinations of primary sources. He states, "an exclusively intertextual approach to Hōnen—one that would examine his thought strictly within a scriptural realm whose hub would be the Pure Land tradition—is grossly insufficient. If we want to truly understand Hōnen, if we want to do justice to him, then we must commit the sin of positing an outside view transcending the textual field..." (p. 87). The principal methodological problems with the book can thus be stated in two questions: What does "understand" mean? And, which method enables the scholar "to truly understand Hōnen"? Unfortunately, Machida does not seem to bother himself with hermeneutical problems; his book does not exhibit any thorough knowledge of the subject matter nor any consciousness of methodological problems. Before substantiating this admittedly rather harsh judgement, let me first try to summarize Machida's main points.

Machida emphasizes the chaos of late Heian society that leads to a widespread sense of crisis and an increased anxiety over death. He claims that the exploited masses were exposed to the permanent threat of physical death, which they witnessed daily on the streets of Kyoto. This fear was even heightened by those who could profit from such a fear: the priests of "Old Buddhism." Buddhist priests vividly described the horrors of hell, since the "religious establishment discovered that the concept of hell was an effective technique for capturing minds and, through them, bodies" (p. 34). As Buddhists taught the theory of an endless cycle of birth and death (samsara), people could not even resort to the expectation of final death, the "sole object of nihilistic hope" (p. 47). Hōnen, says Machida, was the one who overcame the menace of death by equating it with salvation by Amida. Thus, "Hōnen's singularity lay neither in simplifying the practice nor in popularizing the theory of Pure Land worship." Rather, the "most significant characteristic of Hōnen's labor" was that he turned "inside out the meaning of death, imaginatively" (p. 95).

Machida's point is as unspectacular as it is questionable. There is good reason to doubt whether the idea of samsara ever played a decisive role in the soteriological thinking of Heian Buddhism. Death had always been regarded as a "gate to salvation." Theories about salvation in this life never really domi-

nated the common soteriological discourse. Especially in the Pure Land cult (long before Hōnen entered the stage) death simply was the inevitable condition for being saved by Amida. This accounts for a considerable number of suicides both in China and Japan by people who chose to take the "shortcut" to Sukhāvatī. Also, it is simply not true that "Hōnen hoisted the banner of salvation upon death as absolutely final... precisely... against the Buddhist idea of transmigration along the six ways" (p. 82). Hōnen never rejected the idea of transmigration but showed an exit that was easily accessible.

According to Machida, Hōnen's allegedly new interpretation of death as salvation had strong political implications. Accordingly, he is trying to convince us that Hōnen was a revolutionary thinker who was hostile to the feudal "statute system" and propagated a "liberation theology." Like the Christian-Marxist liberation theology of Latin America, "exclusive-*nembutsu* exceeded its bounds as a revolutionary religious doctrine and grew into a social movement with politico-economic impact" (p. 6). Although there was, undoubtedly, a subversive element inherent in Hōnen's doctrine, it was certainly not his interpretation of death. Unfortunately, Machida fails to provide any substantial argument to back his hypothesis.

It is a major feature of Machida's book that it contains a number of far-reaching and rather unorthodox theories that are never convincingly verified. At times the author even seems to deliberately distort facts in order to make them serve his argumentation. Let me give one important example.

One of Machida's major points is the assumption that Hōnen had meditative visions of the Pure Land that assured him of birth in Sukāvatī after his death. Here he refers to a document known as *Sanmai hottoku ki,* which describes the visions Hōnen had when he intensely performed the vocal *nenbutsu* early in the year 1198. Machida does not even mention that the authenticity of this account, which exists in different versions, is disputed because meditative visions like this were clearly *hi-Hōnen-teki.* Machida simply takes the account as historical fact. More importantly, he even tries to convince his audience that Hōnen might have had such experiences even before he left the *bessho* Kurodani on Mt. Hiei in 1175. Again without presenting any evidence he states that "Hōnen probably had similar experiences during his ascetic days and nights in Kurodani" (p. 65). He could of course have mentioned one of the oldest hagiographic accounts of Hōnen, the *Genkū Shōnin shinikki,* which reports that in 1175 "the saint, at age forty-three, entered the Pure Land way for the first time and effortlessly had visions of the Pure Land." Apparently, however, Hōnen's visions are meant to be the consequence rather than the cause of his conversion. Be that as it may, without even mentioning this account or any other evidence, Machida finally claims, "It is true that Hōnen experienced *zanmai hottoku* while he was under the tutelage of Eikū" (p. 124). For Machida, this is an important point, because he is trying to show that Hōnen's conversion to the *ikkō senju nenbutsu* did not result from his textual studies (as the source materials and established scholarship claim) but from his "mystical experience" in which Hōnen's "body became one with that of the Buddha" (p. 131). The alleged importance that Hōnen ascribed to meditative visions was, according to Machida, also one

