Approaching the
Land of Bliss

Religious Praxis in the
Cult of Amitābha

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By the Power of One’s Last Nenbutsu
Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan

Jacqueline I. Stone

Researchers in the field of Japanese Buddhism have long noted the remarkable rise of Pure Land thought and practice in the late tenth through thirteenth centuries. Scholar-monks of the Heian period (794–1185), such as the Tendai prelates Senkan (918–983) and Genshin (942–1017), the Sanron masters Eikan (1033–1111) and Chinkai (c. 1091–1152), and the Shingon figure Kakuban (1095–1143), developed Pure Land doctrine within the framework of their respective schools. Distinctively Pure Land forms of art and architecture were sponsored by the aristocracy, while itinerant monks such as Kōya (or Kōya, 903–972) and Ryōnin (1072–1132) spread the chanted nenbutsu among people of all classes. And in the Kamakura period (1185–1333), independent Pure Land sectarian movements led by Hōnen (1133–1212), Shinran (1173–1262), and Ippei (1239–1289) emerged. Less well recognized, however, is the central role played in much of early medieval Pure Land Buddhism by deathbed practices and accompanying beliefs about the radical salvific power of one’s last nenbutsu, whether understood as the contemplation of the Buddha Amitābha (or Amitāyus, Jpn. Amida) or the invocation of his name. Although Buddhism in general has held that the last moment of consciousness can influence one’s post-mortem fate, in the Pure Land tradition, “right mindfulness at the last moment” (rinjū shōnen) was deemed the essential prerequisite to experiencing the raigō—Amitābha’s descent, together with his holy retinue, to welcome practitioners at the time of their death and escort them to his Pure Land. Since birth in the Pure Land (ōjō) was equated with the stage of non-retrogression on the bodhisattva path, dying with one’s mind fixed on Amitābha was thought to release the practitioner once and for all from the round of samsara and...
The newly formed association called itself the Nijūgozanmai-e, or Samādhī Society of Twenty-Five. Two sets of rules were promulgated to govern the group. An original set of eight regulations, dated 986, has been attributed to Yoshishige no Yasutane (c. 931–1002), a scholar of Chinese studies who had recently been ordained as the monk Jakushin. A revised set of twelve regulations, dated 988, is said to have been written by the monk Genshin, who was active in the society's later development. Although exhibiting some differences in style and orientation, both sets of regulations stipulate that the society should devote the fifteenth of each month to nenbutsu practice with the aim of achieving birth in Amitābha's Pure Land; perform the mantra of light (kōmyō shingon) empowering earth and sand, to be sprinkled on the corpses of deceased members; nurse any members of the society who should fall sick and remove them to a separate chapel called the Čōin (Chapel for Birth in the Pure Land), to be established for this purpose; and establish a gravesite for members and perform funerals, centering around nenbutsu practice. As these regulations suggest, deathbed practice was part of a continuum that encompassed, at one end, one's habitual practice during ordinary times, and at the other; funerary rites conducted after one's death. Within that continuum, however, practice during one's last hours held a special place, as the potential of this liminal moment was deemed to set it apart from ordinary time and offer a unique opportunity for securing birth in the Pure Land.

The deathbed observances of the Nijūgozanmai-e as set forth in these regulations resonate with slightly earlier prescriptions given in Genshin's Ōjō yōshū (Essentials of birth in the Pure Land), completed in the fourth month of 985, the year before the society was established. This work would come to exert a profound influence on the rise of Japanese Pure Land thought and practice. It is justly famous for its vivid opening descriptions of the hells and others of the six realms of deluded rebirth, toward which one is to cultivate aversion, and of the splendors of Amitābha's Pure Land, toward which one is to aspire. The heart of the text, however, is devoted to instructions for practice to achieve birth in the Pure Land, among which the contemplative nenbutsu—the visualization of Amitābha—holds a preeminent place. The sixth chapter, "On the Nenbutsu for Special Times," contains a set of detailed instructions for deathbed nenbutsu practice, the first ever compiled in Japan.

