

Transcendent Understanding: Rennyō's Soteriology and Plotinus' Dialectic in Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

This is an eclectic and experimental comparative philosophical analysis of the soteriological thought of Rennyō Shōnin, the eighth *monshu* of the Honganji temple of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism, and Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism. Both thinkers emphasize the necessity of an understanding that transcends mere intellectual knowledge in the liberative process. Rennyō's soteriology, articulated through his "fivefold method," underscores the importance of past good conditions (*shukuzen*), the role of the good teacher (*zenchishiki*), and active discourse in realizing faith (*shinjin* or *anjin*) leading to birth in the Pure Land. Similarly, Plotinus highlights the dialectic as a means of spiritual ascent, where the teacher acts as a philosophical midwife guiding the soul toward union with the One. By focusing on three key elements—understanding, the role of the teacher, and spiritual ascent—this paper explores the parallels between Rennyō's soteriology and Plotinus' idea of ascent. This comparative study offers a new systematic expression of Rennyō's soteriological model and its potential parallels to the Neoplatonic dialectic, illustrating how both traditions perceive wisdom beyond intellectual knowledge and the transformative power of discourse in guiding individuals from ignorance to liberation.

Keywords: Rennyō, Plotinus, soteriology, dialectic, Pure Land Buddhism, Neoplatonism, spiritual ascent, comparative philosophy

1. INTRODUCTION

In a letter written in 1498, Rennyō Shōnin (1415–1499), the eighth *monshu* (or chief abbot) of the Honganji temple of Jōdo Shinshū, asserts that, "In our tradition, those who wish to know in detail the

essence of the settled mind (安心 *anjin*) do not need to rely heavily on wisdom or intellectual knowledge.”¹ Is it fair to say that Rennyo was not interested in philosophy, whose literal meaning is the “love of wisdom”? If he spoke no further, we might be inclined to think so. Still, he also repeatedly emphasizes to his readers that recitation of the Name of Amida Buddha (*nenbutsu*) without “understanding” does not achieve the intended goal of birth in the Pure Land.² Moreover, Rennyo identifies this awareness as “an endowment of the other-power of the Buddha’s wisdom” and its object as a “comprehension of the origin of the Primal Vow” that assures one of birth in the Pure Land.³ Therefore, he recognizes that understanding is essential in the liberative process, which I shall refer to as Rennyo’s “soteriology.” He also acknowledges that there is a transcendent mode of knowing, which is direct and intuitive, that allows this wisdom to emerge in us. Since Rennyo’s writings are explicitly concerned with the matter of establishing people in this awareness, I believe that it is not unwarranted to characterize him as a *bona fide* philosopher who, nevertheless, recognizes the pitfalls of mere beliefs in the same manner as Plato, who made a clear distinction between philosophers as “lovers of wisdom” and philodoxers as “lovers of opinion.”⁴

I would like to engage Rennyo in a brief discussion with Plotinus (204–270), a Greek-Egyptian philosopher regarded as the founder of

1. *Gojō gobunsho* 御文章 (五帖) (hereafter GBS) (in *Jōdo Shinshū seiten zensho* 浄土真宗聖典全書 [hereafter SSZ], ed. Jōdo Shinshū seiten zensho kanshū linkai 浄土真宗聖典全書監修委員会, 6 vols. [Honganji Shuppansha, 2014], 5:61–198), 5.12: 「当流の安心のおもむきをくはしくしらんとおもはんひとは、あながちに智慧・才学もいらす...」 Translations are the author’s unless otherwise specified. For its comprehensiveness and thoughtful commentary, I have also relied on Kemmyo Taira Sato, *Living with Thanks: The Gojō Ofumi: The Five Fascicle Version of Rennyo Shōnin’s Letters* (London: The Buddhist Society Trust, 2018).

2. A few representative examples are as follows: GBS 2.11, 2.14, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.8, 4.7, 4.8, 4.12, 5.2, 5.5, 5.11, and 5.12; and *Rennyo Shōnin goichidaiki kiki-gaki* 蓮如上人御一代記聞書 (hereafter GK) (in SSZ 5:521–634), 9, 58.

