

Genshin's Development of a Method for Contemplating Amida's *Byakugō* (白毫觀) and Its Influence on Japanese Pure Land Practice

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Introduction

Prior to writing the *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集 (Essentials for Birth, 984) Genshin 源信 (942-1017) composed his first work on the Pure Land, a treatise on the method for contemplating Amida's *byakugō* 白毫 (the white tuft of hair between the Buddha's eyebrows, Skt. *ūṃā*) in 981. In this text, titled *Amida Butsu byakugōkan* 阿弥陀佛白毫觀 (Contemplation on Amida Buddha's *byakugō*), Genshin presents the interpretation that the light emitted from Amida's *byakugō* illuminates all the worlds in the ten directions, protects all sentient beings, and guides them to enlightenment.¹ According to Genshin, the salvific power of the light from Amida's *byakugō* embraces all sentient beings who practice the nembutsu, including those who are not able to see the light because of their blind passions, and never abandons them. In this presentation, I introduce Genshin's interpretation of the contemplation on Amida's *byakugō* and discuss its influence on the later development of Japanese Pure Land practice.

Practice of Contemplation on Amida Buddha's *Byakugō*

Amida Butsu byakugōkan (also known as *Byakugō kanbō* 白毫觀法)² is Genshin's first writing on the Pure Land teaching, composed a few years before the famous *Ōjōyōshū*. In this brief text, he discusses contemplation on Amida's *byakugō*, the white tuft of hair between the Buddha's eyebrows, and the benefits of contemplation on the *byakugō*, one of the buddhas' thirty-two auspicious marks.³

¹ Regarding this text and its influence on the *Ōjōyōshū*, see Robert Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū and the Construction of Pure Land Discourse in Heian Period* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), 126-129.

² For the study of the manuscripts of this text, see Nishimura Keishō's, "Amida Butsu byakugōkan no kenkyū," *Eizangakuin kenkyū kiyō* 21 (1998): 15-25, and "Daigo Sanbōin zō Genshin sen *Byakugō kanbō* nit suite," *Eizangakuin kenkyū kiyō* 25 (2003): 1-13, and Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*, 336 (note 1). The original text is available in *Eshin sōzu zenshū*, vol. 3, 579-584, and *Dainihon Bukkyō zensho*, vol. 39 (Tendai bu 3), 70. A modern Japanese translation by Sueki Fumihiko is available in *Annen, Genshin, Daijō butten*, Chūgoku Nihon hen 19 (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1991), 123-131.

³ For the general discussion on the concept of Buddha's *byakugō* in Buddhist scriptures, see Fukuhara Ryūzen, "Butten ni okeru byakugō sō," *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 40-1, (1991), 1-11.

The scriptural source of this practice is found in the ninth of the sixteen contemplations discussed in the *Contemplation Sutra* 觀經, the Contemplation on the True Body of Amida 真身觀, as follows.

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehi, "After you have succeeded in seeing these images [of Amida], next envision the physical characteristics and the light of Amitayus. Ananda, you should realize that his body is as glorious as a thousand million kotis of nuggets of gold from the Jambu River of the Yama Heaven and that his height is six hundred thousand kotis of nayutas of yojanas multiplied by the number of the sands of the Ganges. The white tuft of hair curling to the right between his eyebrows is five times as big as Mount Sumeru. His eyes are clear and as broad as the four great oceans; their blue irises and whites are distinct. From all the pores of his body issues forth a flood of light, as magnificent as Mount Sumeru. His aureole is as broad as a hundred kotis of universes, each containing a thousand million worlds. In this aureole reside transformed Buddhas numbering as many as a million kotis of nayutas multiplied by the number of the sands of the Ganges. Each Buddha is attended by innumerable and uncountable transformed bodhisattvas.