In the first part of this section, dealing with deathbed ritual (rinjū gyōgi) itself, Genshin draws primarily on Chinese texts. He first cites a "Chinese transmission" (chōngguō běnchuān), quoted in the commentary on the four-part vinaya written by Daoxuan (596–667), in
a section on "Caring for the Sick and Sending off the Deceased" that purports to describe the care of the terminally ill at the Jetavana monastery in Śrāvastī in India. The sick person is removed to a "chapel of impermanence" (mājōin), so that the sight of his familiar surroundings and robe, bowl, and other possessions will not generate thoughts of attachment. There he should be placed behind a standing Buddha image to whose right hand has been affixed one end of a trailing five-colored pennant. The dying person should be made to grasp the other end of this pennant, to help him generate thoughts of following the Buddha to his pure realm. Those in attendance are to burn incense, scatter flowers, and promptly remove any vomit or excrement. Alternatively, Genshin cites the recommendation of Daoshi (d. 668?) that the Buddha image should face east, and the sick person should be placed in front of and facing it.

Genshin also cites the instructions by the Chinese Pure Land teacher Shandao (613–681) that the dying should face west, visualize the coming of Amitābha's holy retinue, and continually recite his name. Of particular importance to the later Japanese tradition is Shandao's insistence that those in attendance should write down any visions described by the dying:

If the sick are unable to speak, then those caring for them should by all means ask from time to time what they are seeing. If they describe scenes of painful punishment, then those by their side should say the nenbutsu for them and assist them by performing repentance with them, so that they may eradicate all their sins without fail. And if their sins are thus eradicated, then the saintly host bearing the lotus pedestal will appear before them in accord with their thoughts. That also should be recorded as before.

Genshin further quotes Shandao to the effect that relatives and other visitors who have recently consumed meat, alcohol, or the five pungent roots should be refused access to the dying. Otherwise, this might cause them to lose their correct concentration, allowing demons to confuse them and make them fall into the evil paths.

Another Chinese Pure Land master cited by Genshin is Daochuo (562–645), who comments on the difficulty of sustaining the ten continuous thoughts of Amitābha in one's last moments, deemed necessary in order to achieve birth in the Pure Land:

To have ten uninterrupted reflections in succession would not seem difficult. But most unenlightened individuals have a mind as untamed as a wild horse, a consciousness more restless than a monkey.

By the Power of One's Last Nenbutsu

Once the winds of dissolution arise [at the moment of death], a hundred pains will gather in the body. If you have not trained prior to this time, how can you assume that you will be able to contemplate the Buddha on that occasion? Each person should thus make a pact in advance with three to five people of like conviction. Whenever the time of death approaches [for any of them], they should offer each other encouragement. They should chant the name of Amitābha for the dying person, desire that person's birth in the Pure Land, and continue chanting to induce [in him] the ten moments of reflection.

In Japan, Daochuo's suggestion of a pact among like-minded practitioners to encourage one another's deathbed practice was first realized in the founding of the Nijūgozanmai-e.

The "ten uninterrupted thoughts" mentioned here refers, on one hand, to Amitābha's famous eighteenth vow, which promises birth in his Pure Land to all who aspire to this goal with sincerity and call him to mind "even ten times"; it also refers to a passage in the Contemplation Sūtra, which, in describing the lowest of the nine levels of birth in the Pure Land, says that even an evil person, if he encounters a good friend (zenkūishiki) who instructs him at the hour of death so that he is able to sustain ten thoughts of Amitābha, shall, with each thought, erase the sins of eight billion kalpas and be born in Amitābha's Pure Land. By Genshin's time, the ten thoughts or ten reflections at the time of death had been subject to considerable interpretation, but he himself took them to mean chanting the nenbutsu ten times while single-mindedly focusing on Amitābha.

