

HONEN'S MEMORIAL DAY (a Buddhist master <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C5%8Dnen>)

The ancients once said: "Worldly passions are like shadows; one cannot separate oneself from them. Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water: unreachable & unobtainable."

I proclaim the unutterable sadness of human existence.
Namo Amida Butsu. No other practice needed or required.

Out on the street. Everyone else seems to know what they are doing.
Free of my otherworldliness, determined cyclists take sharp corners.
Icy cold wind outside the Post Office. City buses on the square.
Cobblestones underfoot. Green dustbins to write on. Flagpoles clattering.
Namo Amida Butsu! I shout at the top of my voice to "God" -
the stern silent ghost of Saturday with the first shops not yet open,
up since four o'clock and itching to get my hands round a warm teapot.

Honen, who simplified the teaching into the saying of the Name
as the key to birth in the Pure Land, can be too difficult for me.
Why must my "one nembutsu" be *profound* if I am to pass the Gate?
Surely it's enough to *say it*, with a pure believing heart at peace?
(Palms together, I bow to you, Great Master, there in Sukhavati).

My poor readers cannot tolerate this heady after-breakfast stuff.
I'd better switch to Dutch and sing the praises of chocolate, beer and lace.
As Bruges Free City Poet for a year, should I not make myself clear
and "haunt the language men do use" on quaint canals the tourists use?

How to convey to Pieter (busy behind his bar) or Maria
(in her bridal bed) that March the Seventh is the day we honour Honen,
dharma lion seated on a blooming lotus in the Land of Bliss?
Aren't we ridiculous enough with our unshaved faces and skate-shop
green bonnets concealing a mop of unwashed hair, without riding
the Buddhist ski among the people of this perfectly flat village?

Is anything more detestable than this world of transmigration -
well-trodden paths leading but to the grave and possibly a rebirth
as an outcast or an Aids patient in South Africa, or worse?
A whole weekend in front of me with nothing planned. Typing, I guess.
Thanks for the green mint tea, Benny, the pistolet was to my liking.

I feel the fresh wind on my smiling face as I hit the road homewards,
the big town bell in its tower booming ten, groups of tourists yakking
outside the Museum purveying psychedelic Flemish history.
The Reverend Thomas Moser writes to me from Bad-Reichenhall,
one of the few Shin Buddhist priests to say he reads my work and loves it.

That deserves a plastic bottle of water at Rida's before returning to barracks.
Help me to say Namo Amida Butsu. Guide my footsteps *safely!*
Zina waves to me from the dark back of her closed snack-bar as I pass.
The capped and bearded boatmen put cushions on board their spring vessels.
The weak sun of Pisces hovers like a fish above the Eekhoutstraat.
I can't wait to get my bleak eyes on that book of *Honen's Path to Bliss*.