

Christian Steineck

Quellentexte des japanischen Amida-Buddhismus.

Studies in Oriental Religions 39. Edited by Walther Heissig and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997. 222 pages.

In the 1990s the number of studies in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism in Western languages has increased considerably, whereby the general image of Japanese Buddhism in the West has become more balanced than ever before. The primary sources of this tradition have been translated and published in English, e. g., the Honganji International Center has published *The Collected Works of Shinran* in 1997, and translations of Hōnen's *Senchakushū* were published in 1997 by the Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research and in 1998 by the Senchakushū English Translation Project. Some of the principle texts of Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212), Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1262), and Ippen 一遍 (123-1289) had been translated even much earlier, into English, French, or German.¹ Even though these early translations have for the most part failed to reach a broader audience, the question may be raised, however, whether a collection of new translations in German was really urgently needed. In his preface to Christian Steineck's book, the late H.-J. Klimkeit justly points out that the hitherto most important collection of German translations, by the missionary Hans Haas (*Amida Buddha unsere Zuflucht*, Göttingen 1910), depends heavily on a Lutheran interpretation and terminology, leading to a tradition of inappropriate comparisons between Japanese Pure Land Buddhism and Protestantism in Germany. Thus, Klimkeit is rather optimistic as regards the future success of Steineck's² book, which he thinks will become a "Standardwerk" despite the fact that most of the texts had been translated before.

The book contains a rather brief introduction to the history of "Amida-Buddhismus" in India, China, and Japan, covering not more than 25 pages. The main part contains translations of the following texts:

Hōnen 法然

- *Ichimai-kishōmon* 一枚起請文 ("Glaubensbekenntnis auf einem Blatt" [creed/profession of faith on one page])
- *Sanbukyō-taii* 三部經大意 ("Der wesentliche Sinn der drei grundlegenden Sūtren" [the essential meaning of the three fundamental sūtras])

¹ For a helpful bibliography see Gerome Ducor's website: <http://www.pitaka.ch/shinbibf.htm>.

² According to his homepage, Steineck holds an M.A. in Japanese Studies (thesis on Nishida Kitarō) and a Ph.D. in Philosophy (thesis on "fundamental structures of mystical thinking") at the University of Bonn and currently holds a position as a research fellow at the same university, working on a research project on "Bioethische Konflikte und das Bild des Menschen in Japan" (bioethical conflicts and the conception of man in Japan).

Shinran 親鸞

- *Shōshin-nenbutsu-ge* 正信念佛偈 (Lehrgedicht auf den wahren Glauben des Nembutsu [didactic poem on the true faith in the *nenbutsu*])
- *Yuishin-shō mon-i* 唯信鈔文意 (“Erläuterungen zu zentralen Sätzen aus dem ‘Yuishinshō’”) [clarification on central sentences from the *Yuishin-shō*]
- *Kyōgyōhinsō* 教行信證 (“Lehre, Werk, Glaube und Verwirklichung” [teaching, work, faith, and realization]; partial translation)

Yuien 唯圓

- *Tan’ishō* 歎異抄 (“Buch der Klage über die Häresien” [book of lament over heresies])

Ippen 一遍

- *Ippen-shōnin-goroku* 一遍上人語錄 (“Briefe und letzte Belehrung” [letters and final instructions]; partial translation of the first volume)

The book has, unfortunately, no bibliography and no index, but contains a glossary of essential terms, as well as a list of some proper names with Chinese characters.

As to the introduction, Steineck makes it clear from the outset that it is not to be taken as a scholarly survey, for which reason no references are given. This is unsatisfactory, indeed, because some of Steineck’s assertions are rather bewildering, and one would like to know where his ideas come from. For instance, he claims that Amitābha / Amitāyus was regarded as the Buddha of the West, because his cult was introduced from the Western part of India. (14-15) This theory is new to me. Moreover, I would like to know what makes him think that the *Longer Sukhāvati-vyūha* (J. *Daimuryōju-kyō* 大無量壽經) was the oldest among the so-called three Pure Land Sūtras. To my knowledge the *Shorter Sukhāvati-vyūha* (J. *Amida-kyō* 阿彌陀經) is generally believed to be the oldest part of the *Jōdo-sanbukyō* 淨土三部經. (Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism*, 1987: 204) By and large, Steineck’s Buddhological knowledge seems to be rather limited. He maintains, for example, that in Nāgārjuna’s work, no direct reference to the Amitābha cult can be seen because Nāgārjuna was from South India, whereas this cult was developed in the North-West. (18) However, although his authorship of the *Daśabbūmi-vibhāṣā-śāstra*, a work which caused Shinran to regard Nāgārjuna as the first Pure Land patriarch, is dubious, Nāgārjuna’s acquaintance with and sympathy for the Amitābha cult is quite evident. Furthermore, the brotherhood of 123 monks and laymen which constituted itself on Mt. Lu in 402 under the guidance of Huiyuan 慧遠 (334-416) – later called “White Lotus Society” (*bailianshe* 白蓮社) – can hardly be regarded as a group that devoted itself exclusively to Amitābha and practiced nothing but contemplation on that Buddha, as Steineck claims. (18-19)

