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Review of: Asura's Harp: Engagement with Language as Buddhist Path

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BOOK REVIEWS

Asura's Harp: Engagement with Language as Buddhist Path. By Dennis Hirota. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag WINTER, 2006. Pp. ix + 156.

Reviewed by **Michiko Yusa** Western Washington University

Asura's Harp: Engagement with Language as Buddhist Path by Dennis Hirota is a book that grew out of lectures given by the author at the Fürst Franz-Josef and Fürstin Gina Memorial Philosophy Lecture series in Liechtenstein (p. 153). Herein the author examines the significant role that language plays in the religious practice of the True Pure Land Sect of Japanese Buddhism (hereafter referred to as Shin Buddhism), founded by Shinran (1173–1263). Hirota's original audience being those present at his lectures, this book directly engages Western intellectuals, Christian and non-Christian.

Hirota examines the language act of recitation of "*Namu Amidabutsu*" (*nembutsu* 念仏) and hearing the name of Amida Buddha (*monmyō* 聞名) as fundamental religious practice, sustained by the Buddha's spirituality of wisdom and compassion (*shinjin* 信心). This approach to Shinran's teaching via language opens up the treasure chest of Shin Buddhism, making it accessible to those who are interested in the philosophical question of language and how it is related to everyday experience and spirituality.

Hirota starts out with a general discussion of Shinran's view of language, namely that ordinary deluded human beings cannot grasp the "truth," which is none other than the significance of Amida's Primary Vow revealed in the world of history. The Buddha essence (*dharmakāya*) or spirituality, however, transcends thought and speech and enables the transformation of the deluded beings (chapters 1, 2, 3). Next, he investigates how language itself is not denied by Shinran. Rather, we should return to the origin of language, which is wisdom and reality, and enter into the "Pure Land," "Amida's bosom," "truth," or "suchness," to which language directs us. By entering this realm, the "teleological duality of this world and the Pure Land" and the "interpersonal duality of the self and the Buddha" are overcome, but the duality itself is not abolished (p. 53). In this experience, *shinjin* (the wisdom-compassion of Amida, and not one's own "faith") becomes the pipeline that connects duality. Shinran asks us to become aware of the falsity of ordinary language and the reality of true language; this is because "the world is characterized by the simultaneous presence of false and true languages." This is in line with Shinran's teaching that "*nirvana* is attained without severing blind passions" (p. 57). Shinran tells us to discard our moral judgment of good and evil, because it is still a stance of reliance on one's hubris (chapters 4, 5, 6).

In part 3, Hirota discusses two decisive moments for Shin Buddhists: (1) the entrance into the true awareness of *shinjin*, which takes place in a single thought-moment and transforms the practitioner radically from a self-centered being to an

Amida-centered being, and (2) the continuing practice carried out throughout one's life (chapters 7, 8). This seems to parallel the Zen experience in which the attainment of awakening or *Kenshō* and the sustained post-*Kenshō* practice are both essential. In the final part, Hirota describes how the act of hearing the "Name" of Amida Buddha fills the awakened practitioner with the Buddha's virtues, and this transforms "our evil into virtue." Hearing the Name in the *shinjin*, our calculative thinking and ego-centric self drop away. In this way, chanting the Name of Amida, either "voiced or voiceless," functions as a "sacrament," and in this sense, concludes Hirota, the Name presents a new paradigm of language (chapters 9 and 10).

This book demands of the reader a certain familiarity with Shinran's teaching. Being truly well versed in the writings of Shinran, Hirota cites with mastery passages from the vast and complex body of treatises and other writings. Therefore, in order to engage in a meaningful conversation with the author, we would do well to bring out a copy of *Tannishō* and *Kyōgyōshinshō* to read, or reread, as the author unfolds his philosophical contemplation.

I found Hirota's discussion on the relationship between Amida, Dharmakāra, and the historical world full of suggestions. Christian theologians may find points of dialogue in terms of Christology. The question at hand is how the eternal intervenes in the historical world. Amida, once given the Name, becomes not just a word but a "prayer," which establishes the relationship of humanity to Buddha, and the Name reveals the "truth" that the Primary Vow was made manifest in this historical world (pp. 29–33). Hirota's discussion in terms of the three manifestations of the Buddha body (the *trikāya* doctrine) especially brings Dharmakāra to the foreground. The "vertical and horizontal" coordinates that Hirota develops caught my attention—the vertical indicates the movement of the timeless-formless emerging into the historical world of time and form, while the horizontal indicates the causal, temporary process of Dharmakāra becoming Amida Buddha (pp. 38–43). I would like to know where each of us as individuals is located in these coordinates. In other words, I would like to see Diagrams 1 and 2 (pp. 141–145) incorporated into the discussion on the coordinates.

Hirota makes it very clear that Shinran's understanding of language is constructive and positive, as that which brings about the understanding of Pure Land teaching and leads us beyond the ego-filled, delusion-laden self-existence to liberation. What has to change, as I understand it, is the stance of the individual self from an egocentric and calculating self to the one given life by the wellspring of Amida's compassion and wisdom.

I found that Shinran's reference to Nāgārjuna's four hermeneutical principles (*shii* 四依) nicely captures Shinran's conviction on the usefulness of discrimination. It reads:

Rely on the dharma, not on the person who teaches it
Rely on the meaning, not on the words
Rely on wisdom, not on the divisive consciousness
Rely on sutras that are meaningful, not on meaningless writings.