"The Buddha Amitayus possesses eighty-four thousand physical characteristics, each having eighty-four thousand secondary marks of excellence. Each secondary mark emits eighty-four thousand rays of light; each light shining universally upon the lands of the ten quarters, embracing, and not forsaking, those who are mindful of the Buddha. It is impossible to describe in detail these rays of light, physical characteristics and marks, transformed Buddhas, and so forth. But you can see them clearly with your mind's eye through contemplation.

"Those who have envisioned them see all the Buddhas of the ten quarters. Because they see the Buddhas, this is called the Buddha-Recollection Samadhi. To attain this contemplation is to perceive the bodies of all the Buddhas. By perceiving these, one also realizes the Buddha's mind. The Buddhas' mind is Great Compassion. It embraces sentient beings with unconditional Benevolence. Those who have practiced this contemplation will, after death, be born in the presence of the Buddhas and realize the insight into the non-arising of all dharmas. For this reason, the wise should concentrate their thoughts and visualize Amitayus.

"In contemplating him, begin with one of his physical characteristics. Visualize only the white tuft of hair between his eyebrows until you see it quite clearly and distinctly. When you visualize it, all the eighty-four thousand physical characteristics will spontaneously become manifest. When you see Amitayus, you will also see innumerable Buddhas of the ten quarters. Having visualized these innumerable Buddhas, you will receive from each the prediction of your future Buddhahood. This is the general perception of all the physical characteristics of the Buddha and is known as the ninth contemplation.

To practice in this way is called the correct contemplation, and to practice otherwise is incorrect."⁴

As described in the *Contemplation Sutra*, the practice of the contemplation on Amida's *byakugō* does not focus on the white tuft of hair between his eyebrows but rather aims at perceiving a flood of light emanating from Amida's body. The sutra recommends contemplation on the *byakugō* merely as a starting point.

Once this contemplation has been accomplished, the virtues achieved are enormous. One will not only see Amida himself but also be able to meet innumerable numbers of Buddhas and will be able to receive the prediction of future Buddhahood. There is one problem, however. According to the sutra, the Contemplation on the True Body of Amida is considered the greatest challenge for practitioners, and they can do this practice only after having completed eight previous contemplations. Thus it is not very easy to reach this practice.⁵

Genshin' Reformulation of the Practice of Contemplation on Amida's *Byakugō*

In the *Amida Butsu byakugōkan*, Genshin reformulated the contemplation on Amida's *byakugō* and transform it for the practitioners to make it easier to accomplish. In the text consists of the following five sections.

1. Contemplation on the cause of Amida's acquiring the auspicious mark of *byakugō*
2. Contemplation on the auspicious features of Amida's *byakugō*
3. Contemplation on the salvific working of Amida's *byakugō*
4. Contemplation on the original nature of Amida's *byakugō*
5. Contemplation on the benefits of Amida's *byakugō*

First Genshin praises Amida obtaining this auspicious sign through his boundless ocean like vow and practice 無辺際諸願行所得. In the second section, he discusses the overwhelming virtues of the light emitted from the *byakugō* that even a single hair contains all

⁴ Hisao Inagaki, trans., "The Sutra on Contmplantation on Amitāyus," in *The Three Pure Land Sutras: A Study and Translation* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 2000), 332-334.

⁵ The formation of the sixteen meditative practice in the *Contemplation Sutra* are contemplations on: 1. the setting sun; 2. water of the Pure Land; 3. treasure-earth of the Pure Land; 4. jeweled trees of the Pure Land; 5. treasure-ponds of the Pure Land; 6. jeweled towers of the Pure Land; 7. the lotus-seat of Amida Buddha; 8. the image of Amida; 9. the real body of Amida; 10. Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara; 11. Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta; 12. the Practioners' birth in the Pure Land; 13. various manifestation of Amida and two bodhisattvas; 14. the higher grades of birth in the Pure Land; 15. the middle grades of birth in the Pure Land; 16. the lower grades of birth in the Pure Land.

the right teaching of every one of the buddhas 一毛具一切諸仏一切正法. In the third section, instead of introducing how to contemplate on Amida's *byakugō*, Genshin recommends practitioners to meditate on the working of the light emanating from the white tufts with reference from the *Contemplation Sutra*.