Following these instructions for deathbed observances, Genshin gives his own recommendations for encouragement to the dying. These consist of ten items of exhortation, centering on visualization of Amitābha's physical marks, his radiant light, and his descent, together with his holy retinue, to escort the practitioner to the Pure Land. As the moment of death approaches, the person in attendance is to say:

Child of the Buddha, do you realize that now is your last thought? This single reflection [on the Buddha] at death outweighs the karmic acts of a hundred years. If this instant should pass you by, rebirth [in samsara] will be unavoidable. Now is precisely the time. Reflect on the Buddha single-mindedly, and you will surely be born on a seven-jewelled lotus pedestal in the pond of eight virtues in the subtle and wondrous Pure Land of Utmost Bliss in the west.

The instructions for deathbed practice given in Genshin's Ōjō yōsha and in the regulations of the Nijūgozanmai-e mark the entry into
Japanese Buddhist discourse of a concern with dying in a state of right mindfulness and belief in the power of one’s last thoughts, ritually focused, to determine one’s postmortem fate. The Ōjō yōshū drew attention in court circles; Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1027), the most powerful courtier of his day, kept a personal copy close at hand. The idealized account of Michinaga’s death given in the historical tale Eiga monogatari (A tale of flowering fortunes, c. 1092) is clearly based on Genshin’s description of deathbed ritual. Michinaga is depicted as dying lying down facing west, calmly chanting the nenbutsu while holding cords attached to nine full-size images of Amitābha, representing the nine levels of birth in the Pure Land.

Aspirations for the Pure Land as set forth in Genshin’s Ōjō yōshū also stimulated developments in architecture, sculpture, and painting, giving rise to a distinctive Heian-period Pure Land visual culture. Personal chapels for Pure Land devotion (Amida-dō) were sponsored by the aristocracy, such as the Hōjōji, completed by Michinaga in 1022, and the even more famous Byōdō-in at Uji, begun by his son Yorimichi in 1052. Similar structures were built in considerable numbers up until about the thirteenth century. The late Heian period also saw the emergence of the raigōzu, a new form of painting depicting Amitābha descending with his retinue of bodhisattvas to welcome the practitioner at death. So closely were raigōzu associated with the Pure Land thought of the Ōjō yōshū that, by the twelfth century, it was believed that Genshin had introduced the genre. Raigōzu were on occasion used in the deathbed setting, and some surviving examples have threads remaining where cords were once attached for the dying person to hold.

Genshin is also credited with another sort of representation of Amida’s descent, the mukaeō, or “welcoming rite,” a ceremonial procession that actually enacted the descent of Amitābha and his retinue, performed by monks and young novices in costume and accompanied by music and nenbutsu chanting. The mukaeō may originally have been performed at the Kedaiin, a chapel established by Genshin at Yokawa, and spread to other locations. Unlike privately commissioned raigōzu, mukaeō performances were witnessed by people of a range of social classes. Genshin’s biography in Hokke genki (Accounts of the wondrous powers of the Lotus Sūtra, compiled 1040–1044) says that those who witnessed the ceremony, “from the monks and laity, old and young, down to the dissolute and those of false views, all wept spontaneously, forming the karma for Ōjō, and prostrated themselves, planting the seeds of enlightened insight.” The monk Nōgū, a disciple of Genshin, is said to have dreamed of his deceased teacher being escorted to the Pure Land by a procession of monks and four gorgeously arrayed youths, “on the whole, like the welcoming rite of Yokawa”—thus hinting at the power of such performances to shape the dreams and visions of the living concerning the Ōjō of the deceased.

Instructions for Deathbed Ritual after Genshin

Genshin’s Ōjō yōshū did much to inspire subsequent ritualization of the deathbed scene. The “deathbed practice” section of the Ōjō yōshū itself circulated in a somewhat modified, kana version as an independent text; it also seems also to have been read on occasion to the dying. For example, Shōnen Ajari (d. 1015), a member of the Nijūzanmai-e, when he fell ill, reportedly “requested that worldly matters not be discussed in his presence but solely had the rinjū gyōgi section of the Ōjō yōshū read to him, learning its admonitions.” On the night of his death, he had his attendant monks recite it, along with the “Fathoming the Tathāgata’s Lifespan” chapter of the Lotus Sūtra.