3. GBS 1.4: 「仏智他力のさづけによりて、本願の由来を存知するものなりとこころうるが...」

4. My rendering of a term Plato coins at *Republic* V, 480: “μὴ οὖν τι πλημμελήσομεν φιλοδόξους καλοῦντες αὐτοὺς μᾶλλον ἢ φιλοσόφους; καὶ ἄρα ἡμῖν σφόδρα χαλεπανοῦσιν ἂν οὕτω λέγωμεν...” in reference to a discussion on the distinction between lovers of opinion and lovers of wisdom that occurs

Neoplatonism, whose deeply influential ideas on the power of understanding and dialogue are also highly relevant to Rennyō's soteriology. A focused comparison of their respective visions allows us to question unchallenged assumptions, thus opening the door to fresh perspectives. The purported incommensurability of different thought systems is sometimes raised as an objection to the practice of comparative philosophy.⁵ Even so, I concur with Alasdair MacIntyre, who argues that this potential impasse only arises when one thinks of such comparison as demanding a choice.⁶ Therefore, this need not require a rational decision between rivals but, rather, enabling a conversation that results in philosophical progress that can enhance our appreciation of each tradition.⁷

In this spirit, I shall compare Rennyō's thought with that of Plotinus by considering three key elements: (1) understanding; (2) the role of the teacher; and (3) soteriology. Both thinkers highlight the importance of a wisdom that transcends mere ratiocination, with Rennyō emphasizing the realization of Amida's Primal Vow and Plotinus focusing on the return of the soul to its source. The teacher's role in guiding this process, without directly bestowing wisdom, is central to each system. Finally, both thinkers describe a spiritual ascent—whether towards birth in the Pure Land or union with the One—aided by external forces outside the limited minds of ordinary beings.

My investigation into Rennyō's soteriology will start by considering his views on the necessity of "past good conditions" or *shukuzen* (宿善), the role of the "good teacher" or *zenchishiki* (also transliterated *zenjishiki*; 善知識), the need to frequently discuss the Dharma

starting at 477. See John Burnet, ed., *Platonis Opera* (Oxford University Press, 1903); and John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, *Plato: Complete Works* (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

5. David Wong, "Three Kinds of Incommensurability," in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, ed. Michael Krausz (Notre Dame University Press, 1989), 140–159.

6. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues," in *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, ed. Eliot Deutsch (University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 104–123.

7. As suggested by Ronnie Littlejohn, "Comparative Philosophy," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; accessed September 5, 2024, <https://iep.utm.edu/comparative-philosophy/>.

with others and clarify doubts, and how his model of “understanding” is informed by the *Anjin ketsujō shō*.⁸ I will also draw on the insights of Kemmyo Taira Sato, who composed a modern translation of Rennyō’s letters and a commentary on them. I shall then compare this to Plotinus’ claim that philosophical discourse (or dialectic) is a liberative process—a view derived from Plato’s model of the teacher as a midwife, but not the bestower of knowledge in the student. Our goal is to come away with a better grasp of Rennyō’s soteriology and its parallels in Neoplatonic dialectic.

2. HISTORICAL NOTE

As a comparative *philosophical* study of Rennyō and Plotinus, I have no ambition in this paper to add new *historical* insights to our understanding of either figure. While Plotinus has been studied primarily as a philosopher, if anything, in English Shinshū studies, Rennyō has been almost exclusively studied from a historical perspective with less attention paid to the structure of his thought—and when it is discussed, it is usually addressed in relation to historical considerations (something usually not considered necessary for other religious figures such as Shinran [1173–1263], the founder of Jōdo Shinshū). Minor and Ann Rogers’ seminal 1990 study of Rennyō characterized post-war Rennyō studies in Japanese as generally “advocating a return to Shinran” because of a perception that Rennyō was primarily concerned with politics and “practical issues.”⁹ Their study, however, reaffirmed that Rennyō was also an important religious figure, and as Mark Blum suggests, “Rennyō’s achievement, whatever it meant politically, is primarily in the area of formulating a coherent religious message.”¹⁰

8. I am precluded from exploring more questions about both systems of thought, due to the limited scope of this essay. Moreover, I must admit that my understanding of Rennyō only touches the surface and is based on his letters in the *Gojō gobunsho*, his remarks in the *Goichidaiki kiki-gaki*, and the anonymous *Anjin ketsujō shō*, which informs much of his thinking. I could easily extend the comparison to Shinran’s own comments on the same matters, but as I feel that Rennyō more fully elaborates upon them, I am confining my investigation to his works.

