

REVIEWS

Dennis HIROTA, transl., *No Abode: The Record of Ippen*. Kyoto: Ryukoku University (Ryukoku University Translation Center), 1986. 251 pp. No price. ISBN 0-940583-01-1.

It is a pleasure to welcome an English translation of *Ippen Shōnin goroku* (The record of the sayings of the Venerable Ippen). Ippen (1239–1289) did not quite end up among the founding heroes of Kamakura Buddhism (Hōnen, Shinran, Dōgen, and Nichiren), whose names are recited almost like a litany in surveys of Japanese religion. However, he was not a lesser master than they. Rather, his sayings leave the impression that one reason why he remains outside the Big Four may be that his teachings are intellectually inconvenient. Shinran and Dōgen, in particular, make an excessively satisfying antithetical pair. To include Ippen with them on the same level might be to risk breaking down some very appealing (and doctrinally important) distinctions.

Born into a warrior family on Shikoku, Ippen was formed as a monk principally by a grand-disciple of Hōnen. After an initial period of searching, he received at Kumano a decisive revelation from the Kumano deity (whose *honji-butsu* was Amida) on the true meaning of Amida's vow and on the true approach to Nenbutsu practice. After this, Ippen gave up every last shred of attachment to worldly things and spent the last sixteen years of his life ceaselessly wandering Japan in the company of a band of disciples, urging all he met to say the Nenbutsu and passing out Nenbutsu slips. His life is vividly illustrated in the set of handscrolls known as *Ippen hijiri-i*, one of the most famous art works of the Kamakura period. The scrolls are an inspiring tribute to him, and show the kind of devotion he aroused. (Painted as they are on silk, they were a very expensive undertaking.) Before he died, Ippen burned all the Buddhist writings in his possession, including his own, saying, "All the sacred teachings . . . have become wholly Namu-amida-butsu" (p. 181).

The *Ippen Shōnin goroku* translated by Dennis Hirota is an Edo-period compilation of Ippen's letters, verses and sayings. It is the standard work of this kind (though other such compilations exist), having been included in both *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* and *Nihon shisō taikei*. To introduce it, Hirota has provided an excellent survey of Ippen's career and thought.

One fascinating aspect of Ippen's thinking is its affinity with Zen—or indeed with any radical Buddhist understanding of emptiness, *dharmakāya*, etc. Ippen certainly upheld the difference, canonical in Hōnen's tradition, between

“the Path of the Sages” and “the Pure Land Way”; and he insisted upon reliance on “other-power.” However, he received (without particularly seeking it) Zen recognition as well. In fact, he reminds me of the seventeenth-century, self-enlightened Zen master Bankei, who taught *fushō zen* 不生禪 (“unborn Zen”). Intellectually, Bankei left his listeners nowhere to hide. Ippen, too, could use the term “unborn,” and he could say, for example, “Apart from Namu-amida-butsu there is no one taking refuge and nothing taken refuge in” (p. 134). Or he could describe the Name of Amida as follows: “Thus, the Name is not blue, or yellow, or red, or white; neither long nor short, neither square nor round. It is not being, it is not non-being. . . . It is not a dharma that you can grasp or measure as anything whatsoever” (p. 139). He even said, “In the mirror of the Name, then we can see our original face” (p. 167). Not that Ippen was a Zen or a mikkyō master, of course. Still, Pure Land saint that he was, he seems to have reached, as he plumbed the depths of the Dharma, about the same understanding as other radical masters who spoke other dialects of the great spiritual language which is Buddhism.

Dennis Hirota’s translation is carefully done and generally unobtrusive. However, certain infelicities should be mentioned. First, Hirota sometimes uses intransitively verbs which can only be transitive. For example, he translates the important term *shingyō su* 信樂す simply as “to entrust,” as in “Forget the self and entrust with joy” (p. 93). I can see the translator’s problem, but still, in English you must entrust *yourself*, preferably to *something*. “Rend,” too, must be transitive (p. 93) as well. Moreover, “ladenened,” as is “suffering ladenened upon suffering” (p. 92), is wrong. But the only place where serious problems crop up regularly is in Ippen’s *waka* verses. These *waka*, though well worth reading in Japanese, are a terrible challenge to a translator. That Hirota has tried hard is obvious, but he did not succeed. Some of his versions are difficult to follow, and many are marred by awkward or incorrect language. Moreover, there are too many typographical errors in the *rōmaji* transcriptions which accompany them.

Still, it is good to have Ippen in English. His example is uncompromising; his message is clean, clear, and loud.

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