# ENLIGHTENMENT IN THE FINAL AGE

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# THE SINGLE PRACTICE MOVEMENTS OF HONEN, SHINRAN AND NICHIREN

By

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A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

MASTER OF ARTS (1997)McMaster University

(Religious Studies) Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Enlightenment in the Final Age: The Single Practice Movements of Honen, Shinran and Nichiren.

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NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 82

## ABSTRACT

It is not entirely clear why medieval Japanese Buddhist figures moved away from earlier practices and doctrinal positions which were tolerant of a variety of teachings. Jackie Stone, in her articles "Seeking Enlightenment in the Last Age: Mappo Thought in Kamakura Buddhism Parts I and II" introduces a hypothesis that addresses this very issue. She argues that the idea of the sole validity of a single path to enlightenment in Kamakura times was not only relatively new but also resulted from "*mappo* consciousness" (an awareness of living in a Degenerate Age) emerging at this point in Japanese Buddhist history. Stone's argument is based on an assumption. She takes for granted that the portrayal of Kamakura times as corrupt by Nichiren and other Buddhist leaders is secular and is not vested with religious interpretations. I shall present the possibility that the religious leaders Stone discusses responded to their own interpretation of events by putting forth a "new" practice and did not necessarily respond to a historical reality in Kamakura times of *mappo* when they introduced their single practice for enlightenment.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my advisory committee who has profoundly affected my development as a graduate student. Professor Koichi Shinohara not only shaped this project at the outset but guided me through the thesis process and M.A. program with great patience and encouragement. *Sensei osewaninarimashita.* Professor Phyllis Granoff's comments on this project and suggestions for further study have increased significantly my interest in this area of research and have prevented my focus from narrowing excessively. Also I would like to acknowledge Professor Stephen Westerholm who read and commented on this thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

A discussion of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism and Kamakura Buddhism in Japan often leads to a discourse on *mappo* thought. *Mappo*--the age of the Final Dharma--is a central doctrine within Chinese Pure Land and within Japan it is said to characterize the times of the mid-eleventh century and twelfth century. This Buddhist doctrine is described as the foundation of the new Buddhist movements of many Kamakura Buddhist leaders.[1] *Mappo* thought has its roots in China and was inherited by the religious leaders of Kamakura Japan; however, a closer look at some of the more prominent "new" leaders of this time in Japan reveals that *mappo* doctrine may not necessarily play the lead role that it is often assigned within such discussions.

Jackie Stone, in "Seeking Enlightenment in the Last Age: *Mappo* Thought in Kamakura Buddhism, Parts I and II", captures the essence of the well-established theory that *mappo* thought is part of the foundationof "Kamakura Buddhism". The focus of this paper will be in part a critical evaluation of Stone's argument.[2]

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[1] The term "Kamakura Buddhism" usually refers to the Buddhism of a few prominent "new" leaders of Kamakura Japan--Honen, Shinran, Nichiren, Dogen, etc. Because scholars have tended to focus on only theses few monks, the term "Kamakura Buddhism" is now being expanded to include all the minor figures and established institutions of this time in Japan, not just the "new" leaders and practices which then emerged.

[2] It must be stressed that Jackie Stone herself has modified some of her older views in her more recent articles, which perpetuated assumptions based on a now-outmoded model of Kamakura Buddhism. See my bibliography for references to these articles. Nonetheless, her article is still currently referred to as one of the more important works addressing *mappo* thought which the "new" Buddhist movements accommodated.

Foremost in this evaluation, I shall look at the passages within Stone's work which "describe" Kamakura history. Stone characterizes the period as having a growing mood of terror resulting from the realization of living in "the end of times". This realization came about as a consequence of plague, natural disasters, toppling of the political structure by the warrior class and general unease. The Japanese cognizance of the uneasiness surfaced with an immediacy rarely experienced under more "tranquil times", Stone declares.

Looking only at Honen, Shinran and Nichiren I shall summarize Stone's understanding of how these leaders came to formulate their movements. Their practices, Stone maintains, grew out of their response to the times which they saw as corrupt.

Ultimately, I hope to re-examine the influence of *mappo*, the specific historical events and the leaders's responses to them by looking afresh at the passages Stone uses to describe history and religious rhetoric. This rhetoric, I shall argue, has mistakenly been taken to describe the reality of Kamakura Japan.

I shall argue that passages which Stone suggests describe the reality of Kamakura Japan in fact serve an agenda for the religious leader who is proposing a solution to living in supposedly "corrupt" times. (With the term "agenda" I do not mean to suggest that the religious leaders were at all aware that the solutions they posed were "new movements" that needed to be legitimated.) Thus, they cannot be relied on as offering accurate historical accounts of medieval Japan.

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dissonance". Thus, the depiction of Kamakura Japan was a time of more disruptions and unease than any other time in Japanese history simply is not substantiated.

Finally, the question arises, how do we understand the rhetoric offered by religious leaders and what purpose do such depictions of history and salvation serve? Turning to a notion well discussed in biblical scholarship--salvation history--we may find an answer to these questions. I hope to show how understanding Honen's, Shinran's and Nichiren's views as a "construction" of a salvation history allows a clearer look at what these leaders were saying and how they were responding to historical events.

**PART ONE**

**An analysis of the representation of single practice movements arising in Buddhism during Kamakura times:**

This section will present Jackie Stone's argument that single practice movements were a response by Honen, Shinran and Nichiren to the realization of *mappo* brought on by calamities during the Kamakura period. I shall present the historic "calamities" as religious rhetoric and argue that in fact the events of Kamakura Japan were no more treacherous than the previous time in Japanese history.

Stone on "Kamakura Buddhism"

In keeping with the structure of Stone's articles I shall summarize the portions of her articles which discuss *mappo*, Honen, Shinran and Nichiren in that order.

*Mappo*:

Buddhist tradition holds that the age of the Final Dharma, due to human depravity, was a time when the teachings of the Buddha would become obscured and salvation would be nearly impossible to attain. Jackie Stone argues that by the latter part of the Heian Period (794-1185) a majority of Japanese believed that the world had entered the period of *mappo*. She maintains that by the mid-eleventh century,

> natural disasters, social instability and widespread corruption among the Buddhist clergy lent seeming credence to scriptural predictions about the evil age of

> *mappo*--predictions which in turn gave form to popular anxieties, feeding the growing mood of terror, despair and anomie known as *mappo* consciousness.
>
> Stone 1985, 28.

It was *mappo* thought that Stone suggests was the heritage of the founders of the new Buddhist movements of the Kamakura period (1185-1333).

All of the leaders, she maintains, were compelled to answer in some way the fears and aspirations that consciousness of living in the Final Age represented. Stone continues by questioning what connection there is between *mappo* thought and the quality of universality--one practice which ensures salvation for all beings--which characterizes Kamakura Buddhism.

In an attempt to draw this connection, Stone looks to the "founders of Kamakura Buddhism" and finds that they asked the question of how one should seek enlightenment in a time when the Pure Dharma would be lost.

*Honen*:

As part of her introduction to the Pure Land Buddhists in Japan, Honen and Shinran, Stone argues that Honen "inwardly divided by ugly power struggles" at Mt. Hiei, was the first of the Buddhist leaders of the Kamakura period to formulate a doctrine specifically in terms of *mappo* thought (34). She states:

> The corruption he saw around him and his acute reflection on his own spiritual shortcomings confirmed in him the belief that `already the age is that of *mappo*, and its people all are evil.' While attaining liberation by the traditional path of high resolve and personal endeavor might be possible in theory, his own sense of frustration and failure in the monastic disciplines caused him to despair of its realization in practice.
>
> Stone 1985, 35.

Honen thus is said to have resolved to abandon all other practices and to rely solely upon chanting the name of Amida Buddha.

Jackie Stone creates a causal link between Honen's awareness of the corruption at Mt. Hiei and his resolution to chant the name of Amida. Included in this connection is Honen's realization that the age is *mappo* and the people's abilities are degenerate. Ultimately Stone hopes to assert that Honen's exclusive choice of a single way of practice stemmed in part from the phenomenon of *mappo* consciousness. We will see later that this understanding of Honen's movement ignores how Honen borrowed his ideas about *mappo* and an easy practice from earlier Chinese Pure Land Buddhists. I shall return to this point.

While outlining Honen's convictions in the *Senchakushu*, Stone further argues that Honen chose the *nembutsu* as the only practice valid in the Final Dharma Age. Stone outlines two reasons for Honen's exclusive choice of the *nembutsu*: the *nembutsu* is superior while other practices are inferior; this one practice is easy. Thus, Stone asserts, "Honen defined the practice appropriate to the time of *mappo* as one that 1) possesses the merit of all other practices within itself, and 2) can be practised universally" (38).

Honen's views were derived from *Mappo tomyo ki* (The Candle of the Latter Dharma) in part and this influenced his definition of the practice appropriate to the time of the Degenerate Age, Stone argues. This treatise states:

> as the world moves farther and farther away from the time of the historical Buddha, human capacity to observe the monastic precepts inevitably declines, until, by the time of *mappo*, no one will be capable of keeping the precepts at all.
>
> Stone 1985, 39.

The idea that the precepts are inappropriate for the time thus led to Honen's propagation of a single practice, according to Stone's argument.

In teaching that the precepts had no bearing on one's salvation in the Final Age, Honen's doctrine, the easy practice of *nembutsu*, made salvation readily acceptable. Honen, Stone insists, believed that common mortals of the *mappo* era could not possibly achieve spiritual advancement through self effort; rather, one ought to chant the nembutsu to attain salvation. The view that enlightenment was something attainable after many lifetimes was a source of despair, inherently discriminatory and had fallen into disfavour with Honen because of his belief in the degeneracy of human capabilities in the Final Age.

*Shinran*:

His writings reaffirms Honen's conclusion that only the *nembutsu* can lead the ignorant to salvation and, Stone asserts it is *mappo* thought that he uses to buttress his argument. Admonishing: "Monks and lay believers of the present age should both recognize their own [limited] capacity", Shinran is said to identify the degeneracy of the age with his own sense of inadequacy and sinfulness (Stone 1985, 43). That is, his thoroughly internalized *mappo* consciousness gives rise to many unique elements in Shinran's Pure Land thought (Stone 1985, 44).

Shinran's uniqueness lies in his emphasis on *tariki*--other power--or Amida's grace. Stone suggests that this unique trait of Shinran's teachings results from Shinran's

having looked deeply into his own heart, concluding that people in the degenerate age of *mappo* could not perform even the slightest good deed.

Shinran's emphasis on *tariki* extended also to the *nembutsu* itself. That is, where Honen emphasized the importance of repeated recitation of the *nembutsu*, Shinran argued that such an emphasis on the number of recitations suggested the importance of self-exertion or effort and not other power. Thus, one recitation uttered in faith was sufficient to attain salvation.

Another unique trait of Shinran's teachings was his belief that faith, given by Amida, once arising in the heart allows a person to attain the stage of non-regression and assures him or her of rebirth in the Pure Land. Shinran argues that faith only arises after one is convinced of one's own depravity.

A sense of personal inadequacy, according to Stone, is an integral part of Shinran's doctrines. Recognition of one's inadequacy is inseparable from *mappo* consciousness. Stone says: "The degeneracy of the times and the limitations of the individual were in his view ultimately one and the same" (47).

In summarizing Honen's and Shinran's development of single practices in Pure Land, Stone argues that Honen defined the vocabulary of contemporary *mappo* thought that any religious leader after him would be compelled to address--time and people's capacities, attaining enlightenment through self-effort, the validity of monastic precepts in the Final Age and the ease of a single practice. All of these issues and the single practice itself stemmed from the consciousness of the leaders of the Degeneracy of the Age in which they lived.

*Nichiren*

Much like Honen, Nichiren also taught a single practice to attain enlightenment in the Last Age. Nichiren asserted that in the Final Age people could attain Buddhahood by chanting the title of the Lotus Sutra. According to Stone, Nichiren's *mappo* thought is striking because it affirms that the Final Age is the most ideal time for attaining salvation.

Unlike Honen's and Shinran's personal sense of inadequacy, Nichiren's search for a teaching valid in the *mappo* era stemmed "from a desire for objective truth" (Stone 1985, 44). She argues:

> Contention among rival Buddhist sects--exemplifying the *Ta-chi-ching*'s prediction of an age when `quarrels and disputes will arise among the adherents to my teachings'--along with the glaring failure of the established religious institutions to alleviate the nation's suffering, awoke in him a resolve to discover which, among the so-called `eighty-thousand teachings,' represented the Buddha's true intention and could benefit people in the last age.
>
> Stone 1985, 44.

Nichiren ultimately concludes that the Lotus Sutra represents the pinnacle of Buddha's teachings.

Nichiren believed, Stone tells us, that people no longer had the capacity to attain full realization of the truth through its manifestations in sutras other than the Lotus. Since this belief followed the traditions of Chih-i (538-597) and Saicho (767-822), Stone argues that Nichiren's uniqueness was in the practice he established--the universal practice of chanting the sutra's title. The practice he propounds is closely tied to his view of *mappo*, Stone asserts. His teaching combined a discipline capable of universal practice and the doctrine of attaining Buddhahood as a common mortal.

