“Correct Awareness and Firm Belief” (shinchi) in the Saigokanjō jōgyō shin'yōhō

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Introduction

Today, as Tomabechi Seiichi 菊地誠一 points out, the Esoteric Buddhist text called Saigokanjō jōgyō shin'yōhō 最後灌頂常行心要法 (hereafter Shin’yōhō) is inherited in Shingon Buddhist temples such as the Chishakuin 智積院, Tōji 東寺, and Kongō sanmaiin 金剛三昧院. 1) According to its postscripts, the author of the Shin’yōhō is Seizon 成尊 (1012–1074) or Shōkaku 勝覚 (1057–1129), influential Shingon monks during the Heian period, who respectively developed the dharma lineage called Ono-ryū 小野流 and established the Sanbōin 三宝院 of the Daigoji 大徳寺. Through some descriptions in the text, however, it is assumed that the Shin’yōhō was written during the latter half of the Kamakura period, by a Shingon monk who was involved in the Sanbōin-ryū 三宝院流 or other dharma lineages of the Daigoji. 2)

According to this Shin’yōhō, considered to be a collection of secret teachings transmitted mainly among monks of the Daigoji, Esoteric Buddhist practitioners, who aspire to “attain Buddhahood within this very body” (sokushin jōbutsu 即身成仏), are required to first have a firm belief in their own bodies which possess enormous virtue innately. Strictly speaking, they have to obtain the “correct awareness and firm belief” (shinchi 信知) concerning the equality and non-duality between human bodies and those of Buddhas. It is repeatedly claimed in the text that, if such correct awareness and firm belief is obtained, the practitioners will attain enlightenment immediately even without completing the practice of three mysteries (sanmitsugyō 三密行), the fundamental practice of Esoteric Buddhism. This is because, after obtaining the correct awareness and firm belief, every bodily, verbal, and mental deed of the practitioners is
transformed into the practice of three mysteries. In this paper, I will examine the correct awareness and firm belief as described in the Shin'yōhō. How do Shingon monks obtain them? Do they, through their practices and doctrinal studies, spontaneously realize that their bodies are equal to those of Buddhas? I will examine the Shin'yōhō and answer these questions.

In conclusion, the Shingon monks who hope to obtain the correct awareness and firm belief concerning a human body and its virtue are required to comprehend the Esoteric Buddhist interpretation of human conception. As discussed in diverse previous works, Buddhism has maintained its own embryological discourses stemmed from the Ancient Indian medicine. For example, the "five developmental stages of an embryo" (tainai goi 胎内五位) are equated with the five Buddhas (gobutsu 五仏). By means of learning such exegesis, Shingon monks are able to obtain the aforementioned correct awareness and firm belief. In this paper, through the examination of the Shin'yōhō, I will also discuss the unrevealed significance of the Buddhist embryology in medieval Shingon Buddhism: I hope to demonstrate that they are strongly correlated with the acquisition of the firm belief in a human body.

1. "Correct Awareness and Firm Belief" in the Shin'yōhō

In the Shin'yōhō, it is repeatedly asserted that to obtain the correct awareness and firm belief that human bodies and those of Buddhas are non-dual and equal is vitally important for the attainment of Buddhahood within this very body. For example, in the introductory section of the text, there is the following description: "The practitioners should obtain the correct awareness and firm belief concerning the 'non-duality between their bodies and those of Buddhas' (jishin honjō no itchi 自身本成之一致), and dwell in the state of the perfect enlightenment." In the paragraph which explains the significance of the "practice of three mysteries without form" (musō sanmitsu 無相三密), it is described as follows:

If, even in one thought-moment (ichinen 一念), the practitioners have the correct awareness and firm belief concerning Buddhahood inherent in their bodies, consisting of the six elements (rokudai 六大), four mandalas (shiman 四曼), and three mysteries (sanmitsu 三密)
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inherently exist (hon’u 本有), they are already the Buddhas who attained enlightenment by themselves.  

In his Sokushin jōbutsugi 即身成仏義, Kūkai 空海 (774–835), the founder of the Japanese Shingon tradition, asserts that every being in this universe is composed of the six elements such as earth, water, fire, wind, emptiness, and consciousness. Therefore, human bodies and those of Buddhas are intrinsically equal and non-dual because they both consist of these elements.  

According to the Shin’yōhō, the practitioners who are firmly convinced of this principle are considered to be those who have already attained Buddhahood.

However, why is it that the practitioners are able to attain enlightenment immediately only by means of being aware and believing that their bodies and those of Buddhas are equal and non-dual? Do they not have to complete the practice of three mysteries? With regard to these questions, the author of the Shin’yōhō answers as follows: “If, even in one thought-moment, the practitioners obtain the correct awareness and firm belief concerning a human body, composed of the five elements (godai 五大), contemplate that their bodies are the Buddhas as they are, and do not have the view that they are merely ordinary people, their correct awareness and firm belief will perpetually function as the ‘incessant practice’ (jōgyōhō 常行法).”  

And, “Every wrong deed of the practitioners who have acquired the incessant practice is transformed into the good deed.”  

That is to say, their bodily, verbal, and mental deeds are all transformed into the practice of three mysteries. Therefore, according to the Shin’yōhō, the Shingon monks who have already attained the incessant practice will absolutely not fall into the evil realms after their death, even if they engage in sinful deeds.  