Each ray of light illuminates all the worlds of the ten directions, embracing sentient beings who practice the nenbutsu, never to abandon them 念仏衆生攝取不捨. … I, too, am within the embrace (of the light). Even though evil passions obstruct my vision 煩惱眼障雖不能見, (Amida's) great compassion shines on me at all times without tiring、大悲無倦常照我身.⁶

In this section, Genshin also suggests that the virtue of Amida's light which is embracing all sentient beings is the “covert (or invisible) benefit” 冥利益, in comparison with the “overt (visible) benefit” 顯利益, which represents the actual preaching of Dharma in person.⁷

In the fourth section, Genshin, as a Tendai master, explains that the Pure Land contemplation on Amida's *byakugō* is in line with the fundamental Tendai doctrine of “perfectly interfused with the three truths” 三諦円融.⁸ The most striking part of Genshin's interpretation of this practice is in the final fifth section in which he explains the benefit of this contemplation. In the beginning of the fifth section, he says that

Those who joyfully accept in faith 歡喜信受 the aspects of the Buddha's *byakugō* with no surprise or doubt in their hearts 心不驚疑, the evil karma which one has committed during eighty kotis of kalpas of samsara will be extinguished.⁹

In the text, although Genshin recommends practitioners to make efforts to contemplate on Amida's *byakugō*, he also suggests that even though they cannot accomplish this practice because of “evil passions” obstructing them, as long as they have faith in the working of Amida's light unconditionally embracing them, they may have a chance to accomplish it at the moment of their death. Thus, Genshin concludes with the following verse.

⁶ Translated and cited in Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*, 127. A similar passage is also found in the *Ōjōyōshū*, in the section discussing *zōryakukan* 雜略觀 (mixed abbreviated contemplation), Taishō vo1. 84, 56. See Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*, 337 (note 10).

⁷ It is interesting to read that Genshin identify the working of the “light” of Amida's *byakugō* as “invisible benefit.” According to Genshin, even though people might not be able to see the light itself, when the salvific light from the *byakugō* touches them, it “transforms itself into a form appropriate to each person to instruct him or her in the Buddhist teaching (Genshin calls this the ‘visible benefit’ [*kenriyaku* 顯利益] of the light).” (Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*, 127.)

⁸ See Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*, 128

⁹ The passages are translated by the author.

At the hour of my death, may my mind remain undisturbed.
May I be able to perceive the light from Amida's *byakugō*,
Immediately attain birth in the Country of Peace and Bliss,
And realize this contemplative practice in front of (Amida Buddha).¹⁰

願我臨終心不乱 得見弥陀白毫相
即得往生安樂刹 現前成就此願行

In the *Amida Butsu byakugōkan*, Genshin reformulated the contemplation on Amida's *byakugō* into a relatively easy practice by taking it out of the context of the formula in the *Contemplation Sutra* and giving more credit to the working of Amida's light embracing all sentient beings including those who cannot see the light because their vision is obstructed by evil passions. He also emphasizes the significance of faith in the salvific power of Amida's light. And as shown in the closing verse, Genshin himself, at least at the time he composed this text, had yet to accomplish this contemplation. That might be the reason why he aspired to birth in Amida's Pure Land and thereafter wrote the *Ōjōyōshū*.¹¹

Influence on the Later Development of Japanese Pure Land Practice

Genshin's promotion of an easy practice for contemplating Amida's *byakugō* directly influenced the writing of the *Ōjōyōshū* three years later.¹² His emphasis on the salvific power of Amida's light is also found in the *Amidakyō ryakki* 阿弥陀經略記 (Brief Notes on the *Amida Sutra*) which is considered his last known writing in 1014.¹³ Since then, the easy practice of contemplating on the *byakugō* became popular not only within the Japanese Tendai tradition¹⁴ but also influenced the thought of Nara and Shingon Buddhist masters, such as Yōkan 永觀

¹⁰ See Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*, 128.