9. Anne Rogers and Minor Rogers, *Rennyō: The Second Founder of Shin Buddhism* (Asian Humanities Press, 1991), 366.

10. Mark Blum, “Introduction: The Study of Rennyō,” in *Rennyō and the Roots of Modern Japanese Buddhism*, ed. Mark Blum and Shin’ya Yasutomi (Oxford

This study will thus serve as a purely philosophical consideration of Rennyo's thought, but several excellent studies exist for those interested in historical contextualization.¹¹ As for the study of Plotinus, the picture is reversed. He is treated exclusively as a philosopher, and we know little about his life except for the biography composed by his student, Porphyry, in his *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books*, to which I will direct the curious reader.¹² For those interested in a secondary resource on Plotinus, Lloyd Gerson has written several excellent studies of the man and his thought.¹³

3. RENNYO'S SOTERIOLOGY

3.1. *The Fivefold Method*

Rennyo's attitude to salvation is most clearly laid out in his presentation of the "fivefold method" or *gojūgi* (五重義).¹⁴ In response to claims that one should only rely on reciting the *nenbutsu* without

University Press, 2006), 4.

11. In addition to the aforementioned Rogers and Rogers (*Rennyo*) and Blum ("Introduction"), see also Yasutonmi Shin'ya, "The Life of Rennyo: A Struggle for the Transmission of Dharma," in *Rennyo and the Roots of Modern Japanese Buddhism*, ed. Mark Blum and Shin'ya Yasutomi (Oxford University Press, 2006); and Alfred Bloom, "Rennyo and the Renaissance of Contemporary Shin Buddhism: Rennyo's Place in the History of Shin Buddhism," in *Rennyo and the Roots of Modern Japanese Buddhism*, ed. Mark Blum and Shin'ya Yasutomi (Oxford University Press, 2006).

12. Porphyry, "On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books by Porphyry of Tyre," in *The Enneads*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson, trans. George Boys-Stones et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

13. Foremost among which I would suggest his "Plotinus," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published September 25, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plotinus/>.

14. GBS 2.11. The final character 義 can be translated as "meaning" (see Sato, *Living with Thanks*, 171) or as "doctrine" (see Shin Buddhism Translation Series, eds., *Letters of Rennyo* [Jodo Shinshu Honganji-ha, 2000], 44). In considering the content of this teaching, though, it becomes readily apparent that this is neither a set of "meanings" (e.g., definitions) nor a "doctrine," but a "method." This translation is consistent with both its Buddhist usage as equivalent to the Sanskrit *naya* (Akira Hirakawa, *A Buddhist Chinese-Sanskrit Dictionary* [Reiyukai, 1997], 948) and its usage in Confucianism as a term denoting the conduct of the "Noble Son" (君子) held by Charles Muller to be synonymous with 恕 (Charles

understanding, or that one need only depend on a good teacher to attain birth in the Pure Land, Rennyō argues that the fivefold method is the correct way in which to discern the meaning of faith, or *shinjin* (信心), that brings about birth in the Pure Land. This is an approach first systematized by the third *monshu* (Kakunyo Shōnin [1270–1351]) in his *Kuden Shō* (口伝鈔).¹⁵ First, one needs past good conditions (*shukuzen* 宿善); second, a good teacher (*zenchishiki* 善知識); third, Amida’s light (*kōmyō* 光明); fourth, faith (*shinjin* 信心; or as Rennyō often puts it, the “settled mind,” *anjin* 安心); and fifth, the Name (*myōgō* 名号).¹⁶

3.2. Past Good Conditions

The idea that one requires past good conditions—especially those created under previous buddhas—to hear the Dharma is standard throughout Mahāyāna literature.¹⁷ The basic principle here is that one’s mind needs to resemble previously cultivated soil from which the seeds of Dharma teachings can yield a fruitful harvest. Shinran discusses this classic doctrine using a similar term, *shuku’en* (宿縁), or “stored conditions.” In the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, he writes that “If one encounters and attains the faith and practice [of Amida’s Primal Vow], ... one should

A. Muller, “義,” in *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, last modified March 31, 2021, <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=%E7%BE%A9>.

15. SSZ 3:1–53, §2: 「光明・名号の因縁といふ事」.

16. In considering the chronology of Rennyō’s letters, we find an emphasis on the importance of a good teacher from early on (e.g., in the first fascicle of the *Gojō gobunshō*). However, he starts to stress the power of “understanding” after moving to Fujishima (Echizen Province) in 1474, which may reflect a response to difficulties he had in encouraging practitioners there to go beyond recitation without understanding (or what is sometimes called “self-power *nenbutsu*”). The focus on past good conditions becomes accentuated towards the end of his time in that region, before his move to Deguchi. Despite diligent efforts at teaching, he appears to have realized that some people are difficult to reach due to their unfavorable karmic roots. While the fivefold method was an established Shinshū tradition, Rennyō adopted different aspects of it depending on changing circumstances.

17. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā*, for instance, suggests that whoever manages to even hear a sutra which they have encountered must have already engaged in meritorious deeds under previous buddhas. See Unrai Wogihara, ed., *Abhisamayālaṅkāra’ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyaḥyā: The Work of Haribhadra together with the Text Commented On* (Sankibō Buddhist Bookstore, 1932 [1973]), 459.

rejoice in stored conditions from the distant past.”¹⁸ Shinran conceives that *shuku'en* are directly related to people's ability to encounter the Dharma and one's current receptivity towards the *nenbutsu* teachings.¹⁹

Likewise, Rennyo sees *shukuzen* as indispensable to receiving faith,²⁰ particularly as they pertain to past conditions relating to the Buddha.²¹ Thus, as is the norm in Pure Land teachings, Rennyo emphasizes the futility of trying to create these conditions in this degraded age of *mappō*, during which spiritual practices are considered altogether ineffective.²² Rennyo suggested that a teacher must carefully ascertain good conditions in an aspirant before teaching them the Shinshū doctrines.²³ When Rennyo adds that people without good conditions “cannot be helped,” this may sound fatalistic, but he also notes that this is not the case if such people reflect and repent.²⁴ Thus, unwholesome karma may not prove an insurmountable obstacle, and “good conditions” are not the same as moral rectitude.²⁵ Rather, “good conditions” refer to one's readiness to hear the teachings: if one has bad past conditions but then reflects on and repents of them, they become “good” past conditions from the perspective of receptiveness to the *nenbutsu*. Kemmyo Taira Sato explains this by suggesting that fully understanding *shukuzen* is to realize our *mu-shukuzen*, or lack of good conditions.²⁶

The same understanding is found explicitly in Rennyo's treatment of *shukuzen*, where he, quoting Shandao's *Hōjisan*, notes that “even those who denigrate the Dharma and *icchāntikas* can turn their minds

18. T. 2646.83.589a: 「眞實淨信億劫叵獲。遇獲ノ行信遠慶宿縁。」

19. Concerning Master Genshin, see 高僧和讃 in SSZ 2:501–515, v.88; and for Jishin-bō, see 親鸞聖人御消息 in SSZ 2:656, no. 17.

20. GBS 4.1. I would argue, based on their respective usage of the terms, that Rennyo saw *shukuzen* as synonymous with Shinran's *shuku'en*, just as he saw *anjin* as synonymous with *shinjin*.

21. A point suggested by Sato, *Living with Thanks*, 295–297.

22. GBS 4.3.

23. GBS 4.5.

24. GBS 4.8.

25. As a typical example of Rennyo noting how Amida unfailingly saves those with heavy unwholesome karma, see GBS 5.1.

26. Sato, *Living with Thanks*, 319. Indeed, this is crucial to realizing that one must rely on the actual *shukuzen* of Dharmākara Bodhisattva, embodied in the Primal Vow.

and all attain birth.”²⁷ Here, *icchantikās* signify those conventionally thought to have “burnt seeds,” lacking buddha-nature, and incapable of liberation—in other words, those with “no roots” (*mu-shukuzen*). Kakunyo’s gloss on Shandao’s passage in his *Kudenshō* expresses the same understanding, explaining it as signifying that “Even those who slander the Dharma and destroy the seeds of buddhahood, if they turn their minds around and rely on the Primal Vow, will all be reborn.”²⁸ For Shinran, the same principle was expressed in his interpretation of the narrative of Devadatta in the *Nirvāṇa sūtra*, where Devadatta, who killed his father, gives rise to “faith without roots” (*mukon no shin* 無根の信) due to the Buddha’s light.²⁹ It seems that Rennyō’s understanding of *shukuzen* was understood within the context of Amida Buddha’s extension of infinite compassion, which is thought to manifest in the form of the dispensation of the Dharma on which they can reflect together with a “good teacher.”

3.3. The Good Teacher and Discussion

For Rennyō, a “good teacher” first seeks out those who already grasp the essentials³⁰ and nurtures their faith, thus enabling them, in turn, to teach their own disciples.³¹ Attaining faith for oneself is not enough; one must also guide others.³² This process of cultivation consists in the

27. GBS 4.5, 「謗法闡提回心皆往」.

28. Jōdo Shinshū kyōgaku dendō sentā 浄土真宗教学伝道センター, eds., *Jōdo Shinshū seiten chūshaku-ban* 浄土真宗聖典註釈版 (hereafter CSH), 2nd ed. (HongANJI Shuppansha, 1988), 909.