Steineck’s sketch of the Pure Land tradition in Japan up to Ippen is not much more reliable. Genshin 源信 (942-1017) was certainly not the first to introduce the teachings of Shandao 善導 (613-681) to the Japanese. (24). As Inoue Mitsusada has demonstrated in his classic *Nihon jōdo-kyō seiritsu-shi no kenkyū* 日本淨土教成立史の

研究 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1956), Shandao's writings were well known among the so-called Six Nara Schools as early as in the 8th century. Steineck's treatment of the subject is extremely traditional inasmuch as he interprets the independent Pure Land cult in Japan as a product of the Tendai-shū 天台宗. Both Hōnen and Shinran, he claims, developed the Tendai Pure Land tradition further towards the end of the 12th century (25), thereby ignoring that Shinran had not even become Hōnen's disciple by that time. Steineck does not bother himself with questions as to whether the traditional claim that Hōnen founded the first independent Pure Land school makes much sense; he just takes the founding of the Jōdo-shū in 1175, the year when Hōnen left Mt. Hiei, for granted. Also, he suggests that the Pure Land sects as well as the other so-called "new Kamakura sects" that were established in the 13th century were somehow more Japanese than the older schools since they did not entirely depend on Indian or Chinese sources. (25) Hōnen's complete reliance on Shandao and the fact that the early Jōdo-shū 淨土宗 was frequently called "Zendō-shū 善導宗" (school of Shandao) clearly contradicts this view. Moreover, the Zen movement was probably more Chinese than any other school of Japanese Buddhism had ever been before.

Steineck falsely claims that the name Hōnen was given to Genkū 源空 posthumously. As a matter of fact, Hōnen-bō 法然房 was his so-called "cell name" (*bōgō* 房號), and there is ample evidence that Genkū was habitually called Hōnen or Hōnen-bō by his contemporaries, such as regent Fujiwara no Kanezane 藤原兼實 (1147-1207). Furthermore, I have never heard that Hōnen was made abbot of the Zenrin-ji 禪林寺 in Kyōto. (30) Perhaps, Steineck has simply misinterpreted the passage on abbot Jōhen's 静遍 (-1224) conversion to Hōnen's teachings in the chapter 40 of the *Hōnen-shōnin-gyōjō-ezu* 法然上人行狀繪圖. This conversion, however, took place after Hōnen's death. Moreover, to my knowledge, only two and not four, as Steineck claims (30), of Hōnen's disciples were executed in 1207. Steineck subscribes to the anachronistic view that Shinran was the one to "make complete" Hōnen's teachings, a position that has proved untenable. Accordingly, the chapter on Shinran is entitled "Shinran – Die Vollendung der neuen Lehre" (Shinran – the completion of the new doctrine). As has been acknowledged by scholars in the recent past, Shinran's interpretation of Hōnen's *nenbutsu* doctrine is perhaps better described as a relapse into the nondualistic paradigm of the *hongaku* 本覺 (original enlightenment) ideology, then *en vogue* especially in the Tendai-shū which Hōnen decidedly denied. At any rate, Shinran's interpretation was just one among others and certainly not the most influential one in the 13th century. An up-to-date treatment of the history of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism should at least mention the fact that Shinran and his followers were not even mentioned as a branch of the *nenbutsu* movement in documents of that period. Gyōnen 凝然 (1240-1321) does not say a word about Shinran in his discussion of the Pure Land school, and likewise Nichiren 日蓮 (1222-1282) does not regard Shinran as an important disciple of Hōnen the "evil heretic"; we may suspect that he did not even know his name. I also doubt that the followers of Shinran called themselves "True School of the Pure Land" (Jōdo-shinshū 淨土真宗) as early as in 1262, as Steineck claims. (35)

This term was merely one of various names denoting the successors of Hōnen, particularly the so-called Chinzei branch 鎮西派. Only in the Edo period (1603-1867) was the name Jōdo-shinshū given exclusively to the adherents of Shinran's doctrine, up to that time commonly known as Ikkō-shū 一向宗.