To exercise our judgment and discernment does not have to lead us into the trap of subject-object dichotomy; instead it can lead us to clarity and light (pp. 49–50). Our intellectual discrimination is then like a double-edged sword. A deluded person wields it in one way, and those who are enlightened in another way.

In relation to the self-transformative effect of the *nembutsu* practice, it struck me as odd to read the following on page 117: “Persons of *shinjin* do not cease from ‘empty talk and gibberish’; neither do they give themselves freely to false speech and acts with a sense of license.” My question is, is it not by definition the “persons of *shinjin*” who no longer engage in “empty talk and gibberish,” because their awareness has been transformed? According to early Indian Buddhism, “right speech” was emphasized as one of the parts of the eightfold path, and the spiritually “transformative” effect of right speech is acknowledged. Certainly, persons of *shinjin* still engage in everyday linguistic discourse, but do they really engage in “empty talk and gibberish”?

Despite Hirota’s excellent elucidation, I find myself still left in the dark concerning the actual “awakening” experience of Shin Buddhists. I am wondering if a psychological description of the *nembutsu* practice might be helpful for readers like me to understand what kind of self-transformation may take place. To illustrate what I am looking for, let me quote the following from a radio interview in which the American jazz musician Herbie Hancock was explaining what happens to him when he chants “*Namu Myōhōrengekyō*.” I am well aware that I am talking about a different sect of Japanese Buddhism, but in terms of the psychological-existential effect of “chanting,” I wonder if the example might not be relevant.

RADIO HOST: For the past thirty-five years, Herbie Hancock has been practicing Buddhism. How do you spur creative juices?

HANCOCK: We chant “*Namu Myōhōrengekyō*.” That’s a phrase we chant. It’s a sound, and what happens is that it opens up your core, and is the source for elevating your life condition, creating you in sync with the universe.

RADIO HOST: Does it help you write songs?

HANCOCK: Where do the songs come from? Song comes from life. When life is illuminated, and you feel more illumination from life, then the inspiration is there. It’s been sitting out there all along, just didn’t see it. I feel more inspired when I chant.¹

By citing this interview, I do not mean to denigrate Hirota’s serious philosophical engagement. On the contrary, I do believe that serious philosophical engagements can benefit from incorporating experiential descriptions. (If chanting “*Namu Amida-butsu*” has a different impact on the practitioner from chanting “*Namu Myōhōrengekyō*,” I would be happy to receive clarification.)

The title of this book, *Asura’s Harp*, is taken from a quotation by Shinran (p. ix). Asura, originally related to the Zoroastrian God Ahura Mazda, was apparently incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon as one of the eight personal guardians of the Buddha, although in the Indian tradition *asuras* were considered enemies of the gods led by Indra. Ahura Mazda is the God of Light; so is Amida, as his Sanskrit name Amitābha (Immeasurable Light) reveals. Hirota describes the form as emerging

from non-form, as the light reveals the wisdom of the Buddha: "Amida Buddha is light, and that light is the form taken by wisdom" (p. 38).

In closing, I would like to thank Dennis Hirota for this groundbreaking book, which points to a productive interreligious philosophical dialogue on language and spirituality.

Note

1 – "Herbie Hancock," *Studio 360*, Public Radio International, broadcast on January 19, 2008, <http://www.studio360.org/episodes/2008/01/18>.

Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy. By Muhammad Kamal. Aldershot, Hampshire and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006. Pp. 136. Hardcover \$89.95.

Reviewed by **Alparslan Açıkgeç** Fatih University, Istanbul

Mulla Sadra is one of the most significant philosophers of the later period of Islamic philosophy. Unfortunately there is still not a single comprehensive study on his system as a whole apart from the late Fazlur Rahman's 1975 work, *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra*.¹ After the publication of Rahman's book, Sadra, his doctrines, and his philosophical system attracted wide interest. There is also a journal, *Transcendent Philosophy*, published by the Islamic Research Institute of London, in which there is a considerable number of articles on various philosophical theories of Sadra's. In Tehran, an Institute was established devoted completely to the study of his philosophical system. One recent study, *Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy* by Muhammad Kamal, a comprehensive investigation of Sadra's philosophical doctrines, is an attempt to capture the general outlook of Sadra's system as a whole. The thesis of this book is primarily what the author calls "Sadra's ontological turn," which is claimed to be *similar* to Heidegger's project in *Being and Time*. This is clearly expressed in a number of places in the book—for example, "Mulla Sadra's philosophical 'turn' or shift from the philosophical position of the *primacy of essence to the primacy of Being* and to thinking of being as the primordial metaphysical reality is *similar* to the ontological enterprise of *Being and Time* by Martin Heidegger" (p. 106; my emphasis). The phrase "*primacy of Being*" is repeated over and over again in the book.

It is not correct to use this phrase in relation to Sadra's ontology and more particularly to his doctrine of Being. I do not recall him saying that "essences are not primary but being is primary." All he says throughout his magnum opus, *Asfar*, is that "essences are not real, being is real." What the phrase "primacy of being" means is that there are a number of realities and that Being is *primary* among these realities, whereas Sadra claims that there is no other reality deserving to be identified