29. CSH 286.

30. That is, those with good conditions.

31. GBS 1.11.

32. GBS 2.15; GK 40 & 137.

active discussion of faith in one's life, which Rennyō defines as "hearing the *nenbutsu*."³³

For Rennyō, frequent³⁴ (ideally monthly³⁵) discourse must "turn the topic to other-power faith"³⁶ and comprehensively address it.³⁷ Rennyō considered this a *sine qua non* for temples, criticizing those who avoid questions³⁸ and urging those with questions or doubts to "speak up."³⁹ Listening at these sessions is likened to taking medicine⁴⁰ but, to be effective, it must come with reflection⁴¹ and sincere entrusting.⁴² He compares the transformative power of such listening to water, which can, by means of time and repetition, bore its way through hard stone.⁴³ In the absence of a reliable teacher, reading the Shinshū scriptures, including Rennyō's letters,⁴⁴ was considered equivalent. He advocated that these texts be studied repeatedly, urging those who are struggling in their faith to re-read them "one hundred times"⁴⁵ until they are threadbare,⁴⁶ as he himself exemplified by his forty years of working through the *Anjin ketsujō shō*.⁴⁷ Repetition, while essential, must come with reflection, discussion, and contextual understanding provided by a teacher in order for faith to authentically manifest itself.⁴⁸ Sato sees

33. Rennyō defines "hearing the Name" as not mechanically listening to the six-character *myōgo* being invoked, but actively engaging with the teaching it represents. Therein, inspired by the *Anjin ketsujō shō*, he describes the *nenbutsu* as entrusting oneself (*Namo*) to the teaching of Amida Buddha. Cf. *Anjin ketsujō shō* 安心決定鈔, SSZ 5:1107–1194 (hereafter AKS), 6, 7, & 20. An expression of *ki* (*Namo*) *hō* (*Amida Butsu*) *ittai*.

34. GBS 2.14, 4.7.

35. GBS 4.12.

36. GK 57.

37. GBS 1.12; GK 49.

38. GBS 4.8.

39. GK 21.

40. GBS 5.18.

41. GK 60.

42. GBS 5.11.

43. GK 193.

44. GK 53, 124, & 125.

45. GK 89.

46. GK 5.

47. Rennyō claimed that this text encapsulated the Shinshū teachings (GK 249 & 250).

48. GK 215.

the teacher as a conduit to faith, not as a refuge—which only Amida Buddha can be.⁴⁹ Taking the teacher instead as the object of entrustment has been considered a form of wrongly settled faith (*i'anjin* 異安心), or heterodoxy, since the time of Kakunyo, who denounced it in his *Gaijashō*.⁵⁰ Instead, the teacher directs beings towards the Primal Vow, effectively becoming a *rūpakāya* manifestation of Amida in the present.⁵¹

3.4. *The Light, Faith, and Name (the Other-Power of Understanding)*

The third of the five methods is the “light” of Amida, which Sato interprets as the compassion of the Buddha, as revealed in the Name.⁵² Rennyo interprets hearing the Name as listening to the Dharma in active discussion with a teacher. Thus, he says, to attain faith, “we must understand the *nenbutsu* ... in detail,” and not just thoughtlessly utter it with our lips, no matter how frequently we do so.⁵³ In discerning the *nenbutsu* correctly, one comes to utter the six-character Name with mindfulness and gratitude.⁵⁴

Thus, while faith is not an intellectual activity per se, our understanding guides one towards it (like a finger pointing at the moon) and leads us to entrusting and refuge, naturally⁵⁵ joining our minds to Amida.⁵⁶ According to Rennyo, any intellectual knowledge that is unrelated to the awakening of faith will prove fruitless; no wisdom or learning is needed,⁵⁷ but “understanding the *nenbutsu*” specifically is the very definition of faith,⁵⁸ as it brings about simple entrusting⁵⁹ as a result of Amida’s wisdom coming into union with sentient beings.⁶⁰

49. Sato, *Living with Thanks*, 176.

50. CSH 940.

51. Sato, *Living with Thanks*, 177. This can be extended to physical books of Dharma that contain their teachings.

52. Sato, *Living with Thanks*, 176.

53. GBS 3.2–5.

54. GBS 3.8.

55. This is *jinen* 自然, the natural working of the Vow’s power (GBS 3.8).

56. Sato, *Living with Thanks*, 237–238.

57. GBS 5.2 & 5.12.

58. GBS 5.5.

59. GBS 2.8.

60. GBS 5.12.

Thus, the practitioner does not actively entrust but receives the capacity for entrustment from Amida. As we shall see in the latter half of this paper, Rennyo's idea of non-intellectual intuitive understanding that comes about by discourse closely parallels Plotinus's understanding of how the ascent of the soul happens in a way that challenges conventional understandings of philosophy as involving conceptual ratiocination. In receiving faith through coming to this understanding, the Name said with gratitude by a person of faith becomes the *nenbutsu* of a "good teacher," which allows the cycle to repeat so that one then becomes a guide to others.⁶¹