*Stone's synthesis of the leaders and their practices in the Final Age*

In summation, Stone declares that "it would appear that these forms [single practices] had greater relevance to the religious needs of the times--represented by the overwhelming phenomenon of *mappo* consciousness--..." (Stone 1985, 55). Thus, the emergence of a single, exclusive form of practice is closely connected to *mappo* thought in Stone's conclusion. She continues:

> The frame of mind known as "*mappo* consciousness" would thus have included both an unusually sharp recognition of impermanence and the anxiety invariably attendant upon that recognition, as well as a deeper, religious fear, born of realizing that prior sources of spiritual aid would no longer suffice. It seems reasonable to imagine that, under these pressures, numbers of people awakened to a new level of religious maturity capable of actively seeking salvation through pursuit of the absolute. Certainly it seems feasible to view Kamakura Buddhism, at least in part, as an expression of such a shift in religious consciousness.
>
> Stone 1985, 63.

Stone concludes that the historic events led to *mappo* consciousness which in turn had a causal role or was a catalyst in the emergence of single practice movements in Kamakura Buddhism.

*Mappo* as Rhetoric and not History

Much of what Stone argues was a reality for Kamakura Japan--pestilence, famine, corruption, etc.--can be viewed as rhetoric used by religious leaders. These depictions of Japan led to an interpretation by religious leaders of their present as the time when the Dharma would be lost. The idea of the End of Times was not meant to describe history as we understand that term today. *Mappo* is a religious concept and the events that are described as determining that *mappo* is a reality for Japan can be considered rhetorical.

As an attempt to identify rhetorical passages and show how they fit into a persuasive argument that the time is *mappo*, I shall discuss *mappo*, Honen, Shinran and Nichiren again in that order. The discussions of the religious leaders will further be divided into sections on their lives in historical setting, the nature of their writings and an analysis of their thought concerning *mappo.*

*Mappo*

"*Mappo* consciousness" is a difficult term to understand and define. It is also separate from *mappo* doctrine. I shall create a distinction between the two terms; the doctrine is that found within the Pali, Sanskrit and East Asian scriptures, whereas "consciousness" is a term introduced in the scholarship on Kamakura Buddhism. ,

Within the Pali and Sanskrit scriptures, the idea of the Decline existed indeed; however, there never was a systematization of it as found in China and Japan. There was no clearly formulated theory of Three Ages. Mainly, the notion of the deteriorating Dharma was discussed with reference to women entering the *Sangha* or as a warning for monks to maintain the precepts but it was never entirely accepted as a time within which people currently lived.[3]

Even in Japan, knowledge of the Three Ages did not necessarily lead to the belief in the continuous decline of the teaching and deterioration of human beings (Marra 1988, 33). For instance, Kyokai (757?), one of the first to present a theory about *mappo* in

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[3] For a thorough examination of the Decline of the Dharma as it was understood in India, Tibet and China see Jan Nattier's Once Upon a Future Time.

Japan, aimed his teaching at leading people to good and showing them how to cleanse themselves of evil in a deteriorating age. Either he could not accept the consequences of the theory of living in the Final Age and advocated a belief in human capabilities of improvement, or the definition of *mappo* at the time of its introduction to Japan meant something very different from what it meant by the time of Honen (1153-1212), Shinran (1173-1262) and Nichiren (1222-1282), all of whom advocated a belief in human degeneracy.

Not only did different religious leaders mean different things by the term *mappo*, but the East Asian Buddhists had a great difficulty fleshing out the actual dates of the Age of Decline. That is, the trend seems at first--during Buddhism's inception in Japan--to reject the belief of actually living in a time when the teaching is lost and humans cannot attain salvation. Debates over Shakyamuni's dates and the periods of successive decline ensued. The most popular theory, I suspect because it postpones the date of the Decline as late as possible, is to take Shakyamuni's death as 949 B.C. The True Age lasted for 500 years, the Imitation Age for 1000 years and the start of the Final Age would have been 1052.[4]

Until the tenth century in Japan, *mappo* was mainly seen as belonging to the future. That is, monks such as Saicho (767-822), Ancho (763-814), Gen'ei of the Sanron sect (@ 840), Zan'an (@ 776-815) of the Hosso school and Annen (841-884) of the Tendai sect never stated that they were already living in the time of *mappo* (Marra 1988,

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[4] Michele Marra investigates completely the understanding of the Three Ages in Japanese Buddhism in "The Development of Mappo Thought in Japan Parts I,II,"Japanese Journal of Religious Studies.

40). By such monks who discussed *mappo* in the ninth century, *mappo* decidedly was something to come in the future. Mostly, monks in ninth century Japan admitted to living in the time of the Imitation Dharma Age. Marra argues:

> Up to this time [ninth century Japan] there was no doubt that the Buddhist Law could be restored to its old glory through cooperation with Imperial Law, and this belief was justified by the relative stability of the *ritsuryo* system.
>
> Marra 1988, 40.

Also, Marra adds, different theories about the date of Shakyamuni's death and the duration of the three ages further confused the issue of when the Final Age started. Thus, the realization of living in *mappo* times was postponed until the tenth century.

Genshin, at the beginning of the tenth century, was one of the first to admit that he was living in the Age of the Decline. His work, the *Ojoyoshu* (The Essentials of Salvation) made no mention of a date regarding the beginning of the last age; however, he clearly showed a belief that he was already living in such a dreadful period (Marra 1988, 40). Evidence that Genshin believed that his time was that of *mappo* can be noticed in his detailed descriptions of continuous fighting among monks, war, famine and many natural calamities. Interpreting these events as catastrophes appropriate to the End of Times, Genshin made conscious the period of the Decline as the present time. As a "response" to the "realization" of *mappo*, he started to compile and publish quotations from Buddhist scriptures in order to show common people the way out in such a dreadful time. His solution, found within Tendai interpretations of Jodo beliefs, stressed practices insuring birth in Amida's Pure Land for the individual. Particularly, his concern was for the efficacy of contemplative and invocational *nembutsu*.

The "practical and theoretical" way of meditation on the Buddha and his Pure Land in Chinese Buddhism, Genshin argued, were difficult to undertake (Marra 1988, 41). Therefore, for Genshin, teachings and practices in order to be born in the Pure Land were the most important thing. He suggested:

> Wise people, excellent people, earnest in their devotion, won't find any difficulty to undertake the practices, but for a foolish being like myself, how is it possible to bear them? Therefore I assembled important passages from holy scriptures and Buddhist treatises elucidating the practice of *nenbutsu.* ... it will be easier to understand these teachings and less difficult to undertake such practices.
>
> Marra 1988, 41.

Genshin's solution reacted to the difficulty he perceived in practising the kind of contemplation know as Buddha-mark contemplation in which the forty-two marks of the Buddha had to be mentally visualized in detail (Marra 1988, 46).

As Genshin believed that beings in the Final Age of the Dharma were weak he questioned how these dull and evil beings could reach the Pure Land. His proposed solution was found in the Jodo belief in Amida's eighteenth vow that states Amida's refusal to attain Enlightenment as long as sentient beings are not saved (Marra 1988, 46). As Amida assures salvation for all those who are willing to reach it, mind, attitude, and purpose are more important than practice. Recognizing the Jodo idea of different practices suitable to different capacities of practitioners, Genshin replaced the complicated Buddha-mark contemplation with the simple invocation of Amida's name. Marra states:

> To concentrate one's mind on the recitation of the syllables of Amida's name is worth the extinction of a large amount of bad karma, and will enable the believer to see all the Buddhas of past, present, and future, ... Genshin stressed the importance of invocational *nembutsu* for ordinary beings by quoting the interpretation of Shan-tao (613-681) ... `The obstacle of evil in ordinary beings

> makes difficult the accomplishment of meditational *nenbutsu*. Therefore the Buddha, moved to pity, advised them to simply intone the syllables of his name'.
>
> Marra 1988, 47.

Thus, Genshin offers a simple practice for those living in the time of the Dharma's Decay.

Genshin's tactics--standard for this time--were mainly to frighten or even terrorize people into believing in and wholly accepting his method of salvation. With his pessimism, and his descriptions of the ruin faced by the Buddhist and Imperial Law, he stressed the conflicts between the monks of *Todai-ji* and *Kofukuji*, and stated that the Tendai sect could not play its original role of protector of the country. Thus, Genshin argued the need to turn to Amida.

Genshin's writings warned people of the Last Age to despise their defiled realm. Genshin popularized a belief that all were living in a Final Age. It is not entirely clear that *mappo* was a widespread "deep inner crisis" in the tenth century or that "*mappo* consciousness" was internalized by the people of that time. Nor is it clear that a belief in the Age of the Decline had been realized by the onslaught of natural disasters, corruption, and calamities. What is clear is that Genshin pointed out and described circumstances in light of an understanding that *mappo* was an age within which he was living. After the terror-inducing doctrine was popularized, Genshin saw a need to address the problem of attaining enlightenment and thereby forwarded his own views regarding salvation--Amida Buddha.

Thus, in Genshin, his belief that he was living in *mappo* times prompted a religious agenda to find an appropriate practice for salvation. *Mappo* consciousness

should be seen as a process of proselytisation and not solely as a response to particular historical circumstances.

*Honen*

Much as we did for Genshin, we can trace the rhetoric and religious agenda within Honen's writings to understand how "historical" events were portrayed. It becomes clear that what scholars have understood as history can be viewed as religious rhetoric. To elucidate this, first, I shall look at Honen's life, teachings and *mappo* thought.

*Honen's Life in Historical Setting*

Honen was born in Minamaka province in 1133; his father, Urama Tokikuni, was a local samurai (Matsunaga 1976, 58). Tokikuni was killed in a struggle with a manager of the Retired Emperor Horikawa's estates. Honen, as a result, at nine years of age went to Bodaiji temple for a period of three years. At thirteen, Honen moved on to enter Mt. Hiei, received training in Tendai doctrine and was subsequently ordained by Koen following two years. Three years later, often said to be because of his dissatisfaction with the "worldly atmosphere" of head quarters at Mt. Hiei, Honen went to the Kurodani sector of the mountain to study with a new master, Eiku (Matsunaga 1976, 59). Under Eiku Honen studied the Buddhist scriptures and doctrinal treatises; he concentrated for a time on the Vinaya (Dobbins 1990, 545). This area was a centre for the *nembutsu hijiri* and Pure Land practices. Here, Honen encountered Genshin's meditations.

Honen is said to have visited Nara to study the Six Sects. It is at this point that he would have encountered teachings he incorporated into his practice, such as Other-power. Having read the *Kuan ching shu*, a commentary by the Chinese master Shan-tao on the Pure Land Meditation Sutra, Honen advocated the practice of *nembutsu*. This practice was put forth by Honen as the single and exclusive act leading to enlightenment. Ultimately, he left Kurodani and secretly expounded his teachings about the single practice.

Honen settled in Otani and eventually attracted popularity with his practice.[5] He managed to stimulate interest from aristocratic patrons, members of the samurai class and especially from the established Buddhist sects. Of course, the interest of the latter was not exactly positive. Nonetheless, Honen's practice was growing.

*The Nature of Honen's Writings*

Many were particularly drawn to the *nembutsu* "movement". As the focus of his teachings Honen cited, following Shan-tao's tradition, the eighteenth or original vow of Amida which follows:

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5 When discussing Honen's practice or movement that evolved during his lifetime, it must be remembered that Honen was publicly non-committal about his beliefs. His followers were in "select company" and his teachings were esoteric. That is, not until after his death did his movement take on the full implications of its traits--exclusivity. During his life, Honen defended his practice against accusations of exclusivity or that he rejected other Buddhist sects and practices. Indeed, he defended his practice from many charges; e.g. the *Kofukuji sojo*--article containing nine points of sacrilege committed by *nembutsu* followers.

> If, when I attain Buddhahood, among the living beings in the ten directions--who, aspiring in sincerity and faith to be born in my land, call me to mind ten times--should there be any who fail to be born there, then let me not attain supreme enlightenment.

It is the phrase "Call me to mind" which gives rise to the recitation practice. As Stone points out, "`Call me to mind' here is interpreted as nembutsu ..., literally, `to meditate on the Buddha.'" (Stone 1985, 36). Honen's understanding transforms into the formula *Namu-Amida-Butsu*, *namu* indicates devotion.

The *nembutsu*, recited continuously, could purify previous transgressions. The notion that it could only be effectual for previous sins is important in Honen's thought. Chanting the formula many times would be more beneficial as one is more certain that the evil is cleansed and therefore could not become a hindrance for attaining enlightenment. This idea is in keeping with the Tendai tradition based on "self-power" or personal efforts, although Honen would not have put any merit in the notion of self-effort.

Calling Amida's name was a single exclusive act; it was also said to be simple by Honen:

> There is no secret about calling upon the sacred name except that we put our heart into the act, in the conviction that we shall be born into the Land of Perfect Bliss. We must not think that the expression `*Namu Amida Butsu*' ... means anything but simply `Save me, oh! Amida Buddha.'
>
> Coates 1949, 394.

The *nembutsu* is to "stand by itself"; that is, without the assistance of one's own efforts, aspirations, deeds of charity, etc., one will attain enlightenment. Salvation is achieved solely through the *nembutsu*.

The *nembutsu* includes all practices within itself. Honen maintains its exclusivity for attaining salvation:

> In my eyes, the meaning of Zendo's [Shan-tao] commentaries, when he speaks of the three mental states, of the five forms of prayer, and of the four-fold rule for practising the *Nembutsu*, is that they are all comprehended within the *Namu Amida Butsu*.
>
> Coates 1949, 396.