major reason for his strict adherence to the precepts. In order to substantiate this point, Machida quotes from a conversation Hōnen reportedly had with his disciple Benchō. Hōnen is quoted as saying, "If one's *shira* [i.e., *śīla*] is impure, one cannot expect to have the samādhi experience (HSZ, 459)." Machida concludes from this passage that "Hōnen had to actively regulate his physical conditions so that the purity of his meditations would remain pure" (p. 107). However, if read in its proper context, the passage reveals that Hōnen was intending to make exactly the opposite point. Instead of providing an argument in favor of the adherence to the precepts as a precondition for the attainment of samādhi, he simply intends to convey the idea that one should forget about the precepts, meditation, and knowledge and rely solely on the vocal *nenbutsu,* chosen as the correct practice by Amida when he established his Original Vow! This is precisely what distinguishes the Pure Land faith from the "Holy Path."

There are many more examples of obvious misinterpretations in *Renegade Monk* that cannot be mentioned here due to limitations of space. For instance, it bewilders me how a scholar who has written his Ph.D. dissertation on Hōnen can possibly misinterpret the famous summary of Hōnen's *nenbutsu* doctrine (*Ichimai kishōmon*) as a pledge (like the *Shichikajō seikai*) to be sworn on by his disciples and a warning against heretical tendencies (p. 8).

One basic problem with the book is the author's complete lack of awareness concerning methodological problems. Machida's treatment of hagiographic materials, for instance, is arbitrary and naive at best. Machida accepts at face value the data provided by hagiographers, as long as they serve his argument, while ignoring others that might contradict his hypothesis. At no point does he attempt a basic source critique; his reasons for choosing one account and leaving aside another are never explained.

It is indeed puzzling how Machida ignores both modern scholarly and traditional sectarian interpretations of major events in Hōnen's life. For instance, no reference is made to the significance of Hōnen's encounter with Shandao in a dream. Not even mentioning the function of the hagiographic account within the Pure Land tradition, Machida indulges in speculations that Hōnen may have been inspired by the setting sun that he often saw from Kurodani (p. 91).

Furthermore, I cannot see why the widespread medieval Japanese belief in "vindictive spirits" should be interpreted in terms of the *Entfremdungs-Theorie* as explained by Marx in his *Philosophisch Ökonomische Manuskripte* of 1844. What is the point in asserting that the same mechanism of *Entäußerung* (externalization) is at work in the belief in spirits as is in the process of *entfremdete Arbeit* (alienated labor)?

Without ever questioning Eliade's theories on shamanism, Machida applies them to Hōnen. Consequently, Hōnen is not only a revolutionary, a mystic, a liberation theologian, and so forth, but also a shaman. He is endowed with "shamanistic powers" (p. 106), his samādhi is described as a "cataleptic trance," his vocal *nenbutsu* as an "epileptic trance" (p. 110).

The question must be raised for whom this book was written. It is quite useless for those who need basic information on Hōnen because it contains

almost no data and lacks chronological order. It must be asked why Machida, who is well aware of—or even overestimates—the lack of anglophone studies on Hōnen, did not write a more conventional book, providing readers with basic information before establishing lofty but unprovable theories. I am inclined to think that the book is also rather useless for experts in Japanese religion because of its lack of methodological awareness, the uncritical and irreflective way of treating source materials, the arbitrariness in (ab)using Western theories, and so forth. Since virtually all major theses in the book are groundless and lacking evidence, *Renegade Monk* is not even suited to stimulate a scholarly debate.

However, other scholars seem to appreciate the book and strongly recommend reading it. Alfred Bloom praises Machida for his "original and highly stimulating approach" and is sure that "this book will make excellent reading in courses on world religion, and Japanese religion and society." Kenneth Tanaka believes that "The West's perception of Pure Land Buddhism has been forever transformed by this superb work," and Unno Taitetsu predicts that "Soho Machida's original, provocative study of Hōnen secures his place in Japanese intellectual history." (All quotations from the back cover.)

In the end every reader has to judge the book on his or her own; all I can do is warn against an uncritical reception.

Christoph Kleine
Marburg University