3.5. The Roots of Rennyo's Notion of "Understanding" in the Anjin Ketsujō Shō

Rennyo suggests that to appreciate the working of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow (*hongan* 本願) is to understand the *nenbutsu*, which encompasses both the taking of refuge (*Namo*) by an ordinary person (*bonbu* 凡夫) and the Vow that liberates all beings.⁶² He also expresses this as the unity (*ittai* 一体) of sentient beings (*ki* 機) and the Dharma (*hō* 法) as embodied by the enlightenment of Amida Buddha.⁶³ His thinking on this point is informed by the *Anjin ketsujō shō*,⁶⁴ with its emphasis on the

61. Sato, *Living with Thanks*, 176.

62. GBS 5.5.

63. GBS 3.7.

64. The AKS, while originating within the Seizan-ha branch of Jōdoshū, is a text that, due to its influence on Kakunyo, Zonkaku, and Rennyo, has long been accepted within the Jōdo Shinshū canons in both Nishi Honganji (SSZ 5:1107–1138; CSH 1381–1426; Jōdo Shinshū Honganjiha Sōgō Kenkyūsho 浄土真宗本願寺派総合研究所, eds., "Jōdo Shinshū seiten zensho seikyō dētabēsu" 「『浄土真宗聖典全書』聖教データベース」, accessed February 12, 2025, http://j-soken.jp/category/ask/ask_12); and Higashi Honganji (Higashi Honganji 東本願寺, eds., "Shinshū seiten" 「真宗聖典」, accessed February 12, 2025, <https://shinshuseiten.higashihonganji.or.jp/>). It also received a new annotated modern Japanese translation, published by the Nishi Honganji in December 2024 (Jōdo Shinshū Honganjiha Sōgō Kenkyūsho 浄土真宗本願寺派総合研究所, eds., *Anjin ketsujō shō* [Modern Language Version] 「安心決定鈔(現代語版)」 [Honganji Shuppansha, 2024]). For a new, annotated translation with a thorough introduction and historical discussion, cf. Alexander James O'Neill, *The Essence of the Determination of the Settled Mind: A Translation of the Anjin Ketsujō Shō* (Dharmakāya Books, 2025).

importance of this unity.⁶⁵ For the *Anjin ketsujō shō*, this unity is realized through an understanding that aligns the three actions (of body, speech, and mind) of ordinary beings with those of Amida Buddha, and which, thereafter, becomes the supporting vehicle of their actions.⁶⁶ The subject that recalls (念) and the object of recollection (佛) share the same essence, as the recollection itself is other-power harmonizing our mind with the Buddha.⁶⁷ While the *Anjin ketsujō shō* uses *ki* to signify “sentient beings,” Rennyō defines *ki* specifically as the sentient being’s *shinjin*.⁶⁸ That is to say, faith is that shared essence, which is one (*ittai*) with the Buddha’s mind. That faith is understood as being received from Amida as a gift of unconditional grace rather than something generated by intellection.

Returning to the practical aspect of teaching, the *Anjin ketsujō shō* also views hearing as required for bringing about that faith,⁶⁹ suggesting, in a passage quoted by Rennyō,⁷⁰ that this is what constitutes the “*Nenbutsu* Dharma Gate.”⁷¹ Hearing (and thus discerning) the essence of the *Infinite Life Sutra* that contains the Primal Vow is, therefore, constitutive of “awakening.”⁷² But, as with Rennyō, the *Anjin ketsujō shō* emphasizes that hearing should not be superficial and that it must be accompanied by reflection on the Great Vow until we apprehend our own awakening in its essence.⁷³

4. PLOTINUS

Turning to Plotinus, his thoughts, as recorded in the *Enneads*—transcriptions of his lectures, which were subsequently edited by his student Porphyry—form the foundation of Neoplatonism. Plotinus

65. AKS 2 & 10.

66. AKS 17. This is also nicely compared to firewood (representing ordinary beings), which is a host to fire (representing the mind of the Buddha) (AKS 23); this analogy originally was given by Shandao and quoted by Shinran in *Kyōgōshinshō* III.68.