The single practice of reciting Amida's name is for Honen the most fundamental Buddhist practice of his age. If this was understood then none of Buddhism's other doctrines nor practices would be necessary.

As Honen refers to Shan-tao, it is important to look briefly at this Chinese monk's views on practice. The "right practices" recommended by Shan-tao, summarized by Pas, in the *Kuan-ching shu* are:

> (1) with singleminded attention study and chant these sutras (*tu-sung*); (2) with singleminded attention reflect on (or visualize), inspect, and remain attentive (*anusmrti*) of the twofold reward of Sukhavati (*kuan-ch'a yi-nien*); (3) with singleminded attention worship Amita (*li*); (4) with singleminded attention invoke and praise Amita (*k'ou-ch'eng*); and (5) with singleminded attention praise and present offerings (*tsan-t'an kung-yang*).
>
> Pas 1995, 269.

Whether Shan-tao really has oral recitation in mind exclusively with regard to rebirth in the Pure Land remains to be proven. In fact, there is even question if he means to put forth oral invocation of Amita's name is a practice. Certainly, Pas argues, terms such as *nien* and *ming-hao* come very close to mean recite or read aloud (Pas 1995, 269).

the notion of human despair fits into a larger scheme of religious messages offered by authors much before the time of Honen.

Shan-tao (613-681) talks about the hopelessness of the human situation in the *Kuan Wu-liang-shou-Fo ching shu* (Commentary on the Scripture of Visualizing the Buddha of Infinite Life). His writings greatly influenced Honen's teachings. Shan-tao unquestioningly accepts the idea of the corrupt dharma in his outlook on life (Pas 1995, 144). As Pas points out, in one sentence Shan-tao summarizes the human situation; he lives "in an evil age when the five impurities are flourishing, which are the evil world, evil sentient beings, evil views, evil *kleshas*, and unbelief" (Pas 1995, 145). In this evil age, he proposes an easy practice, not a single practice to save sentient beings. He speaks about the need of singleminded attention for all sentient beings who are mentally scattered and whose minds wander.

Against this view of bleakness is a reason to rejoice--Buddha Amita (Amida) who saves all sentient beings. Shan-tao maintains there is no essential distinction between a sage and a fool, thus, ordinary beings and holy ones are equally perfect with inherent Buddha nature. Unfortunately, "Because screens of delusions deeply cover [man's] essential purity, this purity has no way to manifest itself and to shine forth" (Pas 1995, 145).

Shan-tao created what is known as the "Parable of the White Path" to illustrate humankind's predicament. He depicts a situation of crisis or of a dilemma with only one way of escape--crossing to the other side--but this is impossible because of a paradoxical choice. The parable is said to exemplify the existential crises of human beings in the age

of the Final Dharma (Pas 1995, 147). There is one escape from the predicament--a narrow dangerous white path for a traveller with no escape from wild beasts and robbers in the wilderness or essentially, Amida Buddha as a rescuer of all beings.

Even before Shan tao, Tao ch'o (562-645) advocated one supreme form of practice for one who could not achieve the ten practices. He considered the continuous recitation of "Na-mo O-mi-t'o-fo" as the preferred practice (Chappell 1976, 83).

> In fact, there is a long history of "single practice" in Chinese Buddhism.
>
> The influence of both the *Awakening of Faith* and the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* made one-practice (or one-mark) samadhi a well-known practice, and this, in turn, contributed to the celebration of a specifically Chinese type of Buddhism. Significantly, the appearance of the Pure Land and Ch'an schools was contemporaneous with the compilation of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*. Although these two schools inherited the conception of *i-hsing san-mei* from these two works, they eventually modified its content considerably. From their soteriological outlook, the term *i-hsing san-mei* had to be understood quite literally: the one practice was superior because it included all practices.
>
> Faure 1986, 103-4.

There is this heavy weight of Chinese Buddhist conceptions of single and easy practices behind Honen.[6]

What commands our attention at this point is the question: to what extent can we attribute Honen's practice to the "historic condition" of *mappo* within Japan? We must not overlook the wealth of Buddhist tradition from which Honen was drawing when he formulated his works on an easy single practice in a corrupt age. Included in this tradition was the rhetoric of human depravity, which forced the need for alternative

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[6] To further delve into the theories of Tao-cho and Shan-tao, as well as the understanding of one practice, see respectively: Pas, Chappell and Faure as they are sourced in my bibliography.

methods of salvation. Much like Shan-tao, Honen believed in the darkness of human suffering and the bleakness of the Final Age, however, this was to make people aware of the need to welcome Amida as a rescuer from the depravity of the human condition.

Clearly in his writings Honen regarded his practice or form of Amida worship as specifically suited to the time of *mappo*. This does not mean, however, that it was the historic conditions leading to a mood of *mappo* which occasioned to his views. *Mappo* thought or a belief in human depravity were concepts that were familiar in religious writings. Within these ideas were part of a formula the religious leaders used to appropriate their practices. It is equally as plausible a theory that Honen interpreted the world as corrupt and its people destitute and this lead to *mappo* consciousness, following Genshin's lead. Or, we might argue that he turned to the existing doctrine of *mappo* and through it saw the world as destitute, following thinkers like Shan tao.

Honen discussed his practice in terms of its being fit for the times and used the doctrine of *mappo* to proselytize his teachings. The representation by Honen of the world as "corrupt" and in a state of crisis thus may be driven by his desire to fit his teachings into an established model. Scholars have come to accept this representation as historically accurate and they erroneously present Kamakura times as disordered. They suggest that such disorder led to the acceptance of and internalization of *mappo*. I would argue that well-established religious rhetoric led to a certain way of describing and perhaps perceiving the environment.

*Shinran*

The trend of propagating a practice appropriate to what has been interpreted as the Age of Decline was not new by the time of Shinran. Within this teacher's writings similar rhetoric and a similar "agenda" or "style" can be seen as was noted in Honen's works.

*Shinran's Life in Historical Setting*

Shinran (1173-1262) was a student of Honen who developed further Honen's teachings and style. Shinran became a monk at a young age and spent roughly twenty years on Mt. Hiei (Dobbins 1990, 549). Like Honen, in 1201, Shinran too secluded himself for religious practices; he did this in Kyoto. At this time what is often discussed as a religious revelation of self-depravity created for Shinran an outlook that would shape his teachings. Shinran devoted himself to Honen's teachings.

The relationship between Honen and Shinran did not last long as the two were separated because of persecution of the Pure Land movement in 1207. Due to this suppression Shinran was banished to Echigo Province. After his pardon, Shinran moved to Hitachi Province and actively proselytized the Pure Land teachings (Dobbins 1990, 549).

Claiming himself "neither priest nor layman", Shinran married (thus breaking his earlier Tendai vow of celibacy and severing ties with that sect). He established himself in Kanto region mostly among peasants and humbly saw his role as a seeker.

Shinran acquired a sizable following and it is in Kanto region that he is said to have realized that one single recitation of the *nembutsu* was sufficient for eventual salvation based on faith. He stopped perpetually chanting, thus repudiating Honen's belief in the continuing need to cleanse sins with the *nembutsu*. By roughly 1224, Shinran completed at least the first draft of the *Kyogyoshinsho*, within which is found his teaching.

We shall see that his biography is helpful in understanding Shinran's convictions. I concur with Bloom who says:

> The course of his life has a direct relation to the thought which he formulated for it is quite unlikely had he not been separated from his master Honen, nor chosen to live a life among the peasants of the eastern provinces would he have contributed to the development of Pure Land tradition in such a creative manner as his thought reveals.
>
> Bloom 1968, 1.

Indeed, we can well understand that the social and historical setting influenced Shinran's doctrinal views; however, it is much more difficult to sort out how his life is understood within the *Shinshu* tradition over and against historical events. Often it is the uncritical acceptance of Shinran's biography put forth by himself and the later *Shinshu* tradition that has found its way into scholarship. I shall return to this point below.

*The Nature of Shinran's Writings*

The primary element in Shinran's "teachings" (it is important to note that Shinran never claimed to be a teacher but instead spoke of himself as a student and proponent of Honen's teachings) is a reaffirmation of Honen's conclusion that only the *nembutsu* of

Amida's original vow could lead ignorant and deluded people to salvation. This emphasis on the *nembutsu* is immediate in the *Kyogyoshinsho*:

> The great living is to pronounce the Name of the Nyorai of Unimpeded Light. In this living are embraced all good things and all the roots of merit. They are instantly perfected [as soon as the Name is pronounced.] The name is the treasure-ocean of the merits accruing from the absolute in reality of Suchness.
>
> Suzuki trans. 1973, 15.

Thus, Shinran stresses the Absolute that is contained within Amida's name and its pronunciation.

Because the name contains the merits accruing from the absolute reality of Suchness, the *nembutsu* is acclaimed as the prayer of pervasive salvation and the efficient cause leading to enlightenment for those inadequately equipped. Shinran moves from espousing the effectiveness of his prayer to asserting its benefit even for the lowly.

As Shinran defines the prayer as that of "universal deliverance", he addresses his practice also to ignorant and deluded people. He promises that single-hearted devotion to the *nembutsu* will result in great merit. He states:

> By the `Prayer of universal deliverance' is meant [as is elucidated in *The Larger Sutra*] that any ordinary beings, regardless of their being good or evil, uniformly attain rebirth in the Pure Land [and this] is all due to the power of Amida Buddha's great Prayer which works as the efficient cause.
>
> Suzuki trans. 1973, 41.

Simply calling the Name assures rebirth in Amida's Bliss for **all** sentient beings.

In what is a subtle supplanting of his teacher Honen, Shinran it would seem "fixes" some of Honen's doctrinal positions which, although they had begun to routinize, had some inherent problems. One of the major issues of contention for Myoe, a contemporary of Honen, was Honen's repudiation of all practices other than the

*nembutsu*. Myoe wrote a public treatise--*Zaijairin*--criticizing Honen's movement.[7] Another important accusation by Myoe was that Honen was a hypocrite who espoused a belief in faith in Amida's (other) power yet who propagated a practice based on self effort. Shinran, with his doctrine about complete faith in and reliance on Amida for salvation, does away with Honen's belief that a person's continued recitation and personal effort will cleanse sins.

Shinran viewed the constant reciting of Amida's name with the hope of ridding oneself of sins as a form of self-effort. Shinran asserted that there is absolutely no hope in the end times except through faith, thus one must repudiate self-effort. He argues this belief in the *Kyogyoshinsho*:

> Beings are not to assume or to make it appear outwardly that it is they themselves who are wise, good, and self-exerting, because this would be their egotistic pretension and hypocrisy. In reality, all beings are ... full of unapproachable poisonous evils and variously contriving.... Even when they are bodily, orally, or mentally conducting themselves properly, these deeds on their part are good mixed with poison; ... they are not deeds which are true and real.
>
> Suzuki trans. 1973, 92.

Thus, there is a definite link between Shinran and Honen regarding the benefits of the *nembutsu*; however, Shinran was able to benefit from the outside criticisms made of the single practice movement. He saw fit to amend the practice according to Myoe's serious and well-founded accusations of hypocrisy--if one relies on faith and Amida for salvation what is the need for one's continued recitation? As a consequence, Shinran asserts that instead of performing deeds for salvation one must possess the "true mind".

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[7] Several Japanese scholars have reread the *Kyogyoshinsho* as Shinran's direct reply to Myoe's criticism of Honen. However, no where in Shinran's work is Myoe's name mentioned nor does Shinran engage in polemics with him.

Shinran discusses the true mind as partaking of Amida's mind. Repeating the *nembutsu* accesses this true perfection and is not the result of practising the prayer or of any self-effort. (Just how Shinran believes the *nembutsu* accesses perfection is explained later in the section about Shinran's salvation history.) The believing mind is not attainable per se. That is, one cannot try to achieve this perfection. Perfect mind is a gift and one's believing mind results from such a gift given by Amida.

In his writings Shinran always makes it clear how accessible is the *nembutsu* and how easy it is to practice. Pronouncing Amida's name only once, indeed merely hearing the Name, can lead one to the Buddha Land. Shinran claims that Amida Buddha made his vow whereby he could take in all beings by means of his Name and save them.

*Analysis of Shinran's thoughts of human depravity and mappo*

Shinran in fact did assert that during the Dharma's decline adherents were incapable of maintaining practices. Thus, Shinran denied the idea of returning to clerical strictness and he denied the belief in human capabilities. Whether or not we can thus maintain that *mappo* thought led to the single practice remains to be seen.

If we turn again to his main teachings, we can trace Shinran's thoughts regarding the decline of the Dharma and how this fits into his advocating the *nembutsu*. I would concur that one need not search far to see that Shinran's championing of the *nembutsu* is closely related to his understanding of the times. In "Transformed Buddha and Transformed Land" he states:

> Now be it that the beings of this corrupt age and the beings defiled and vile are now out of the Ways of Ninety-five Heathen and be it that they have now entered

> the gates of Hinayana and Mahayana, and also the Ways of temporary and true, whatever is genuine is extremely hard to find and whatever is real is extremely rare; whatever is false is extremely numerous and whatever is vain attains a great number. At this, Shakyamuni Buddha threw open the gate of the *Store House of Precious Virtues* and led in all beings, and Tathagata Amita already took vows to take in all sentient beings into the Law.
>
> Morikawa trans. 1961, 198.

