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Deathbed Practices in Medieval Japan :

Developments after Ōjō yōshū

Jacqueline STONE

Genshin's Ōjō yōshū, completed in 985, introduced into Japanese Buddhist circles the notion that, by right-mindedness of the Buddha at the time of death (*jūnū shōnen*), one could escape the painful round of rebirth and achieve birth in the Pure Land. Drawing on the work of the Chinese Pure Land masters Daoxuan (596-667), Shandao (613-681) and Daochuo (562-645), and including Genshin's own admonitions to the dying, Ōjō Yōshū presents all the major elements that would become fundamental to Japanese deathbed practice : removing the dying person to a separate hall (*junjōin*) ; enshrining an image there of Amida Buddha, with a five-colored cord attached to its hand for the dying person to hold ; scattering flowers and burning incense to create a dignified atmosphere; prohibiting worldly talk ; exhorting the dying person ; and above all, encouraging that individual's final contemplation and *nembutsu* chanting.

The publication of Ōjō Yōshū marked the beginning of a new concern with dying in a state of right-mindedness and belief in the power of one's last thoughts: ritually focused, to determine one's post-mortem fate. In this discourse, the moment of death was represented as a liminal realm, transcending the ordinary moral calculus of sin and merit, when a lifetime of wrongdoing could potentially be reversed, and an evil person achieve birth in the Pure Land. Conversely, however, it was thought that even a virtuous person, by a single distracted thought at the end, could negate the merit of a lifetime's devotion and fall into the evil realms. Thus the last moment was seen as pregnant with soteriac potential but also danger, and as requiring strict ritual control.

Genshin's Ōjō Yōshū formed the prototype for a number of subsequent deathbed ritual or *rinjū gyōgi* texts. These were produced in virtually every Buddhist tradition and continued to be published well into the Edo period. However, some of the most significant innovations in deathbed practice took place from the latter Heian through Kamakura periods. These medieval *rinjū gyōgi* texts for the most part retain the chief recommendations set forth in Ō-

jiō Yōshū but also reflect new developments, which may be summarized in three points. First, the basic structure of Genshin's instructions is assimilated, across the boundaries of lineage and school, to a range of practices and doctrinal interpretations. For example, Tanshū (1066-1120?), a Kōfukuji monk learned in Hosso doctrine, allows for aspiration to realms other than the western Pure Land : If the dying person seeks birth in the Tsurita Heaven, then an image of Maiteya should be substituted for that of Amida, and the dying person should visualize being born there". Rainū gyōgi texts in the *himitsu nenbutsu* or esoteric Pure Land tradition, by Jichian (c. 1089-1144), Kakuban (1095-1143), Dōhan (1184-1252) and others, assimilate the deathbed nenbutsu to some form of esoteric three secrets practice (*sammitu kaji*). Instructions for deathbed practice were also produced within the so-called "single practice" schools.

Second, these later deathbed manuals increasingly elaborate on the Ōjō Yōshū's instructions. For example, they discuss at length the significance of relocating the dying person ; the positioning of the Buddha image and the meaning of its facing east or west ; the exact posture to be assumed, lying or sitting, by the dying person ; which hand the cords should be affixed to ; and how they should be prepared. We can see in such elaborations the production of a body of specialized knowledge concerning deathbed practice.

Third, and most important, is the increasing focus in these later texts on the role of the person or persons in attendance, referred to as kanbyōnin ("carer for the sick") or more commonly zenchishiki or chishiki (Skt. kalyāṇamitra, "good friend"). Read chronologically, medieval rinjū gyōgi texts suggest that, at least by their compilers, the role of the chishiki as a deathbed ritual specialist was gradually coming to be seen as just as, and in fact even more, important than that of the dying person in ensuring that individual's successful negotiation of the final moment and achievement of birth in the Pure Land. The chishiki was responsible for the physical requirements of nursing ; for reading religious texts and otherwise instructing the dying ; for leading the chanting that, regardless of its content, was central to most deathbed practice ; for warding off malevolent influences ; for recognizing corporeal signs presaging the dying person's postmortem fate, and, if necessary, intervening ritually ; and sometimes for conducting postmortem rites. Let us consider a few of these aspects.

Post-Genshin deathbed ritual texts suggest growing practical experience in care of the dying. The Kanbyō goyōjin by Nen'a Ryōchū (1199-1287) is especially detailed on the

subject of nursing. Ryōchū recommends drawing up a schedule of watches, so that the kanbyōnin may relieve one another. Until the very end, a kanbyōnin must not remove his eyes from the sick person, even for a moment. Even when off duty, he should rest where he can hear the patient's breathing. At night, lamps should be lit so that the dying person can see the Buddha image and the kanbyōnin can clearly observe the dying person's countenance, for illness often worsens at night. The dying should not be forced to get up to urinate or defecate if unable to do so. In such cases, screens should be set up between the dying person and the Buddha image while the bedding is being changed. Ryōchū also advises on how to deal with fractious and recalcitrant patients. One should never inquire of the dying, "Would you like anything?" as it can arouse desire and distract their thoughts from the Buddha².