In summary, Steineck's introduction should not be taken too seriously. His general approach is anachronistic and the details are often unreliable. There are also a number of formal mistakes, such as wrong or inconsistent transcriptions. For instance, in transcribing Chinese titles Steineck sometimes uses hyphens to connect the compounds (e. g. *An-lo-ji* 安樂集) and sometimes not (e. g. *Jing to lun zhu* 淨土論註). As the examples show, he is also rather careless in his usage of Pinyin: *An-lo-ji* should read *Anle ji*; *Jing to lun zhu* should be *Jingtulun zhu*, *nien-fo* 念佛 should read *nianfo*.

Let us now turn our attention towards the main part of the book, i. e. the translations. First of all, I must deplore the fact that Steineck does not even mention already existing translations of the texts in question. I think this is not fair and raises the suspicion that Steineck wants to suggest that his book is a pioneering work which it is not. Secondly, the author provides no information about the significance of the texts in a given tradition, about the context of their production, and so forth. Steineck does not even give reasons for his selection of the texts.

To begin with the *Ichimai-kishōmon*, the first text translated, he does not even tell us which edition he has used as a basis for his translation. The translation is rather free but acceptable.

Steineck's translation of Hōnen's *Sanbukyō-taii*, probably written before 1198, is much more problematic. The translation, unfortunately based on the *Nihon shisō taikai* 日本思想体系 edition,³ contains a number of inappropriate or even wrong renderings. Amida's name as a bodhisattva, "Dharmākara bhikṣu" (Hōzō biku 法藏比丘 in the original), for instance, is rendered as "der fromme Dharmākara" (the pious Dharmākara; 42) instead of "the [beggar] monk Dharmākara". Shandao's famous paraphrase of Amida's 18th vow, saying "if the sentient beings of the ten direction, who wish to be born in my land, call upon my name down to ten times (*geshi jūnen* 下至十念) (*Hōnen shōnin zenshū*, p. 28) is misinterpreted as "wenn sie meinen Namen rufen, und sei es weniger als zehn Mal." (44) This is a point of some significance in the tradition of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, as Shandao's paraphrase clearly indicates that "ten invocations" (*jūnen*) is the least one has to do to be born in the Pure Land, although there was some debate over the question whether Shandao wanted the smallest possible number of ten invocations to be taken literally. Two important technical terms, *jōzen* 定善 and *sanzen* 散善, are interpreted as "das bestimmte und das vielfach zerstreute Gute" (47) instead of "contemplative good and noncontemplative good [practices]," as customary and appropriate. A few pages later (51), the terms are even translated as "Gelassenheit" (calmness) and "Guter Wille" (good will), which makes no sense to me at all. To make things worse he uses the term "zerstreute Werke" (scattered works; 54) to denote the important technical

³ It certainly would have been more appropriate to use the text critical edition in Ishii Kyōdō's 石井教道 *Hōnen Shōnin zenshū* 法然上人全集 (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1955).