In suggesting that few genuine teachings can be found in the age and by stating that much in the way of false teachings exists and then offering a haven of sorts through Amida Buddha, Shinran endorses the authority and trustworthiness of the *nembutsu* during corrupt times.

Shinran urges the worst sinners to pronounce the Name since the ordained and not-ordained alike are levelled to one status in defiled times. Thus, seeking enlightenment in the Last Age disregards ability and degree. In his main "text" we find:

> Now all the ordained and the not-ordained of this corrupt age should, without losing a moment, enter the well-accomplished, all perfect `True Gate' and desire for the `*Inconceivable Birth* in the Pure Land'.
>
> Morikawa trans. 1961, 198.

Common mortals and sages are invited at the same level to pronounce the name.

Supplementing his endorsement, if you will, of the *nembutsu*, Shinran cautions for all to be on guard not to believe in the teachings offered by others, which are not fit for people of the latter days to follow. Beings of *mappo* times are prompted to believe deeply in the Buddha's words and devote themselves exclusively to the practice of the *nembutsu*. To believe in others' teachings would cost one the great benefit of a birth in the Pure Land of Amida.

The benefit of the vow is certainly proclaimed foremost in Shinran's works. This tends to translate into a rejection of practising and egotistically maintaining precepts. Shinran declares that refuge in the vow and authority of Amida is the only way to the Pure Land. This view connects with his discussion of the corrupt age as causing defiled and vile beings to cling to temporary and wrong ways. In this degenerate age when the false teachings are numerous one must look to Amida who is True and who will take anyone into the power of his Vow.

Indeed, Shinran tends to identify the degeneracy of the age with his own sense of inadequacy and human depravity, as noted by Stone. This is an obvious conclusion from his writings as Shinran takes many opportunities to be self-deprecating. However, this negative outlook seems only to act as a stepping stone, so to speak, supporting a conclusion which celebrates Amida Buddha. Clearly Shinran abandons practices which rely on his own merit for the joy of acquiring faith in Amida through the *nembutsu*. Nonetheless, to suggest that he realized his own incapacities and found refuge in Amida through faith ignores many subtleties of what was happening. Although there is evidence in "Transformed Buddha and Transformed Land" of developed *mappo* thought where the beings are defiled and corrupt, this doctrine is used to introduce the concept of giving up sundry practises and to assert the joys of Amida. This "chapter" of Shinran's work can be viewed as a testimony to the merit of the *nembutsu* and not as a realization of Shinran's deep-rooted sense of inadequacy.

To support her view that Shinran's *mappo* consciousness is an intense self-reflection, Stone suggests that his pessimism finds expression in the *Shozomatsu*

*wasan*. If we carefully look at this hymn we can see that Shinran's internalized inadequacy plays a role in the solution offered by Amida Buddha. We must be cautioned against assuming that the solution came after the problem was posed. I turn to the hymn:

> Time flows and in the Befoul'd Age
> Gone is the Self-Power now; the Way
> Of Amita is widely spread
> And Nembutsu shows a heyday.
>
> Morikawa trans. 1961, 238.

This section of the *wasan* shows explicitly how the "practice" is understood to have taken hold. The time is that of degeneracy. Self-effort is no longer able to suffice as a "way" or path. Amida Buddha has spread his message and promise for salvation. The *nembutsu* is the way to liberation.

Self-will is portrayed as bad in the hymn only because it leads away from Amida. Again, Shinran's unique advocacy of faith surfaces. It is clear that the recognition of one's limited capacities is inseparable from the problem of *mappo*. In the *wasan* what is missed are the positive elements and praises.

The hymn centres around revelry in Amida, implicit in the hymn is the notion that self-power is insufficient. It rejoices:

> Grieve not that ye lack wisdom bright!
> He is the torch for etern'l gloom.
> Wail not for sins, for his bark will
> Take ye across the flock of doom.
>
> Morikawa trans. 1961, 240.

My reading of the *wasan* is more optimistic than Stone's. I find greater expression is given to praise of Amida's power to bring faith to the desolate; the notion of personal inadequacy is mentioned only as something not to lament as Amida would take in all

people across the doom. It would seem to me that the degeneracy of the age and the degradation of the self are merely playing a subsidiary role in emphasizing Amida Buddha's sincerity and authenticity.

Instead of discussing Shinran's Buddhism as a response to *mappo*, we can see it first as a reaction to Honen's Buddhism, which, to recall, was not necessarily a response to a historic realization of living in the Final Age. After being made well aware of some of the inherent contradictions within Honen's behaviour and teachings, something that was pointed out publicly by Myoe, Shinran responded by addressing these concerns in his own writings.

Instead of continually reciting the *nembutsu*, Shinran claimed he was unable to play any part in his own salvation. Thus, he accepted the doctrine of human depravity, a doctrine which was put forth as a reason to celebrate Amida's saving grace and faith in this salvation. The age as *mappo* is at best secondary within Shinran's thoughts. Foremost is a discussion of Amida's grace in Shinran's work. Realizing one's degeneracy is a step on the way to salvation through grace. Thus, there is evidence of Shinran's pessimism that is expressed in his teachings; however, to focus on this aspect of Shinran's teachings is to ignore the main message of his text--the celebration of Amida.

Shinran was not addressing the contemporary *mappo* thought which Honen first defined; Shinran clearly and readily accepted that. Instead he emphasized the ideology of the practice which Honen propounded--salvation through Amida. Indeed, if Shinran had been responding to the doctrine of the Decline of the dharma in order to create a new practice, he would have had to add something new to Honen's view of the decline. What

he added only inadvertently addressed *mappo*; his thoughts dealt more with faith than degeneracy.

The rhetoric in Shinran's writings which scholars have accepted as a true biographical portrayal serves Shinran's advocation of salvation through Amida. The idea that he is too degenerate to attain enlightenment in his defiled time is part of a persuasive argument to find refuge in Amida.

*Nichiren--life in historical setting*

Nichiren was born into a family of minor samurai in Awa Province in 1222. As a young boy, like Honen and Shinran, he too entered a temple near his birthplace and studied Tendai doctrine. Eventually Nichiren went to Mt. Hiei for training. His principal doctrinal interest was with a form of salvation that was not only personal but imperial as well (Dobbins, 1990 556). Questioning why Imperial ignominies occurred and what the nature of Buddhism was, Nichiren concluded that "just as a nation cannot peacefully function with two rulers, if Buddhism is to be effective there can only be one true sect and one true sutra" (Yampolsky trans. 25, 1990). This resolution prompted his search within Buddhism for this true sutra. Thus, his search was metaphorically linked to concerns of the state. This understanding appears to reflect the long-standing relationship between Tendai and the state.

Nichiren says that after some years studying various forms of Buddhism--Jodo, Zen, Pure Land--he found these teachings unsatisfactory and rejected them. Consequently Nichiren claims to have studied the sutras and commentaries only to

become convinced that the Lotus Sutra was the one, the true teaching. I strongly suspect that the conclusion Nichiren wished to reach--the ultimate supremacy of the Lotus--dictated the autobiography he composed.

The skeleton of Nichiren's significant years is as follows: the year 1253 saw Nichiren publicly attack the Pure Land movement of Honen, and this led to conflicts with both the religious leaders and the local authorities. This nonetheless began Nichiren's career with all its tensions. Seven years later, he drafted his essay "The Establishment of Righteousness and the Security of the Country". A year after that Nichiren was exiled to Izu. After returning from exile and again engaging in many conflicts, Nichiren was again exiled, this time to Sado. His banishment allowed him to enrich and further his thoughts which materialized as his major writings. Ultimately, Nichiren died in seclusion on Mt. Minobu.

*The Nature of Nichiren's Writings*

Foremost in Nichiren's thought is the notion that the Lotus is the pinnacle of Shakyamuni's teachings. The *Rissho Ankoku Ron* (Establishing Truth and Bringing Peace to the State), the first of Nichiren's five major works, clearly elucidates this belief. It reads:

> The Lotus and the Nirvana sutras represent the very heart of the doctrines that Shakyamuni preached during the five periods of his teaching life. Their warnings must be viewed with the utmost gravity.
>
> Yampolsky trans. 1990, 35.

Nichiren believed the Lotus to contain the Absolute, a belief that became the basis of all his teachings.

Nichiren warns his readers to give the Sutra the respect and reverence proper to the Absolute. He points out that "The second volume of the Lotus Sutra says: `One who refuses to take faith in this sutra and instead slanders it. After he dies, he will fall into the hell of incessant suffering'" (Yampolsky trans. 1990, 40). Following this, Nichiren concludes:

> Therefore you must quickly reform the tenets that you hold in your heart and embrace the one true vehicle, the single good doctrine of the Lotus Sutra. If you do so, then the threefold world will all become the Buddha land, and how could a Buddha land ever decline? ... If you live in a country that knows no decline or diminution, in a land that suffers no harm or disruption, then your body will find peace and security and your mind will be calm and untroubled.
>
> Yampolsky trans. 1990, 40.

Before one can appreciate all that Nichiren is stating here, it is important to examine this excerpt more closely.

Nichiren's teachings were expressly political. He stressed the importance of the state's peace and tranquillity as much as, if not more than, he stressed one's individual peace of mind and salvation. For reasons to be discussed later, with reference to Nichiren's thoughts on *mappo*, Nichiren was much preoccupied with the state of Japan. He wanted to see order and prosperity return to a nation in suffering. For this to happen, Nichiren has claimed the nation must not turn from the most important scripture. He states:

> Concerning the means for insuring order in the nation, there are numerous passages in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist texts, and it would be difficult to cite them all here. ... it seems to me that prohibiting those who slander the Law and

> paying respect to monks who follow the Correct Way is the best way to assure stability within the nation and peace in the world at large.
>
> Yampolsky trans. 1990, 31.

Nichiren saw himself as a monk who followed the Correct Way and who deserved respect. The Correct Way, he argued, was found in the Lotus Sutra.

Nichiren became convinced that he was the one who must realize the ideal of the Lotus in Japan; because of this his writings were very polemical against adversaries who followed other teachings. In the *Rissho Ankoku Ron* Nichiren refers to Honen's teachings when he suggests that people must abandon false views. He writes that Honen's work *Senchaku Shu* "brought confusion to people in every direction" and must be rejected (Yampolsky trans. 1990, 22). To respect teachings such as Honen's which suggest an abandonment of the Sacrad Way teachings--including the Lotus--would lead a person and his country into despair. I shall return to this point.

Nichiren's practice, his salvation for a state gone awry, is based of course on the Lotus. The title of the sutra is said to be the most significant and efficient summary of the teaching therein. Nichiren argues:

> The daimoku or title of the sutra, which appears before the opening words *nyozi gamon* or `Thus have I heard,' is in all cases the true heart of the sutra. This is true whether it is a Mahayana sutra or a Hinayana sutra.
>
> Yampolsky trans. 1990, 307.

The title contains the essence of the sutra.

Nichiren suggests that the five characters *Myo-ho-ren-ge-kyo* comprise the true heart and the True Law that stands above all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, the people of the two vehicles, and sentient beings. Thus, taking refuge in these characters is what

Nichiren advocates as a practice. Simply chanting *Namu Myo ho ren ge kyo* will assure salvation for the nation and the individual.

*Analysis of Nichiren's mappo thought*

> Nichiren characterizes his world in very devastating terms. He states:
>
> In recent years, there are unusual disturbances in the heavens, strange occurrences on earth, famine and pestilence, all affecting every corner of the empire and spreading throughout the land. Oxen and horses lie dead in the streets, the bones of the stricken crowd the highways. Over half the population has already been carried off by death, and in every family someone grieves.
>
> Yampolsky trans. 1990, 13.

Without having to establish his belief in *mappo* doctrine, Nichiren is clearly referring to this when he writes that the "situation is just as [the scriptures] describe it". Nichiren discusses the decline, which is responsible for the above description, as a fault of following mistaken views and turning from the Lotus.

> Another glimpse of Nichiren's world depicted in his writings:
>
> Famine and disease rage more fiercely than ever, beggars are everywhere in sight, and scenes of death fill our eyes. Cadavers pile up in mounds like observation platforms, dead bodies lie side by side like planks on a bridge.
>
> Yampolsky trans. 1990, 14.

Glimpses of the times and characterizations like these are readily available in Nichiren's work. They serve as part of a larger panoramic picture which Nichiren intends to bring into focus.

These disasters and calamities arise one after another according to Nichiren because people turn away from the True Teaching. What results is the loss of the country's protection by benevolent deities and sages.[8] As already discussed, Honen,

according to Nichiren, is one of the heretics responsible for the loss of the Correct Way in Buddhism.

Nichiren's subsequent discussion of *mappo* is unique and is put into a very specific context. The Final Age for him was a time when the Bodhisattvas of the earth would appear and establish the supreme object of worship. They only had been waiting for the right time to emerge. *Mappo*, in Nichiren's writings, was that time.

In his essay "The Selection of the Time" he details views about the time of the Decline. Nichiren discusses the direct relation between Buddhism in India, China and Japan with the times of the Former, Middle and Latter Days of the Law respectively. The Latter Day for Nichiren was a time when the True Teaching, the Lotus, could be expounded far and wide. Since the Lotus Sutra was revealed during the last eight years of the Buddha's life, it must be celebrated in the latter years of the Dharma.