On the contrary, they are able to attain rebirth freely in every pure land including Amitābha Buddha’s Land of Utmost Bliss.

2. “Correct Awareness and Firm Belief” and Buddhist Embryology

As Tomabechi, an Esoteric Buddhist scholar who first examined the Shin’yōhō, discusses, the above descriptions concerning the incessant practice remind us of the absolute affirmation of this actual phenomena unique to Tendai Original Enlightenment thought (Tendai hongaku shisō 天台本覚思想). How do the Shingon monks acquire this incessant practice? In other words, by what method do they obtain the correct
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Awareness and firm belief concerning a human body and its virtue? In the Shin'yōhō, the Esoteric exegesis of Buddhist embryology is considered to be the method by which the monks obtain them. In the section which explains the significance of the practice of three mysteries without form, there are the following descriptions:

Thus, the phenomena such as birth and life are the subsidiary virtue of the six elements and four mandalas . . . Therefore, through learning the “process of human conception from impregnation to development in utero” (jushō shotai no shidai 受生処胎之次第), the Esoteric Buddhist practitioners have the view that their own bodies are the Buddhas as they are. In the womb, they experience some developmental stages which are initiated from kalala (kararan 磬顏). Each stage in the process of gestation is regarded as the secret representation without exceptions.\(^{12}\)

Soon after these sentences, the author of the Shin’yōhō elucidates the correspondence between the five developmental stages of an embryo and other fivefold categories of Esoteric Buddhism, such as the five Buddhas of the Diamond Realm, five wisdoms (gōchi 五智), five phases (gosō 五相), and three kinds of secret bodies (sanshu himitsushin 三種秘密身).\(^{13}\) Specifically, it is this correspondence that the “process of human conception from impregnation to development in utero” is regarded as the “secret representation.” The correspondence is summarized as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>five stages</th>
<th>five Buddhas</th>
<th>five wisdoms</th>
<th>five phases</th>
<th>secret bodies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kalala</td>
<td>Akṣobhya</td>
<td>wisdom of the great round mirror</td>
<td>entry into the Bodhi mind</td>
<td>letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arbuda</td>
<td>Ratnasambhava</td>
<td>wisdom of the nature of equanimity</td>
<td>cultivation of the Bodhi mind</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peśī</td>
<td>Amitābha</td>
<td>wisdom of the excellent observation</td>
<td>attainment of the diamond mind</td>
<td>sign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ghanā</td>
<td>Amoghasiddhi</td>
<td>wisdom of manifesting actions</td>
<td>realization of the diamond body</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>praśākha</td>
<td>Mahāvairocana</td>
<td>wisdom of the essential nature of the universe</td>
<td>perfect attainment of Buddha body</td>
<td>shape</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And, in concluding such correspondence, it is further described as follows.

Every sentient being possesses such enormous virtue perfectly, and exists inherently and permanently . . . If the practitioners obtain the correct awareness and firm belief concerning
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this “body which consists of enormous virtue” (mandoku shojō no shin 万徳所成之身) even in one thought-moment, they are able to reach to the original state of enlightenment. It is because the original state is the six elements, the body of dharma which produces all beings. 14)

According to the Shin’yōhō, by means of fully grasping the correspondence between the developmental stages of an embryo and diverse categories of Esoteric Buddhism, Shingon monks are able to acquire the incessant practice, that is, obtain the correct awareness and firm belief concerning their bodies which inherently possess aforementioned enormous virtue and are equated with the bodies of Buddhas.

Conclusion

In the Shin’yōhō, it is claimed that Shingon monks are able to attain Buddhahood within this very body only by means of obtaining the correct awareness and firm belief concerning the equality and non-duality between human bodies and those of Buddhas. The reason why is because every deed of those who have obtained this belief is transformed into the practice of three mysteries. And, in order to obtain such correct awareness and firm belief, the monks are required to fully grasp the Esoteric significance of human conception. According to the Shin’yōhō, in medieval Shingon Buddhist tradition, the Buddhist embryology was correlated with the acquisition of the firm belief in the power inherent in the human body.

Notes


2) Tomabechi, Heianki Shingon mikkyō no kenkyū dainibu, pp. 439–446.


4) Tomabechi, Heianki Shingon mikkyō no kenkyū dainibu, p. 463.

5) Tomabechi, Heianki Shingon mikkyō no kenkyū dainibu, p. 477.

6) See Kanaoka Shūyū 金岡秀友, Mikkyō no tetsuakaku 密教の哲学 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1989), pp. 64–79.


8) Tomabechi, Heianki Shingon mikkyō no kenkyū dainibu, p. 474.
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9) Tomabechi, Heianki Shingon mikkyō no kenkyū dainibu, p. 474.
10) Tomabechi, Heianki Shingon mikkyō no kenkyū dainibu, pp. 484–485.
11) Tomabechi, Heianki Shingon mikkyō no kenkyū dainibu, pp. 452–453.
12) Tomabechi, Heianki Shingon mikkyō no kenkyū dainibu, pp. 471–472.
13) Tomabechi, Heianki Shingon mikkyō no kenkyū dainibu, pp. 479–480.
14) Tomabechi, Heianki Shingon mikkyō no kenkyū dainibu, p. 480.

Bibliography

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