67. AKS 9.

68. GBS 3.7.

69. AKS 2.

70. GKS 185.

71. AKS 3.

72. AKS 4.

73. AKS 5.

elaborated on Plato's ideas, particularly the ascent of the soul towards the ultimate reality, the One (τὸ Ἕν; *to Hen*). For Plotinus, the One transcends Intellect (Νοῦς; *Nous*) and sensory experience (ψυχή; *psyché*), serving as the source of all being and knowledge. The soul's liberation is achieved through dialectic, a contemplative process that leads one from the material world to the intelligible realm and, ultimately, to unity with the One. This "ascent" (ἀνάβασις; *anábasis*) is not merely intellectual but involves a transformation of the soul, aligning Plotinus' concept of the One with ideas of non-duality found in Buddhism, where ultimate liberation, *nirvāṇa*, similarly transcends conceptual thought.

We shall explore Plotinus' understanding of dialectic as a liberative process, drawing parallels to Rennyō's understanding of Amida's Primal Vow, with a view to demonstrating how both traditions regard wisdom as transcending mere rational thought. This leads to a non-dual realization that is inconceivable, whether that be union with the One or the unity of sentient beings and the Dharma.

4.1. Platonic and Neoplatonic Parallels to the Principles of "Past Good Conditions" and the Teacher as "Midwife"

As with all Neoplatonists, Plotinus built on the foundations laid by Plato. The philosophical life, according to the latter, must not confine itself to the intellect.⁷⁴ The *Symposium* speaks of a gradual revelation of the highest good, called "the Beautiful" (τὸ καλόν; *to kalón*), which is cultivated in aspirants through discussion with their teacher.⁷⁵ As with Rennyō, Plato recognized that the teacher does not bestow knowledge but, rather, inspires a "spark" in students who are called to realize this ineffable truth for themselves.⁷⁶ Like a midwife, the teacher does not bring about the student's wisdom but simply nourishes it.⁷⁷ Likewise, similar to Rennyō's insistence that the teacher must discern who has "good conditions" before imparting the Dharma to them, Plato suggests that the role of the teacher includes identifying which students have reached the requisite level of spiritual maturity.⁷⁸ In keeping with Sato's view of the "good teacher" as being a manifestation of Amida

74. As established earlier with a reference to *Republic V*, 477–480.

75. *Symposium* 210e.

76. *Seventh Letter* 341c.

77. *Theaetetus* 148e–151d.

78. *Seventh Letter* 341d.

Buddha's *rūpakāya*, Plotinus considers that a realized master assumes the role of a higher genus of being (comparable to the guiding role of Intellect upon an embodied soul) when engaging in discourse with a student.⁷⁹

4.2. The Dialectic

As with Rennyō's soteriology, which I have characterized as a process whereby a teacher enables the student to entrust through discussion, the core of the awakening process for Plotinus is a form of discourse known as "dialectic" (διαλεκτική)—a didactic discussion that, on the surface, focuses on identifying similarities and differences to enhance one's grasp of various principles. This leads to an ascent from lower to higher virtues and to establishing one's knowledge in a realm surpassing that of the embodied soul (i.e., our everyday experience of the world), namely, the "Intelligible" domain beyond the constraints and distortions of corporeality. One can then proceed to higher orders of reality—the Good (τὸ ἀγαθόν; τὸ *ágathon*) and Beauty itself—and beyond these to the non-dual One.⁸⁰ During this spiritual unfolding, all the principles known directly are disclosed by the *Nous* (conventionally translated into English as "Intellect," but for Plotinus, this is not simply ratiocination but direct intuition of the truth), not conjured up by the soul's reasoning. This resembles what the Pure Land tradition of Buddhism refers to as "other-power."⁸¹ Plotinus tells us that the noetic realm comprises pure contemplation and that the object of its vision is the ultimate reality, which does not depend on the Intellect—given its natural inclination towards further transcendence, *Nous* stands entirely in need of the One for its consummation.⁸²

A key aspect of Plotinus' understanding of the dialectic is that he considers it to be, in principle, accessible to all people, not just

79. Enn. (42) §6.1.20.28–29.

80. Enn. (20) §1.3.4.1–18. Plotinus, based on *Republic* 534b–c and *Phaedrus* 243b, sees this as proceeding through the following levels: 1. identity; 2. difference; 3. similarity; 4. location; 5. quantity; 6. being; 7. non-being; 8. good; 9. non-good; 10. the everlasting; and 11. the transient. This culminates in knowing things directly, not by means of mere "belief." It allows one to identify with the *Nous*, its genera—and the manifestations of these—until one is endowed with stillness in the intelligible world, thus coming into union with all of its objects.