In the End times no being has previously received the seed of Buddhahood and because of that no one has the ability to realize enlightenment. Nichiren explains how people in previous times came to salvation:

> In China before the arrival of Buddhism, some had attained the correct view through Taoism and Confucianism. Many wise bodhisattvas and common mortals perceived [even before they heard the Lotus Sutra] that the Buddha had planted the seed of Buddhahood within them in the remote past [of *sanzen-jintengo*], in the days of the Buddha Daitsu. They understood this by

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[8] Nichiren made use of the then current trend of redefining Shinto beliefs in light of Buddhism. Buddhism provided a conceptual framework for tales about *kami* performing miraculous works. Indigenous Deities were also incorporated into Nichiren's teachings; they were said to have given up their protection posts because of the neglect of Buddhist scriptures, mainly the Lotus.

> hearing the provisional Mahayana sutras ... These then are the types of people who came to understand the truth through teachings other than the Lotus Sutra.
>
> Yampolsky trans. 1990, 157.

Since some in the Former and Middle times received the seed of Buddhahood they have the extraordinary ability to perceive this nature through other Buddhist teachings.

The notion of receiving the seed of the Lotus--innate Buddhahood--maturing this seed and cultivating it was profoundly influenced by Chih-i who likened the process of attaining Buddhahood to the process of planting, cultivating and harvesting. The Buddha is said to plant the seed of Buddhahood by arranging it so that sentient beings hear the Dharma. The maturing or nurturing process is the time when the provisional teachings thrive. Understanding is cultivated by various sutras which are deemed appropriate for the capacities of individuals. Harvesting is the last stage in the process of emancipation.[9] The seventh chapter of the Lotus clearly puts forth this view when the Buddha asserts that perfect enlightenment can be attained, by those who have been born with him through many lifetimes, now through the One Vehicle of the Lotus Sutra.

Thus, Nichiren's teachings and views on *mappo* can be summarized as follows: monks of earlier times, even though they knew the truth of the Lotus' supremacy, expounded and taught sutras that were appropriate for their age. Buddhist teachers who came later, biased in their understanding, obstinately clung to these views defending a small corner of the teachings thereby departing from the true way. In the End Times, the teachings of former monks are no longer appropriate and because many Buddhists still

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[9] For a discussion of Chih-I's teachings see Leon Hurvitz's Chih-I: An Introduction to the Life and Ideas of a Chinese Buddhist Monk.

follow such mistaken views, Japan is in a state of disaster. What is needed is faith in the Lotus, the truth, and in Nichiren's ability to expound this truth. Practising *Namu-myo-ho-ren-ge-kyo* will allow one to see the truth.

As we can see, *mappo* thought was incorporated into Nichiren's writing. Must we see that Nichiren's teachings fit into Kamakura times because they addressed the notion of the Final Age?

If Nichiren's primary concern was with offering a practice best suited for the times, this certainly is not found in his early works. The *Rissho Ankoku Ron* does not articulate clear and developed views regarding *mappo*. In fact, this treatise dealt mainly with a reformation of society as a whole. This work is very direct in its appeals to the most powerful members of the government but it is lacking in many details of Nichiren's thoughts, especially those on the Final Age.

Nichiren's succeeding work "The Opening of the Eyes" emphasizes the failure by others to recognize the supremacy of the Lotus which caused the disasters ravaging Japan. Nichiren presents himself as the one to propagate the Lotus and explain its significance in the Latter Days. It is not until his treatise on "The Selection of the Time" that Nichiren fully reveals and emphasizes his understanding of the role of the Lotus in the age of *mappo*. There, he discusses his single practice. In these later works, indeed, the Final Dharma Age is an essential factor in Nichiren's practice.

Nichiren's thoughts on the Final Age and his subsequent response or practice appropriate to such a dreadful time are developed over time. Foremost in his earlier works is Nichiren's concern for a reformed society and for government responsibility to

do what is necessary to "make things right" in Japan. His belief in himself as the saviour of Japan by propagating and following the teachings of the Lotus Sutra are more prominent than his thoughts on *mappo*. Thus, Nichiren emphasizes his desire to personally take responsibility for "setting right" Japan's problems. He points out the difficulties facing the government, explains why such ignomies in Japan have occurred and ultimately suggests himself as the one who can save Japan. In his later writings he emphasizes this same pattern with a discussion of *mappo* and the need to chant the *daimoku* for salvation.

With his discussion of the disasters and destruction of Japan he again points out Japan's problems in order to put himself forward as one who has the solution. He reminds people that the times are in the last stage of decline. Nichiren however may not necessarily be responding to what has historically been described as a realization of *mappo*. Instead, we can imagine that his interpretation of the problems of Japan as signs of living in the end of times leads to his response with his single practice movement. This response was not necessarily reacting to a historical reality.

What was found in Nichiren's work added to the tensions among rival Buddhist sects; the already existing contentions did not necessarily "awake in him a resolve" to discover the truth. He pointed to the "glaring failures" of other sects and targeted them as causing the nation's suffering. Stone's conclusion that Nichiren sought an answer to the existing strife in Buddhism is an account directly imported from Nichiren's treatises. These treatises have a religious agenda and do not necessarily reflect historical events.

Heian History (794-1185)--prior to the periods directly relevant to the discussion of the rise of Kamakura Buddhism

The characterization of Kamakura Japan as devastated by strife and natural calamities does not conform to known facts about history. Such characterizations, we have seen, serve religious purposes for Kamakura Buddhist leaders. Looking at the historical events of earlier Heian times will help to show that "Kamakura history" is in part constructed by religious authors.

Famines, pestilence, warfare and strife were common throughout medieval Japanese history. That is, at least the descriptions of these events are found documented throughout this time. Early Heian Japan, often described as a "more tranquil time" than Kamakura Japan, certainly saw disruption and even disorder. There are records of great rituals of exorcism designed to rid various communities of pestilence or some other disaster (Sansom 1986, 215). In particular, a Buddhist mass was held to pacify spirits who were thought to have caused calamities because of the disgrace and banishment of Michizane, a statesman. Soon after his death in 903 the Great Audience Hall of the Palace was struck by lightening; constant rainstorms flooded and shook the capital city. More disasters reportedly occurred--deaths of prominent men as well as fires. Many calamities continued for some time and were of great magnitude (Sansom 1986, 215). Once the disgrace of the statesmen was rectified, the curse of the capital city was lifted and the misfortunes ceased.

"Historical" depictions such as these tend to arouse suspicion as to their authenticity; however, Heian times were clearly not understood as tranquil by those

portraying such events. Indeed, forces of evil were said to be extremely active and belief in particular forms of magic was common. Members of Heian society at its highest levels often resorted to occult practices of invocation and incantation in order to defeat these forces of evil (Samson 1986, 216). It is difficult to maintain that Heian society was not troubled by curses or disorders. At the very least we know that members of this society also saw many problems in need of being rectified.

As early as the latter years of the tenth century (mid Heian times) there were signs of distress and disorder in the capital city. Sansom describes:

> There were, in addition to the fruits of human fallibility, constant plagues and pestilences which, as in most medieval societies, were utterly beyond the control of the civil power. The chronicles and diaries of the time record occasion after occasion when great services of intercession were held, and amnesties granted, in an attempt to avert or moderate natural disasters.
>
> 220

Although the country was at peace, its state was all but "calm" and free from problems.

There arose a connection between Heian's higher members of society, who are often characterized as superstitious, and Tendai and Shingon Buddhism. The daily life of Heian men and women of the middle and upper classes was governed by astrological or divine considerations as depicted in the *Tale of Gengi* (Sansom 1986, 215). The protagonist in this story, thinking of returning to the Palace, is told that to do so would be unfortuitous because of Saturn's position. Many such astrological references are found in this tale. In fact, many precautions and cosmological considerations tended to dictate the actions of Heian members who believed these superstitions.

Complementing the belief in divination were beliefs in exorcism. If one's life could easily be plagued by a wrong action or turn, the evil influence could be pacified or exorcised. Often events such as disease were thought to have been caused by evil spirits. Thus, incantations and prayers, reciting scriptural texts were practices used in hope of a cure. There was a strong belief that certain deities and the spirits of the dead could lay curses on the living. Shingon and Tendai Buddhism performed many exorcisms designed to rid a person or community of curses or any form of ill fortune.

Of course, both the Shingon and Tendai sects wanted to extend their power and influence as religious sects and in order to do this they needed to gain support from the society and its higher members. One means of obtaining such support was through exorcisms and spirit worship. This is not to say that leaders such as Saicho and Kukai did not believe in native *kami* or ancestral spirits.

Vengeful spirits were often identified as the cause of calamities. The notion of a wronged deceased transforming into an evil spirit became quite popular and most likely originated from indigenous stories, tales or folk beliefs. In fact, "attributing calamities befalling the perpetrators of their injustice or even national disasters was one method of effectively challenging unpopular political decisions" (Matsunaga 1992, 228). One such instance was the story of Prince Sawara who assassinated Fujiwara Tanetsugu in 745. After this death, the Imperial family is said to have been "plagued with misfortune" until 799 when the prince was posthumously made Emperor Sudo.

The idea that disasters resulted from bad deeds or spirits was firmly planted in Heian society. The relief from curses was sometimes sought by Buddhist rituals.

Pestilence, famine, ill fortune, etc., characterized the entire Heian and medieval period. Indeed, even Nara Japan was similarly characterized. The Court, having first been moved to Nagoako in 784, was abandoned as a resting place for a capital city. After ten years of work at Nagoako that was carried out on a grand scale and at great expense, this labour was stopped and a new site was chosen for the capital a few miles away. Misfortunes attacking the Emperor's family and calamities ascribed to evil influences are believed to have been the cause for such a move (Sansom 1986, 99). Thus, it is problematic to suggest that the problems of late Heian and Kamakura Japan were unlike any other time in Japanese history. Even early Heian saw disasters, plagues and misfortune. These problems were attributed not to the decline of the Dharma but to an ill fate or vengeful spirit. The discussion that Kamakura Japan was a time of instability with calamitous events unknown in more tranquil Heian times, does not conform to the perceptions of their time by Heian members or other known sources of history during the Heian era.

The assertion that the quarrels among Buddhist monks in the late Heian period were not seen in earlier times of tolerance also does not conform to known historical facts. The relationship established in roughly 809 between Saicho and Kukai later saw dissonance and even intolerance. The differences between the two were ideological as well as personal. Taihan, Saicho's most intimate disciple who was named as Saicho's successor, proved to be one of the main factors in the personal conflicts between Saicho and Kukai.

Taihan, apparently not a brilliant monk, aroused the jealousy of other monks at Mt. Hiei with his position of Saicho's complete trust. Perhaps the turbulent undercurrents within the monastery caused Taihan to leave Mt. Hiei but in a letter he left to Saicho, Taihan wrote he could no longer accept his own corruption and needed time for self-reflection (Matsunaga 1992, 145). Taihan then turned to Kukai for study. Saicho saw this as a great loss and continued to implore Taihan to return. Kukai replied with a doctrinal challenge to one of Saicho's contentions and announced Taihan's refusal to return. The relationship between the two eminent leaders deteriorated into strife.

In fact even the monastic disputes of late Heian and early Kamakura Buddhism that are said to have contributed to the disillusionment of Honen, Shinran and Nichiren, had their roots in the "peaceful" times of earlier Heian Japan. The monks at Mt. Hiei who contributed to disruptions in the Heian period, formed armies. These forces often flexed their muscle in the capital and manipulated the Court for certain advantages such as more land or money. The court was easily convinced to meet the demands of these monastic armies as the religious soldiers threatened harm to the capital with superstitious consequences. Not satisfied intimidating just the Court, in 1113, it is said the *Kofukuji* sent a force of 20,000 men against the *Enryakuji* monastery (Sansom 1986, 221). The increasing material strength of these monasteries and the strife between sects of Buddhism can be understood if we look further back into the development of Tendai Buddhism.

After Saicho Tendai superseded the influence of Shingon Buddhism. Ennin, an eminent abbot and Enchin helped the growth of prestige of the Tendai sect (roughly

873). Over time the disciples of the two saw differences in opinions and factions developed within the sect. These differences lead to the development of the Mountain Order at Enryakuji forming one side of the dispute against the Church Order at Miidera. This disagreement is said to have led to the use of guards or *Akuso* ("Bad monks") as a sort of monastic army (Sansom 1986, 222). During the early to mid years of Heian Japan these forces grew to a much larger scale.

In 1081 the Kofukuji, along with another monastery banned together and attacked Mt. Hiei and Miidera. The latter was burned and the armies made off with booty (Sansom 1986, 222). These attacks began to descend on the capital, where the most troublesome of all, the Tendai monastery of Mt. Hiei, swarmed the city between 981 and 1185.

Why, at the end of Heian (mid eleventh century) and start of Kamakura times, are events often described as causing a distinct mood of pessimism, when all throughout the Fujiwara period (950-1150) the Buddhist institution was described as an influence breeding disorder, corruption and bloodshed with their roots of disruption in earlier times (Sansom 1986, 223)? Clearly such depictions of evil times are not restricted to the time of the rise of Kamakura Buddhism and single practice movements.