Among the chishiki's chief tasks was to lead the deathbed chanting. But what of dying persons who fall unconscious or become disoriented and are thus unable to chant? According to Kakuban's Ichigo taiyō himitsushū, in such cases, the chishiki should should observe the dying person's breathing carefully and match their breathing to his, chanting the nenbutsu in unison on the outbreath, for a day, two days, a week, or until death transpires. In this way, the dying person can be freed of sins and achieve the Pure Land, because the power of Amida's original vow must inevitably respond to the invocation of his name. Moreover, the chishiki are to visualize their nenbutsu, chanted on the outbreath, as the six syllables Nar-mu-a-mi-da-bu-tu in Siddham letters, entering the dying person's mouth with the in-breath, transforming into six sun disks, and dispelling with their brilliance the darkness of the obstructions of sins associated with the six sense faculties³. Here we see for the first time an explicit statement that, when the dying person can no longer mentally focus or falls unconscious, responsibility for both chanting and visualization practice immediately shifts to the chishiki, whose own actions at the deathbed then become determinative of the dying person's ōjō.

Kakuban's emphasis on chanting on behalf of the dying would become a standard feature of later deathbed instructions. The Rainū no yōi attributed to Jōkei (1155-1213) also stresses that the chishiki should chant in rhythm with the dying person's breathing and even continue to chant into his ear for a time after the breath has ceased. "Although he may to outward appearances be dead, consciousness may remain, or the spirit may not have departed but be lingering near the dead person. Even if he should be destined for the evil paths, be-

cause he hears the name, he may be born in the Pure Land from the interim state (antanā bhava, chinū).⁴ Some question exists about the authorship of this text, which may considerably postdate Jōkei. But a similar assertion occurs in Ryōchin's Kanbyō goyōjin, which stipulates that the chishiki continue chanting for two to four hours after the breath has ceased, all the while transferring the merit of their nenbutsu to the dead person. "By its virtue," Ryōchin says, "he will achieve ōjō, even from the interim state."⁵ In such passages, the beneficial influence of the chishiki's chanting is said to extend beyond the final moment into interim existence. At this point, deathbed practice begins to shade off into the realm of funeral rites.

Another function of the chishiki was to ward off evil influences. Kakuban recommends that one chishiki, someone with long training and experience, should stand at the dying person's head and continuously recite the mantra of Fudō to ward off demonic attacks. From stories in ōōden and setsuwa, we know that dying people were thought sometimes to fall victim to possessing spirits (mononoke), and the chishiki then had to double as exorcist. The Kōyōshū, attributed to Kakuban but probably a later medieval text, advises that, while such spirits may deceive human eyes, their true nature can readily be exposed by the simple expedient of hanging up a mirror.⁶

Kakuban's own instructions specify which esoteric rites (shūhō) the chishiki should perform immediately after the person's death--whether the ritual of Fudō, Jizō, the kōmyō shingon, sonshō darani, or others--should that person have manifested some physical sign presaging a descent into the lower realms. Kakuban cites from the esoteric Chinese scripture Shouhu guojiezhu tuoluoni jing (T no. 997) fifteen signs that the dying will fall into the hells (such as crying aloud, refusing to open the eyes, foul breath, etc.); eight signs of falling into the realm of hungry ghosts (such as high fever of extreme hunger or thirst); and seven signs presaging a descent into the bestial realm (such as contorting of the hands and feet or foaming at the mouth)--all requiring the chishiki's immediate ritual intervention.⁷ Like the chishiki's chanting to redirect the dead person's wandering spirit from the interim state to Pure Land, provisions for his ritual intervention to rescue the dying from the lower realms extended the chishiki's role past the moment of death into a sphere approaching that of funeral practice.

Such instructions increasingly cast the chishiki in the role of a deathbed specialist. With him rested the ritual control of the final moment, with its brief window onto the possibility

of escape from samurai suffering. He, even more than the dying person, came to be deemed ultimately responsible for that person's success or failure in reaching the Pure Land. Thus the Kōyōshū states: "In most cases, the fact that people achieve their aspiration for the Pure Land is due solely to the ability of the chishiki."⁸

Such assertions do not necessarily mean that most people actually died in this elaborately scripted fashion. Formal rinjū gyōgi were initially confined to monastic and aristocratic circles; not until the mid-Kamakura period did ranking warriors also begin to adopt deathbed ritual, as part of a broader appropriation of aristocratic culture. Inviting a ranking monk or famous adept to serve as chishiki would have been beyond the reach of ordinary people. Nonetheless, the professionalization of the chishiki seen in medieval rinjū gyōgi texts may have facilitated the adoption of deathbed practices by a range of social classes in late medieval and early modern times. It was, for example, linked to the Muromachi-period institution of "camp priests" (jinsō), who accompanied their warrior patrons to the battlefield and, in advance of the fighting, conferred on them the final nenbutsu, in what amounted to an abbreviated form of deathbed ritual. And, by the Edo period, the fact that rinjū gyōgi were increasingly becoming the domain of religious professionals may have also aided their adoption among commoners as one of the routine ritual services, along with funerals and memorial rites, provided by local priests to danka members.

- 1) Rinjū gyōgi chūki, Dai Nihon Bukkyō zensho (Suzuki Gakujutsu Zaidan edition) 49 : 48-49.
- 2) Kanbyō goyōjin, reproduced in Itō Shimtetsu, Nihon Jōdōkyō bunkashi kenkyū (Tokyo : Ryūbunkan, 1975), pp. 447-48, 450-52.
- 3) Kōgyō Daishi senjūtsushū 1 : 173-74.
- 4) Nihon daizōkyō 64 : 26.
- 5) Nihon Jōdōkyō bunkashi kenkyū, p. 456.
- 6) Dai Nihon Bukkyō zensho 43 : 19, 27.
- 7) Ichiso taiyō himitsushū, Kōgyō Daishi senjūtsushū 1 : 174-76.
- 8) Dai Nihon Bukkyō zensho 43 : 28.

(Key Words) rinjū gyōgi, chishiki

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