term *zōgō* 雑業 (“miscellaneous acts”), and thus suggests that *sanzen* and *zōgō* are the same. A sentence saying that “there are various other interpretations besides this” 此外多クノ釋有リ (HSZ, p. 34) without referring to one specific author, is interpreted by Steineck as “Shan-dao macht noch viele Anmerkungen zu diesem Thema.” (51). The Kegon doctrine of *sanmusabetsu* 三無差別, indicating that there is no real difference between the mind, the Buddha and the sentient beings, is interpreted as “kein Unterschied zwischen den drei Schätzen” (no difference between the three treasures, i. e. Buddha, Dharma and Saṃgha; 56-57). Likewise, the Tendai doctrine of *jissō shinnyō* 實相眞如 (all things are ultimately real as they are) is translated as “Erleuchtung durch Loslösung von allem Anhaften” (enlightenment by detachment from all kinds of attachment; 57). On page 58 Steineck quite correctly translates the well known term *hōshin* 報身 (Skt. *sambhogakāya*) as “Körper des Genusses” (body of pleasure) only to render *hōbutsu* 報佛 (Buddha of recompensation) and *hōdo* 報土 (land of recompensation) as “der verwandelte Buddha im verwandelten Land” on page 63, thereby confusing the terms *sambhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya* (J. *keshin* 化身; translated correctly as “Verwandlungskörper” on page 58). Furthermore, the translations “Wesenskörper” for *hosshin* 法身 (Skt. *dharmakāya*) and “zweckmäßiger Wesenskörper” (85) for *hōben hosshin* 方便法身 (Skt. *upāya dharmakāya*) sounds really strange in German and does not help much to understand the underlying meaning of these technical terms. Steineck’s translation of the “table of contents” of part two of the *Kyōgyōshinshō* is, bluntly speaking, pure nonsense. For instance, he renders the simple but crucial phrase *senchaku hongan no gyō* 選擇本願の行 (the practice selected [by Amida] in his original vow) as “das Werk nach dem Gelöbnis des Ursprungs der Erwählung.” (98) I dare not translate this into English.

There are many more problematic translations which I cannot mention in this review. Especially the frequent usage of Christian terms, such as “beten” (to pray) for *raihai* 禮拜 (to venerate), “Anbetung” (worship in the sense of praying to somebody), “fromme Handlungen” (pious acts) for *shūgyō* 修行 (religious practice), “Werk” for *gyō* 行 (practice), etc., is rather annoying. Steineck’s predilection for terms heavily loaded with Christian connotations makes us wonder why Klimkeit thought that Steineck’s new translations were needed because the old ones were too “Lutheran” in their perspective and terminology.

Due to limitations of space and time I cannot go into more detail here. However, one more point should be mentioned. In his translation of the *Tan’i-shō* Steineck does not even indicate that the famous sentence, “selbst ein guter Mensch wird im Reinen Land wiedergeboren, um wieviel mehr also ein schlechter Mensch!” 善人なおもて往生をとぐ、いわんや悪人をや。 (When even the good are born in the Pure Land, how much more so will the sinners!) is probably not a quotation of Shinran but of Hōnen, as Kajimura Noboru 梶村昇 has shown quite convincingly in his book *Akunin shōki setsu* 悪人正機説 (Tokyo: Daitō Shuppan, 1992). Since this sentence has been used as an “identity marker” by modern Shinshū adherents, Kajimura’s well supported thesis should at least be mentioned in a footnote in every translation after 1992. We may assume, however, that Steineck does neither know Kajimura’s book nor other basic secondary literature whether written in Japanese or

in Western languages. As he does not provide a bibliography, we shall never know. I cannot help but suspect that his approach is a purely “philosophical” one in the sense that he seems to think that philological care and historical background information are negligible factors in “intercultural hermeneutics” as every piece of work of the human mind stands for itself and needs no contextualization. In many ways, Steineck thus confirms the prejudices of many historically and philologically oriented scholars, to whom I would count myself, against some of those trained in philosophy who only care for “timeless” ideas which, however, are only made timeless by way of ahistorical interpretations.

In summary, I cannot help but conclude that this is not the book scholars of Buddhism or Japanese religion have waited for. Steineck’s book may be useful for those who are interested only in the general ideas of Hōnen, Shinran and Ippen but not in any doctrinal subtleties of their respective doctrines or their historical context. If the book was directed to the general public, however, it should have not been published in an academic series. It is a pity that another chance has been missed to balance the image of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism by a carefully introduced and annotated translation of equally carefully selected texts of this important tradition. As Steineck has written this book before finishing his Ph.D. we should perhaps not be too harsh on him with regard to some of the specific shortcomings of his translations, but I am afraid that his scholarly approach – which may of course be judged quite differently by others – is not just a problem of prematurity.⁴

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⁴ We will gain more clarity about that point after reading Steineck’s new books on Dōgen: (1) *Dōgen als Philosoph [Dōgen as Philosopher]* (*Studies in Oriental Religions*; 39). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002; (2) *Leib und Herz bei Dōgen. Kommentierte Übersetzungen und theoretische Rekonstruktion [Body and Heart in Dōgen. Annotated Translation and Theoretical Reconstruction]* (*West-östliche Denkwege*; 4). St. Augustin: Academia-Verlag, 2003.