Perhaps we can better understand the sentiment of pessimism or growing *mappo* consciousness arising in late Heian and early Kamakura times as an expression of an uneasy and nostalgic sense of loss of a "better time" that was brought about during a period of change such as was seen by Kamakura members of society who feared the future results of these many changes. What is probable is that religious leaders were

influenced by *mappo* doctrine and interpreted their time as a loss of a more tranquil and peaceful era. This is unlike the view maintained by Stone and others in that the causal link between historical events and changes which brought about "*mappo* consciousness" does not exist. Instead, *mappo* most likely allowed an interpretive understanding of the changes.

## PART TWO

## A context for the argument that Kamakura Japan was the Final Age for the Dharma:

In this next section I shall present the notion of "salvation history" as an appropriate context for the rhetoric that states Kamakura Japan saw strife, dissonance and corruption. By placing the doctrines of Honen, Shinran and Nichiren into a religious frame of understanding their forms of salvation and depictions of history, I hope to provide an appropriate forum for interpreting their doctrines and teachings.

### The True, Counterfeit and Last Teachings as Religious Concepts

The idea of a degenerating Dharma is not meant to describe history as we may understand the term. Instead, these terms describe the way in which salvation is offered in different forms according to different times. *Mappo*, thus, is a religious term, not an historical one. Events that were interpreted in light of *mappo* have both a religious and historical slant to them. A concept known as salvation history, something familiar in biblical scholarship, sheds some light on understanding *mappo* and events in Kamakura Japan as recounted by scholars. This in turn will help us to understand Honen's, Shinran's and Nichiren's forms of salvation put forth in their respective teachings.

#### *Salvation History*

The process of salvation history can be summarized as follows: in an event or events, perhaps political or involving only the religious thinker, a realization of a larger

religious scheme is discovered concerning the event(s) experienced. In order that this religious scheme be perceived as such, the leader places the event into a religious frame. In the case relevant for us, the prophet interprets the events in the light of a connection with previous events and salvation within a tradition. Thus, a present event, which is recognized to have religious significance as an event pertaining to salvation, leads to associations with earlier salvation-historical revelations or realizations. Later, the present event is understood as a form of a saving event.

What is important to note in this process is that the actual event, which must be witnessed by the religious leader or prophet and by non-believers, may in fact signify nothing (much like all events). However, the prophet's revelation and belief therein are intimately related to the event. When the revelation becomes popular, the event takes on a central importance both to the witnesses and to the bearer of the revelation even though originally the event may not have signified anything.

What tends to develop is an understanding of historical events in terms of a religious salvation ideology--teachings that refer to attaining salvation at certain times in secular history. The prophet has at his disposal previous accounts of history handed down to him that have been vested with "mythical" interpretations as saving events. In fact, it could be proposed that these interpretations caused the prophet subsequently to regard the events of his time as events of salvation.

A problem thus arises when we understand historic events in the same terms as did the prophets who offered the religious interpretation of the same events. Oscar Cullmann writes:

> The salvation-historical interpretation ... uses non-historical elements alongside the historical reports or by investing the accounts of historical events with legendary, mythological, and bold relief. It does this in two ways: either by placing the non-historical elements alongside the historical reports or by investing the accounts of historical events with legendary, mythological, and fabulous elements. This material has in common with an historical report of events the fact that it, too, is communicated in the form of narratives. The men [prophets] ... did not make any distinction between historical report and mythical interpretation in the account passed on to them, a distinction we carry out with our methods of scholarship.
>
> Cullmann 1967, 93.

Thus, it is very difficult to distinguish between the historical narrative and the religious one. The task thus becomes to separate "history" and interpretation, or, at the least, to learn what history meant for the faith of the prophet.

In gathering meaning within history, patterns are often woven around a continuing event. The one for whom meaning is created will select events and evaluate them, judge them as significant for the pattern being woven. For a believer or religious leader, faith plays a role in creating a pattern. This faith finds its expression in passages identifying history as pregnant with religious activity. Likewise, in Kamakura Japan, religion seems to have been the interpretive frame for evaluating their present.

The religious perspective in history sees a whole stream of events that interact to reveal a "divine" plan or course. This course unravels toward a final actualization of salvation in history. A divine revelation is found within historical events or human affairs. The Ultimate thus discloses itself and comes as a saving encounter in history in which faith and commitment can be awakened in man. Thus, the "salvation historian" gives an inner meaning to actual historical events to foster belief and offer salvation.

The question arises if we can understand the historic picture which develops as seen through the eyes of the religious leader as history. The events are coloured with the faith of the writers. In the writings of the Kamakura religious leaders the historical actuality of the Kamakura period seems to have faded into the background and the "inner meaning" of these events has been made the centre of attention. There is no distinction between salvation history and secular history.

Some modern scholars have mistaken salvation histories for simple historical analysis. Having reviewed a summary of the important doctrines of Honen, Shinran and Nichiren and having understood their beliefs as pieces of an overall argument that propagates a single practice, what I shall reconstruct from the "rhetoric" of these thinkers is their "salvation histories".

Having defined salvation history as an attempt by religious leaders to 1. find in an event a religious meaning, 2. to place that event into a religious frame of reference and 3. to present the event as a saving event, I shall divide my discussions of Honen, Shinran and Nichiren into those three categories.

*Honen*

Honen's teachings can be reconstructed as a form of a salvation history. He sees in events of his time larger religious meanings. He places the event(s) into a religious frame of the Three Ages much like the religious leaders who preceded him, namely, Genshin and Shan-tao. Subsequently he presents his present events as saving events but in a special sense. The event itself does not for Honen indicate the right time for

salvation. The event indicates instead that the time is one when salvation is nearly impossible. Thus, Honen constructs a means for salvation based on the indication by events that a different means to attain enlightenment is needed.

*Religious meaning discovered in an historic event*

Honen characterizes Japan of his time as demoralized and corrupt. Looking to the Court, whose members were greatly influenced by powerful families fighting only for their own interests, Honen observed only depravity. He noted in these power struggles of influential families only "counterfeit patriotism" and clannish agendas (Coates 1949, v). Honen understood these events as signs of the degeneracy of the times, thus he described his day politically as exhausted by strife.

The "political confusions" to which Honen refers are due to the then long-standing feud between the Minamoto and Taira hereditary ruling clans. This feud is often blamed for the relaxation of those "moral and social restraints which hitherto had made for the unity and welfare of the people" (Coates 1949, 28). This strife is said to have shaken the foundations of society and the state; clearly, the significance and inner meaning of the event is brought forth by Honen.

In 1159, the Minamoto were defeated in battle by the Taira led by Kiyomori. The battle was over military grasp on the power of the state. The ensuing corruption is described as follows:

> Intoxicate with the love of power and military glory, it seemed as if in court and camp alike the ordinary moralities were now cast to the winds, son taking the life of father, nephew of uncle, and even brothers ever and anon at each other's throats. Following too faithfully the unpropitious example of their Fujiwara

> masters, the Taira men in the day of their power gave themselves up to extravagance and luxury, only in turn to lose the confidence and good will of the nation, and usher in an age of disorder and internecine strife.
>
> Coates 1949, 29.

The above portrayal of this historical time is given the interpretation of bringing in an age of chaos. We shall see how such interpretations come to serve significant religious purposes.

Men's conduct is described as being unrestrained by moral sanctions, sexually immoral, and absent of proper rule. Reading and transcribing sutras, setting free captive birds and fish and other charitable deeds were considered as having great merit; however, considering deeper meanings of religion was not of much concern (Coates 1949, 30). (We are by now, largely skeptical of such characterizations and can begin to see how this "rhetoric" will come to form Honen's salvation history.)

The religion of this time was characterized by elaborate ceremonies which were understood to be effective in gaining favour of the gods and Buddhas and protecting oneself against harm. Priests frequently went to the Court to perform ceremonies of confession, purification or intercession for health and or happiness of the Imperial person (Coates 1949, 31). In the official temples on certain days reading and expounding the Scriptures were considered essential to the welfare of the State. We are told that ministers often were called in to conduct special rites at the birth of a child as well as at times of death. During periods of drought, rain rituals were common practices as well. Religion was mainly concerned with manipulating, if you will, forces allowing for the welfare of the State.

Honen argues that Buddhism was corrupt as could be seen in

> pompous ceremony with which the high priests won popular adulation, by confining their public prayers chiefly to petitions for material good, whether national or individual, and by the airy speculations of the more learned priests on the abstruse problems of metaphysics, instead of grappling with the practical problems of the spiritual life. .
>
> Coates 1949, v.

Morality and religion thus were said to echo the disintegrating political society.

Pointing to the then established practice of employing "soldier priests", it was easy to argue that jealousies and rivalries caused hunger for power and material gain. The Court even bent to the demands of these religionists who not so subtly threatened the vengeance of deities if their wishes were not met. The Buddhist sects which were dominant at this time were Kegon, Tendai and Shingon. In practice, Honen would argue, the ideal these schools espoused--that Buddhahood was an immediate attainment for everybody--proved impossible in practice given the "corruption" of these sects as witnessed by their militant actions and material gain in the monasteries.

Honen looks at specific events or trends within his society, isolates these incidents and interprets their significance. The fact that he regards the strife between Minamota and Taira as ushering in an age of immorality within society and interprets the rituals performed by Tendai priests as an example of the corruption of Buddhism by material and secular concerns, shows how he focuses on events witnessed within his time and expounds their implications. Understanding these events within his lifetime as he does leads to his search for an escape or answer to the horrid state of affairs by which he believes he is surrounded.

*The events are placed into a religious frame*

Honen determines from the events of his time, which he interprets bring about an age of corruption, that he is living in the Final Age. During such a time, sentient beings are so morally decayed that salvation is extremely difficult to attain.

Given the "corruption and immorality" of the times, Honen determined that "people like ourselves are no longer vessels for the three disciplines of precepts, meditation and wisdom," (Stone 1985 35). To Honen, the first step in realizing enlightenment was the belief that meditative life, as expounded by Tendai Buddhism for instance, is beyond human capabilities. He argues:

> We need no further evidence of the weakness of men's wills today than the fact that out of the five ordinary commandments prescribed for laymen, not a single man keeps a single one of them. The ability in action that men display is confined to their indulgence of passion and their wanton pursuit of polluting pleasures, like monkeys jumping from one branch to another. ... So it is absolutely essential for a man to understand that he is totally unable to deliver himself from the fated transmigratory round by his own powers, and thus empty himself of all self-confidence.
>
> Coates 1949, 44.

Honen asserts that men's minds and wills in these "degenerate days" are void of ability. They cannot visualize the Buddha nor conceive of the artistic productions of Unkei and Kokei because they are incapable of any form of self-effort regarding enlightenment.

Honen also believed in his own incompetence. He explains that having a desire to obtain salvation he practices many forms of self-discipline. He maintains, however, that he cannot keep even one of the precepts nor does he attain to any one of the forms of meditation. Having been taught that *samadhi* cannot be realized without observance of the precepts, Honen describes himself as disheartened. Moreover, he wonders, how can

the heart of ordinary unenlightened man, "because of his surroundings" be liable to attain salvation (Coates 1949, 186). Perplexed, Honen questions how one can get free from the chains of evil passion. It is this problem which Honen describes that inspired him in these latter days to find salvation.

Honen, thus, describes his search:

> And so I enquired of a great many learned men and priests whether there is any other way of salvation than these three disciplines, that is better suited to our poor abilities, but I found none who could teach me the way or even suggest it to me. At last I went into the Library at Kurodani on Mount Hiei, where all the Scriptures were, all by myself, and with a heavy heart, read them all through. While doing so, I hit upon a passage in Zendo's *Commentary on the Meditation Sutra*, which runs as follows:--`Whether walking or standing, sitting or lying, only repeat the name of Amida with all your heart. ... This is the very work which unfailingly issues in salvation, for it is in accordance with the Original Vow of that Buddha.'
>
> Coates trans. 1949, 187.

Honen describes how he was impressed with the fact that even ignorant people like himself may benefit from the Vow. Honen believed in this teaching and followed the Great Vow.

In the events described in Kamakura Japan--plagues, pestilence, warfare, etc.--Honen saw a larger religious scheme that he and others were experiencing. In order that this religious scheme be perceived as such, Honen placed the events into a religious frame--the Decay of the Dharma. The present events of Kamakura Japan were recognized as having religious significance and as saving events; that is, as events from which it is impossible to be saved without refuge in Amida.

The events, in and of themselves, which Honen interpreted as reflecting or even bringing in a defiled age do not signify a time when salvation is unattainable. However,

Honen's interpretation of these events sees the time as one of Degeneracy. His form of salvation is understood as appropriate to the times that Honen saw were degenerate. That is, Honen reacts to his interpretation of events in his present and understands that these events reveal the truth of a religious doctrine of *mappo*. Once Honen accepts that the Dharma has in fact degenerated, as noted by the behaviour of men in his day, he constructs a solution. In fact, he is constructing a form of a salvation history by showing how one gains enlightenment in a time of a Defiled Age. That is, by evaluating his present in the light of religious interpretations and doctrines, Honen offers a practice for attaining salvation in those times.

Honen's belief in *mappo* led him truly to accept the notion that men cannot attain enlightenment by following the precepts or meditation. In fact, because of the "corruption and moral degeneracy" around him, Honen believed men could not exert any self-discipline or restraint.