81. Enn. (20) §1.3.5.2–3.

82. Enn. (30) §3.8.

philosophers—but the latter are expected to lead those who possess the temperament of lovers and musicians.⁸³ It is also worth noting here a distinction between Plotinus and later Neoplatonists, such as Iamblichus, who saw ascent to the divine as requiring the ritual worship of divinities. This is known as *theurgy* (θεουργία),⁸⁴ which literally means “god-work.” Nevertheless, Plotinus’ model remains one of dialectic contemplation.⁸⁵ I am tempted to see this distinction as reflecting the “self-power” and “other-power” dichotomy, with *theurgy* being a kind of ritual self-power performed by the philosopher.⁸⁶ This raises the question of the extent to which Plotinian dialectic has any room for “other-power” in its outlook.

4.3. Understanding and Its Object

When contemplating reality through dialectic, one naturally ascends upwards to its ultimate object, the One. This spontaneous natural response is a feature of *Nous* because of its innate orientation towards the Good and the One. Therefore, it only becomes active during the noetic ascent—once union with the One is attained, our spiritual terminus has been reached.⁸⁷ For Rennyo and Shinran, the “hearing” (*monpō* 聞法), which involves active engagement with the Dharma through discussion, emerges as a natural working (*jinen* 自然) that serves to bring the mind of the sentient being into unity with the Buddha, which is realized as *shinjin*. Moreover, the distinction between the soul as initially embedded in dualism while ascending through higher levels of being

83. Enn. (20) §1.3.1.

84. Cf. Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, trans. Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell (Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

85. There are suggestions that Porphyry’s representation of Plotinus was influenced by his own rivalry with Iamblichus. Gregory Shaw points out how Iamblichus seems to have “followed a trajectory of Plotinus’ thought that was not developed by Porphyry.” Gregory Shaw, *Hellenic Tantra: The Theurgic Platonism of Iamblichus* (Angelico Press, 2024), 40–41.

86. With this said, I would add that there is definitely a degree of “other-power” in Iamblichus and Proclus, where both express the impotence of human Intellect to transcend without divine assistance, giving a more complex picture of what is referred to by “god-work” or *theurgy*.

87. Enn. (13) §3.9.7–9. Elsewhere, up to the level of *Nous*, Plotinus identifies this natural inclination with the principle of non-sensual divine Love (cf. [50] §3.5).

and its complete unification with the One brings to mind the Mahāyāna contrast between relative and absolute *bodhicitta*—the former representing the dualistic aspiration of ordinary beings to attain buddhahood, and the latter being the inherently awakened nature that underlies all minds and conditioned reality. The Jōdo Shinshū tradition, in identifying *shinjin* with *bodhicitta*,⁸⁸ also asserts that ultimate reality or “suchness” (*tathātā*; *shinnyo* 眞如) pervades all things, which is apprehended (through a retrospective cognition of one’s entrusting after receiving *shinjin*) as the ultimate unity of all with a non-dual oneness (*ichinyo* 一如). In summary, what we see—in both Plotinus and Rennyo—is an awakening that comes about through natural working that functions through understanding, which itself results from an aspirant’s discourse or dialectic with a teacher who has realized this unitive truth.

5. CONCLUSION

The Shinshū and Neoplatonic approaches to liberation place great emphasis on the role of discourse, understanding, and a “good teacher.” For Rennyo, “hearing” the import of the Primal Vow through the Name of Amida Buddha is central to liberation, which is rooted in the dynamic working of *tathātā* and realized through continuous reflection, discussion, and entrusting. Plotinus, by contrast, situates our emancipation in a dialectical ascent, where noetic contemplation—guided by the teacher as a philosophical midwife—leads the soul beyond the material world to union with the One.

Both thinkers converge on the idea that wisdom transcends intellectual knowledge and that, through discourse with a teacher, individuals may be guided from ignorance to liberation. Rennyo ultimately grounds this awakening in the compassionate activity of Amida’s Primal Vow, which unites sentient beings to the Buddha in the experience of *shinjin*, while Plotinus leads the soul, through dialectic, towards a final union with the One (albeit only intermittently in this life). Ultimately, both systems emphasize the working of a transcendent power. However, in Rennyo, this is initiated by an act of compassion in light of our acute spiritual infirmities (i.e., Amida’s working through both his light and life), whereas the One in Plotinus, while accessible

88. See Shinran’s *Kyōgōshinshō* III.16.

to those who ascend, appears to otherwise have no awareness of (or active concern with) the harrowing plight of humanity.⁸⁹

89. This paper was originally presented at the twentieth International Association for Shin Buddhist Studies conference at Ryūkoku University on 28 September 2024. As it appeared in the conference program, its original title was “A Neoplatonist Reading of Rennyō Shōnin’s Soteriology: The Dialectic versus Theurgy.” After writing it, I found this was not an accurate reflection of the paper’s contents.

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