¹¹ See Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*, 129.

¹² In the *Ōjōyōshū*, Genshin introduces the practice of contemplation on *byakugō* mostly following the text of *Amida Butsu byakugōkan* in the section discussing *zōryakukan* 雜略觀 (mixed abbreviated contemplation), Taishō vol. 84, 56. In the *Ōjōyōshū*, Genshin further makes this practice easier by recommending those who are not capable of visualizing Amida's *byakugō*, to recite the name single heartedly 一心称念, which he calls as an extremely simplified 極略 version of the practice. See Sueki Fumihiko, *Annen, Genshin*, 355-356.

¹³ For the further development of Genshin's interpretation of the contemplation on *byakugō*, see Fukuhara Ryūzen, "Ōjōyōshū no byakugōkan," *Jōdo Shūgaku kenkyū* (1983), 129-147.

¹⁴ For the development of *byakugō* contemplation within the Tendai tradition, see Yanagisawa Masashi, *Nihon Tendai Jōdokyō shisō no kenkyū* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan), 172-188.

(1033-1111), Jippan 実範 (?-1144), and Kakuban 覚鑿 (1095-1143).¹⁵

It is also known that Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212) cites a significant portion of this text in his *Gyakushu seppō* 逆修説法.¹⁶ However, he does not include the virtue of this practice in the *Senjakushū* 選択集, once he established the teaching of the sole practice of recitation of nembutsu 専修念仏. Hōnen's disciples, including Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1262), the founder of Jōdo Shinshū, did talk about the benefit of Amida's embracing light grasping all sentient beings never to abandon them. They, however, stopped mentioning the practice of the contemplation on Amida's *byakugō*.¹⁷ In the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, Shinran cites a passage in the *Ōjōyōshū* discussing *byakugō* contemplation, but he elides the *byakugō* part and focuses only on the virtues of Amida's light.

Although I too am within Amida's grasp, blind passions obstruct my eyes and I cannot see [the light]; nevertheless, great compassion untiringly and constantly illumines me.¹⁸

Chapter on Shinjin 17 (*Collected Works of Shinran*)

Shinran also praises Genshin's efforts to promote the Pure Land teaching in "Shōshinge" and a hymn, based on Genshin's *byakugō* contemplation, but there is no mention of the practice of contemplation at all.

The person burdened with extreme evil should simply say the Name:
Although I too am within Amida's grasp,
Passions obstruct my eyes and I cannot see him;
Nevertheless, great compassion is untiring and illumines me always.

Shōshinge (*Collected Works of Shinran*)

My eyes being hindered by blind passions,
I cannot perceive the light that grasps me;
Yet the great compassion, without tiring,
Illumines me always.

"Genshin san" in *Kōsō Wasan* 94 (*Collected Works of Shinran*)

Although Genshin's promotion of the practice of contemplation on Amida's *byakugō* was virtually lost with Hōnen's reformation of the Japanese Pure Land tradition under the banner

¹⁵ See Fukuhara Ryūzen, "Nihon ni okeru byakugōkan no tenkai: Jippan wo chūshin ni," *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 41-2 (1993), 236-241.

¹⁶ See Fukuhara Ryūzen, "Amida Butsu no bettoku ni tsuite," *Jōdo shūgaku kenkyū* 20 (1993), 31-46.

¹⁷ Fukuhara Ryūzen, "Amida Butsu no bettoku ni tsuite," 43.

¹⁸ *Ōjōyōshū*, Taishō vol. 84, 56.

of the sole practice of recitation of nembutsu 專修念仏, the spirit of Genshin's reformulation of this difficult contemplation into an easy practice for even a person whose eyes are hindered by blind passions, formed the basis for the development of the Japanese Pure Land tradition.