His salvation in history is based on his feeling that man needs an alternative method to attain enlightenment. He saw the need for a practice that did not require of man the very qualities he saw that were lacking in humanity at that time--morality, discipline, and restraint. Thus, rejecting meditation and comprehension in his devotees Honen insisted on "the mere repetition of the name of the Buddha Amida, without a doubt of his mercy" as a practice for salvation. Such a practice, Honen believed, was rooted in the very nature of the times.

*The practice for salvation based on Honen's interpretation of events*

The *nembutsu* is easily practised anywhere by anyone, something that Honen stressed in his teachings. In comparison to the relative efficacy ascribed to other Buddhist practices before Honen, the *nembutsu* has absolute value aside from being easy. In the Vow of Amida as expounded by Honen, salvation of all sentient beings by a simple invocation was granted by transferring to devotees the full merit of all religious austerities Amida practised through many kalpas.

As already pointed out, Honen was not the first to express a belief in the degeneracy of humankind nor was he the first to offer a practice in the form of *nembutsu*; however, Honen very distinctively and definitely showed how utterly impossible it is for men of his generation to keep the commandments. Based on this premise, Honen reiterated Zendo's (Shan-tao) practice of calling on Amida's name in faith for salvation. Following Zendo, Honen showed how one must be convinced of his own helplessness and depend on Amida in faith. Honen showed a way of salvation that was predicated on the belief in a bondage of evil.

His understanding of salvation through Amida is expressed in Honen's writings with the help of analogies. Honen writes:

> ... if a man without feet, or with broken thighs, wishes to go on a long journey, seeing that he cannot do it himself, he rides in a boat or some vehicle and does it easily. This is not by his own power, but by the power of another.
>
> Coates 1949, 433.

Honen tells devotees to use Amida's ship--that of the Original Vow--to cross the sea of birth and death.

Amida's Vow is again likened to a ship. Honen describes a man who has escaped his enemy's prison who, as he goes along the road comes to a wide river and cannot possibly cross it. During such a crisis, Honen tells his reader to imagine that the man's father, having gotten a boat ready, meets his son to help him across. This is how Amida saves sentient beings who cannot imagine enlightenment.

Honen's descriptions of one's salvation are often allegorical as shown above. He makes it very clear that Amida's Vow *is* salvation. Honen further personifies this saviour:

> ... when we are bound hand and foot by such enemies as covetousness, anger and evil passion, and shut up in the burning prison-house of the three worlds, if Amida, with all the deep sympathy of a compassionate mother, should come with the sharp sword of His sacred name, and cut the cords of birth and death with which we are fettered, should float the wonderful ship of His Original Vow upon the waves of our sea of sorrow, and bring us safely to the other shore, our tears of joy would flow like rivers, and unbounded indeed would be the thankfulness in our hearts.
>
> Coates 1949, 437.

Much emphasis is put on the notion of salvation which is extended to the helpless or incapable person by Amida.

Because of the great saving techniques of the Vow, and because it allows for the salvation of anyone, Honen insists that devotees give up attempting to follow the practices, impossible to maintain in these times, and join the Jodo. He talks of other great priests who attained salvation by joining. Honen argues that most of the prominent teachers of various sects were born into the Pure Land. Naming eminent priests from Shingon, Tendai, Sanron, Kegon and Hosso sects, Honen tells how they gave up their own sect, joined the Jodo and were born into the Pure Land (Coates 1949, 448). Honen

is of course building the popularity of his practice but again what is interesting is his insistence on forsaking other practices.

Complementing this teaching of turning from the precepts is Honen's belief that no one's sin is great enough to nullify or hinder a man from attaining salvation. Unlike the practice according to the strict codes, rules and practices of earlier sects, the *nembutsu* has no hindrances to its efficacy. That is why the single practice is said to excel all others.

> Thus, the alternative Honen sought was for the ordinary man. He states:
>
> The reason I founded the Jodo sect was that I might show the ordinary man how to be born into Buddha's real land of compensation (*hodo*). According to the Tendai sect, the ordinary man may be born into the so-called Pure Land, but that land is conceived of as a very inferior place. Although the Hosso conceived of it as indeed a very superior place, they do not allow that the common man can be born there at all. And all the sects, though different in many points, all agree in not allowing that the common man can be born into the Buddha's land of real compensation; while, according to Zendo"s Commentary, which laid the foundation of the Jodo sect, it was made clear that birth into that land is possible even for the common man.
>
> Coates 1949 188.

Clearly the practice of Jodo belongs to even the most worthless who may find the way of salvation; thus, Honen insists he has a practice belonging to the degenerate age.

In understanding Honen's rejection of "sundry practices" which relied on one's own exertions and were therefore unsuited to the depraved beings of his time, it is difficult to maintain that this depiction does not rely on his understanding of salvation within the times he interpreted as corrupt. Clearly it is not responding to historical events which "ushered in an age of degeneracy". Indeed the events of late Heian and early Kamakura Japan were not unprecedented as already seen. Honen's teachings which

caste doubt on the validity of the monastic community responded to an understanding of history in light of scriptural interpretations.

These Scriptures passed down to Honen a tradition of religious concepts of the decline of the Dharma. Such concepts were not meant to describe history as we would understand historical events. The terms were often used as a divine warning to maintain the precepts, respect the teachings and honour the monastic codes. That is, monks were warned that if they ignored the vinaya rules and were disrespectful toward the Dharma the result would be the Dharma's decline. However, within the tradition of scriptural exegesis in East Asian Buddhism, Honen was handed down depictions of historic events as religiously significant regarding the Three Ages. His immediate predecessor as author of such a salvation history was Genshin who interpreted historic events of his day as signs that he was living in the Age of the Final Dharma. Thus, Honen inherited a tradition of understanding that the decline of the Dharma pertained directly to secular events in history. Also, Genshin had already declared that the time was the Final Age and he passed this belief to Honen. The example of how to look for the signs of degeneracy and how to be aware of devastation which reflects the Final Age was set for Honen.

It is not at all surprising that Honen offers his own salvation history which sees that his time--the Final Age--is a time to look to Amida as a saviour because of human incapacities. Honen's teachings thus urge an abandonment of former practices inappropriate to an age of *mappo* and a turn to his form of salvation.

*Shinran*

Shinran's salvation history takes the form of a "conversion narrative" or personal testimony of sorts. As a Pure Land convert, Shinran readily accepted the basic positions of devotion to Amida. Because man was so evil, no discipline could avail for himself to gain salvation through his own power. One had to rely on Amida Buddha. Shinran believed these premises. He also accepted the doctrine of the degenerate Age of the Dharma which he believed indicated that disciplines and practices were futile and unnecessary.

Shinran's contribution to the discussion of salvation during corrupt times is his personal understanding of the human condition, to which he testifies with his own experiences of failure and futility. We can see in detail how Shinran's claims of low self-worth help to shape his understanding of salvation through Amida. What is interesting is Shinran's presentation of his struggle to find the path he currently travels--that of absolute and complete faith.

*A larger religious meaning discovered in Shinran's sense of inadequacy*

He starts by asserting that he "truly knows" that one who practices the Way with a mixed mind, rather than practise exclusively with the right mind, cannot be blessed with a great rejoicing mind. He explains "mixed mind" as one that is slighting and arrogant, being always ambitious, with a ruling ego. Such a mind will pleasingly seek sundry practices which bar one from the right practice. The mixed mind is one with the intention of exerting effort to escape from birth and death. A person with this mind

regards the Name of the vow as their own act of good once pronounced. Acting in this way makes it hard to arrive at the Buddha's wisdom and difficult to know the cause of Amida's salvation.

His teachings echo the fact that Shinran had discovered the solution to man's predicament by personally struggling. Thus, Shinran is found often lamenting in his works:

> Even though I take refuge in the Jodo Shinshu,
> It is difficult to have a mind of truth.
> I am false and untrue,
> And without the least purity of mind.
>
> We men in our outward forms
> Display wisdom, goodness and purity.
> Since greed, anger, evil and deceit are frequent,
> We are filled with naught but flattery.
>
> With our evil natures hard to subdue,
> Our minds are like asps and scorpions.
> As the practice of virtue is mixed poison,
> We call it false, vain practice.
>
> Bloom, 1965, 28-29.

Shinran's awareness of his own spiritual condition forms the basis of his salvation history.

Adopting Gutoku as his surname, Shinran further signifies his involvement with human passions and evil. His name means "foolish, bald-headed old man". This is said to be a symbol for his recognition of the inner debased condition of himself and all humankind. Thus aware of his nature, Shinran found taking the name teacher shameful and of course he saw himself as unworthy of such a title.

It is this awareness of personal depravity that Shinran builds on to construct his concept of a saviour. Realizing, and whole-heatedly believing that there was nothing he could do to ensure his salvation, he concluded that no practice, not even the recitation of the *nembutsu* (as a practice technique) could assure rebirth in the Pure Land.

This is not to say that Shinran rejected Honen's solution that the recitation of the name was the easy practice for salvation in a defiled age. It is to say though, that Shinran saw some problems with the solution, or, at least with those "practising" the solution. As Bloom describes:

> ... in the course of his religious development, he had occasion to think deeply on the process of the acquisition of merit which underlay all Buddhist disciplines, even that of reciting the name of Amida Buddha. What attracted him was the attitude of the devotees who engaged in the performances of religious exercises. To him it seemed that these individuals believed that somehow they were doing a good act and that this good act was the basis of their salvation. He perceived that such persons were in error from two points of view. On the one hand they failed to take seriously the depravity of beings, and on the other hand, they did not recognize the true meaning of the need for Buddha's assistance in attaining salvation.
>
> Bloom 1965, 30.

So, Shinran further developed Honen's solution by emphasizing human depravity and self-effort in his own solution to the problem of attaining salvation.

Shinran concluded, in more deprecating comments about humanity, that man is incapable of good acts. He writes:

> Actions and practices are done, but the mind lives in slighting and arrogance; being always ambitious, the ego of itself rules. Not being on intimate terms with the fellow-followers of the faith and the Teachers of the Way the mind pleasingly seeks sundry practices, barring thereby one's own self and also others in the right practice for being born in the Pure Land.
>
> Suzuki trans. 1973, 200.

Remarks such as these help Shinran to set up his convictions about faith. Since human nature is in such a horrid state, given the times, one cannot rely on mortal (in)capacities.

Shinran spells out this notion more thoroughly. His work is full of comments which devalue the efforts of religious followers. Even good acts are defiled as they are ego-filled actions whose intent it is to attain recognition or salvation. Shinran describes such endeavors as hypocritical in the *Kyogyoshinsho*:

> There are those who, in this manner [hypocritically], try to find their peace of mind and their way of conduct, by working most arduously, most impatiently, day and night, throughout the twelve periods of time, running after something, doing one thing or another, and belaboring themselves as if their heads were on fire. Yet, their doings, however superficially good and proper, are essentially mixed with poison. As long as their conduct remains thus mixed ... it will be impossible for them, however they may desire to do so, to be born in the Pure Land of the Buddha.
>
> Suzuki trans. 1973, 93.

Shinran's acceptance of the inadequate and fatal actions of self-effort help to construct his view of faith.

*Shinran's inadequacy is understood in religious terms--the need for faith*

Where Honen discussed faith he mainly referred to faith in the efficacy of the *nembutsu* to attain salvation. The practice in Honen's Buddhism was what brought salvation, not faith. Assistance from Amida guaranteed the effect of recitation--salvation. Shinran, however, saw faith in Amida Buddha as the Cause of salvation. This unique understanding of faith is said to have been brought about by Shinran's belief in a complete lack of spirituality or goodness.

Thus, a spiritual attitude or aspect of faith was essential for a devotee of *nembutsu*. Bloom summarizes this trait of Shinran's teachings:

> He realized that as the practice of recitation may have been given by the Buddha, so also the traits of mind that are necessary on the part of the believer were also given by the Buddha. Thus he made the act of faith itself the essential basis of salvation, and the act of faith was not made by the individual, but by the Buddha in that person. In this way Shinran designed to remove all self-calculating aspects from religion.
>
> Bloom 1965, 31.

This design, as Bloom calls it, is definitely rooted in Shinran's understanding selflessness. However, this negative belief of the self translates into a positive aspect of salvation through the Other.

*Faith understood as a saving technique*

Accepting the theological salvation history of Honen--that man has entered a time of sinfulness and evil ways causing the maintenance of precepts to be impossible and salvation difficult--Shinran moves this historical characterization forward. The logic he follows holds that the deeper man falls into sins the greater is the need for an Absolute Saviour. The more a man sins, the worse the human condition, the less likely are his capabilities for realizing enlightenment and the more powerful the saviour must be. Shinran creates a complete dependency on Amida as that Saviour. In fact, this could very well be why he depicts himself as so worthless; that is, his self portrayal is not a biography per se, but rather a form of justifying his religious teaching.

Requesting that devotees place their faith in Amida, Shinran demanded that followers relinquish their ego and concerns for attaining or gaining anything. To have

faith or even to attain salvation is to possess the right or true mind. This mind is one that harbours no admixture of doubt or "poison". Instead, what is trustworthy is a "believing mind". Such a mind, Shinran explains, is what Nyorai has as the completion of all his prayers. These prayers are said to emanate from his compassionate heart which is pure and perfect and creates the ocean of the believing mind. Seemingly circular, this understanding of how faith arises needs to be unravelled.

The true mind partakes of Nyorai's (Tathagata) mind which results from his having said his prayers. The prayers come from Amida's pure heart--perfect being. Repeating the *nembutsu* accesses this perfection or the ocean of believing mind. This mind is Amida's; it is not the result of practising the *nembutsu* or any other self-effort. The believing mind is not attainable per se; that is, one cannot try to achieve this perfection. Perfect mind is a gift and the one's believing mind is the result of such a gift from Nyorai. The merit accruing from the right and true mind comes from the Buddha, not from self.

> Shinran's writings may also help to clarify this essential point of his doctrine.
>
> As long as they try to be born in the Land of Infinite Light by means of falsehood and of poisonous nature, they are attempting something altogether impossible. Why? ... Because this mind is not other than the Nyorai's great compassionate heart, which he knew is surely the right efficient cause for making all beings attain birth in the Land of Recompense. The Buddha feeling compassion for all suffering beings turned-over to the great ocean of all beings his great pure mind that knows no obstruction.
>
> Suzuki trans. 1973, 109.

When all beings hear the name of Amida, Shinran writes that one thought of pure faith is awakened in them. It is this faith that becomes the believing mind.

Shinran further accounts for the desire for enlightenment within a person. Aspiration for birth in the Pure Land is given by Amida. Shinran recounts how Nyorai felt great pity at the sight of all beings who were suffering. Because of this, the Buddha disciplined himself in bodhisattvaship and his compassionate heart was brought into perfect function, real and true. It became "others-benefiting" and was turned over to all beings in all states of existence. "The mind that is thus`turned over' to all beings is no other than his aspiration for all beings to be born in the Pure Land" (Suzuki trans. 1973, 114). Even yearning does not partake of the admixture of doubt and poison.

Hope for the chance of salvation resulting from birth in Amida's Land is clearly understood as coming to one as a consequence of the "turning over" of Amida's sincere mind. Not even the ambition for enlightenment can share its origin with mortal drives according to Shinran's doctrines.

Faith then is the negation of self-exertion. It arises and conversion results when one reverses the mind of self power. Salvation is assured when one gives up attempting to secure salvation through acquiring merit. Thus, the faithful, especially the evil man, was the prime object of Amida's work in Shinran's form of salvation.

Shinran was in a position of accepting the "spirit" of the Pure Land tradition before him. However, denying certain of its aspects--acquiring merit, practice--Shinran added to the tradition. His addition is often said by Stone and others to arise as an outgrowth of his own inner spiritual experience. He was able to raise Pure Land to a new level of spirituality because of his convictions and beliefs in human depravity, a belief inherited from his teacher Honen. We can see that it is equally as plausible to suggest

that his belief in human depravity supports his practice of complete reliance on Amida for salvation.

Providing a more consistent understanding of human incapacities and religious practice, Shinran further developed the salvation history he was taught. Instead of treating the notion of man's defiled state as an abstraction, Shinran claimed to have realized this state in actuality and he denied the worth of any effort put forth by degenerate beings. Shinran developed this belief to its extreme by asserting that even faith, the will to believe, was given by Amida. Shinran allowed evil people to accept their state of being; that very acceptance and recognition led one to salvation through faith and complete dependence on Amida.

Thus, Shinran's salvation history is as follows: the event in which he discovers a larger meaning is his sense of being defiled. This sense is placed into a religious frame and is understood as the result of living in a defiled age. The "event" prompts a salvation means--faith. Faith is needed in Amida because no personal effort will allow one rebirth in the Pure Land. During such horrible times one must have faith in a tremendous and powerful saviour; one who is desperately needed. Shinran presents this saviour as Amida Buddha.

*Nichiren's Salvation History*

Nichiren distinctively identifies secular history and salvation history in his writings. In a very bold way he explained historical events familiar to his readers in

terms of his salvation history. Also, his religious and theological characterization of *mappo* is clear. That is, the time is seen as the opportunity for salvation.

*The conditions in Japan as events with religious meaning*

As we have seen already, Nichiren describes the deplorable condition of Japan as a result of following heretical teachers, the loss of protection from *kami* and as a time of degeneration. The devastation that Japan has seen proves for Nichiren that the time is *mappo*.

Nichiren does not see the End Times as a reason for despair like Honen and Shinran. His solution to, or even celebration of, *mappo* is unique. Thus, Nichiren's salvation history is different from Honen's and Shinran's views. For Nichiren, the time as *mappo* was the right time for salvation. Time, in Nichiren's salvation history is a very important concept. He discusses the importance of the concept of time in the history of the development of Buddhism. This is clearly seen in his essay "The Selection of the Time".

To open this treatise, Nichiren declares: "One who wishes to study the teachings of Buddhism must first learn to understand the time" (Yampolsky trans. 1990,, 183). He sets up various discussions emphasizing the significance of the appropriateness of time. That is, the cuckoo, Nichiren tells us, waits until spring is waning until he sings; the cock waits until the break of day to crow. Similarly, the Buddha knew to wait until the suitable moment before he revealed the teachings of the Lotus. Time also plays a role in adherents' understanding of the Sutra.

When he clarifies his chronology of time within Buddhist history, Nichiren clearly collides secular and salvation history. He writes:

> Shakyamuni Buddha was born in the Kalpa of Continuance, in the ninth kalpa of decrease, when the span of human life was diminishing and measured a hundred years. The period when the span of human life diminishes from a hundred years to ten years accordingly falls within the period represented by the fifty years of the Buddha's preaching life, the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days of the Law that follow his passing,, and the ten thousand years of the Latter Day of the Law that follow that.
>
> Yampolsky trans. 1990, 190.

Nichiren continues to explain that the Lotus Sutra was revealed during the last eight years of the Buddha's life and was to be fully received and actualized in the five hundred years at the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law.

*The present events as saving events*

It is because "now" is the Latter Day and this time is appropriate for the teachings of the Lotus that all should exult. Nichiren tells a story of Asita, a hermit-sage, who when he saw the newborn Prince Siddartha, expressed his sorrow that he would not live to see the prince attain enlightenment since he already was ninety. Take note of this example and celebrate your fortunate birth in these times, heeds Nichiren. How better to be a common man in the Latter Day than to be a mighty ruler during the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days.

Nichiren continues by specifying how the Lotus Sutra fits into the Latter Times and he legitimates this claim. He starts by pointing out that the doctrines the Buddha taught fit into various categories, for example, Hinayana and Mahayana, provisional and

true sutras, exoteric and esoteric, correct and incorrect, but among these, as already noted, the Lotus represents the correct teaching.

> Regarding all teachings other than the Lotus, Nichiren has the following to say:
>
> The sutras, numerous as the sands of the Ganges, that the Buddha preached during the first forty or so years of his teaching life, belong to the time when, as the Buddha said, he had `not yet revealed the truth.' The eight years during which he preached the Lotus Sutra he called the time when he `now must reveal the truth,' and the Buddhas that are emanations of Shakyamuni gathered together and extended their tongues up to the Brahma Heaven in testimony.
>
> Yampolsky trans. 1990, 57.

The "other" sutras were part of the Buddha's peripheral sermons. They do not contain the truth and the time for their understanding has since passed.

Nichiren does not fault followers in his writings for turning to "other" sutras or teachings in these times. He explains how even perceptive and keen men such as Vatsa and the ascetic Vaipuly confused the Hinayana and Mahayana sutras. Vimalakirti, clever by nature, could not distinguish properly between provisional teachings and the true ones. Nichiren writes:

> These men lived during the thousand-year period known as the Former Day of the Law, not far removed in time from the Buddha himself, and in the same country of India, and yet they fell into error, as we have seen. How much more likely, therefore, that the people of China and Japan should do so, since these countries are far removed from India and speak different languages from it?
>
> Yampolsky trans. 1990, 77.

Nichiren understands how one follows the wrong understanding in the wrong time and thus can be led astray.

To say that he understands that men of these times follow heretical views is not to say that Nichiren tolerates this. Thus, he discusses how to attain enlightenment through

the true teachings of the Lotus. Nichiren discusses that it is essential to fathom the idea of innate Buddhahood for salvation. However, he warns that it is extremely difficult to presume that one's base heart could possess the world of Buddhahood, but this must be realized.

"Now" is the right time to realize innate Buddhahood by receiving the seed or prior cause--the Lotus--for attaining enlightenment. The only obstacle preventing one's salvation in this age is that beings born during *mappo* times have not established the bond with the Lotus that they need. The time is ripe to form that bond.

Enlightenment can be attained through the *daimoku* as Nichiren claims while celebrating the time of *mappo*. As opposed to many lifetimes of cultivation until final emancipation is yielded, Nichiren offers a practice that sees this procedure reduced to one lifetime, even one moment. Nichiren says:

> A hundred years of practice in the land of Perfect Bliss cannot compare to the benefit gained from one day's practise in this impure world. Two thousand years of propagating Buddhism during the Former and Middle Days of the Law are inferior to an hour of propagation in this, the Latter Day of the Law. This is in no way because of Nichiren's wisdom, but simply because the time makes it so.
>
> Yampolsky trans. 1990, 316.

As we can see, Nichiren's salvation history turns the End times into a positive era for emancipation.

Historical events, the movement of Buddhism into Japan and even China, the disputes among Buddhist clergy, certain natural occurrences, all are incorporated into Nichiren's interpretation of Kamakura Japan as in the time ripe for salvation. Thus,

salvation history and the history of Japan and Buddhism within Japan are identified in Nichiren's writings.

By looking to former writings of other great Buddhist monks within history and understanding their teachings as "only appropriate for their time" and subsequently explaining how the Lotus is the right path for *mappo* times, Nichiren not only understands history in terms of religious ideals but he explains religious trends as well in terms of his understanding of salvation in Kamakura Japan. This allows Nichiren to dismiss all other teachings and demand the supremacy of the Lotus and the *daimoku*.

The distinctive identification of secular and religious history with salvation history in Nichiren may also explain to a large extent why Nichiren scholars are more apt to fall into understanding Kamakura Buddhism as developing from a growing mood of terror and a need for religious reform. Focusing first on and understanding Nichiren's teachings would most certainly bias one's understanding of history, in the modern sense, within Kamakura Japan. Accepting this bias and further moving back in time, from Nichiren to Shinran and Honen, these scholars tend to project Nichiren's interpretation back onto Honen and Shinran's thought. Nichiren's presentation of secular history is read into the history of Honen and Shinran.

## CONCLUSION

Once a concept or passage is removed from its context much of its peripheral significance can be lost. Abstracting passages which discuss Kamakura history from their religious contexts within writings by Honen, Shinran and Nichiren is done often at the risk of misunderstanding the passage as "historical". It is this mistake that modern scholars make when they attempt to read the excerpts from religious "texts" describing Kamakura Japan as accurate historical depictions of Kamakura Japan.

The critique that modern scholars have taken what are essentially rhetorical passages and seen in them historical realities does not help us in the reading of the rhetoric itself. Clearly, religious rhetorical passages cannot be used to reconstruct the "history" of the time they purportedly describe unless the religious interpretation is at least acknowledged; however, such a conclusion does not demonstrate the significance of the details of these rhetorical passages nor does it explain the differences among Honen, Shinran and Nichiren to whom the rhetoric is attributed. For this reason it is important to note how Honen, Shinran and Nichiren construct their "salvation histories" out of rhetorical passages.

The religious or theological character of Honen's *mappo* is more obvious than that of Shinran and Nichiren. Honen's salvation history thus focuses mostly on the "corruption of the monasteries" which followed the example of the "morally disintegrating society". What he interpreted as corruption surrounding him led in his writings to a confirmation that his time was that of the Final Dharma Age. This

witnessed event became a saving event but in an unusual way. The salvation was based on a witnessed event within history, but it was not a time for salvation. Rather, it was a time to despair that salvation was but impossible to attain. Because of this dilemma, Honen constructed a solution through Amida Buddha and the practice of recitation.

Shinran turned the concept of salvation history into an existential understanding of his own spiritual situation. Describing himself as a degenerate, inadequate and a worthless human who could never attain enlightenment, he saw within these traits a desperate situation. This situation he interpreted as a saving event. Again the event as a saving event was discussed in negative terms. The salvation is attained through "other power"; the more degenerate the self, the more powerful is the saving grace of Amida--the Other.

Nichiren, in contrast, explained historical events as saving events in and of themselves. That is, salvation history and the history of Japan were identified. The time as *mappo* was seen as an exceptionally rare opportunity for salvation. For Nichiren, his time was the best time to attain enlightenment quickly within this lifetime by chanting the *daimoku*. Nichiren very boldly espoused that there would be salvation for all beings who would follow his practice in the Defiled Age. This was true, he argued, simply because the time was right.

Once we place the notion of *mappo* back into its original context, it becomes clear that it functioned as part of a discussion constructing a form of salvation within history. That is, the religious characteristics of the Final Age become an interpretive frame for events in Kamakura Japan. What is most curious about *mappo* is how it comes

to serve an understanding of attaining salvation within the writings of Honen, Shinran and Nichiren. The rhetorical nature of *mappo* must be given priority in a discussion of these figures.

Once we accept that *mappo* is part of an argument putting forth the supremacy of a single practice movement, in these cases at least, we need to re-examine its role in discussions about seeking enlightenment. *Mappo* must be assigned its place as part of various salvation histories that were passed from monks such as Genshin down to Honen, and that religious leaders like Nichiren would appropriate.

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