The “deathbed practice” section of the Ōjō yōshū also formed the prototype for a number of subsequent rinjū gyōgi texts, or “deathbed manuals,” as they might be termed, compiled during the latter Heian and Kamakura periods. These texts retain and elaborate on the basic features of Genshin’s instructions: the removal of the dying to a separate place; the enshrinement of a Buddha image with a cord fastened to its hand for the dying person to hold; the offering of flowers and incense; the shielding of the dying person from talk of worldly affairs or the intrusion of those who have recently consumed meat, alcohol, or the five pungent roots, or of those who would be likely to arouse strong feelings, either of love or aversion; and the need throughout to create a quiet and dignified atmosphere conducive to contemplation in one’s last hours. Genshin’s exhortation to the dying person is frequently quoted: “You should not visualize any form except the features of the Buddha. You should not hear any sounds except the Buddha’s words of Dharma. You should not speak of anything except the true teachings of the Buddha. You should not think of anything except birth in the Pure Land.”
Underscored above all is the decisive influence of the last moment in determining the dying person’s postmortem fate, and hence, the vital role of the person or persons in attendance—variously referred to as the kanbyō (carer for the sick) or zencishiki (kalyāṇamitrā), often shortened to chishiki (literally, a “good friend” or religious guide)—in offering encouragement, guiding deathbed reflection and repentance, and chanting the nenbutsu. This shared framework, however, was quickly assimilated to a range of practices and doctrinal interpretations. An early example is the Rinnō gyōgi chōki (Annotations on deathbed practice), written by Tanshū (1066–1120?), a Kōfu-kyū monk learned in Hössō doctrine. Tanshū identifies right thoughts at the last moment with the aspiration for enlightenment (Skt. bodhicitta, Jpn. bodaihin), which marks the beginning of the bodhisattva path; so long as one has aroused the bodhicitta, one will not suffer at the time of death, even if one should fall into the evil paths. Tanshū’s instructions for deathbed observance reflect the eclectic and nonexclusive character of much Heian-period Pure Land practice. In addition to chanting the Buddha’s name, he says, if death is not imminent, other measures may be taken: Someone versed in the Lotus Sūtra may expound its meaning for the dying person, or a companion in practice may read the Daishōmyō rishubun (Scripture on the guiding principle of great wisdom). He also suggests having the bodhisattva precepts recited for the dying person to hear, as an unrivalled source of merit. Tanshū’s instructions for deathbed practice allow for aspiration to sacred realms other than Amitābha’s Pure Land: If the dying person seeks birth in the Tuṣita heaven, for example, then an image of Maitreyā should be substituted for that of Amitābha, and the dying person should visualize being born there.

A number of texts of deathbed ritual instruction were also produced by monks active in the development of the himitsu nenbutsu, or esoteric Pure Land tradition. The earliest example is the Byōchū shugyōki (Notes on practice during illness) by Jichihana (c. 1089–1144), which draws on elements from Genshin’s Ōjō yōshū but reinterprets them in an esoteric mode, emphasizing the non-duality of Amitābha and the shingon practitioner. For example, Genshin had stressed the visualization of the radiant light emanating from the white curl (ārāmū) between Amitābha’s brows. This light embraces the practitioner and enables him to eradicate sin, focus his deathbed contemplation, and achieve birth in the Pure Land. Jichihana suggests that the white curl should be visualized as a transformation of the letter hūm, endowed with Amida’s four inseparable mandalas. He further equates the name “Amida” with three fundamental esoteric meanings of the letter “A”: A indicating originally unborn, which is the middle Way; ni, the non-self that is the great self, which freely abides; and da, moment-to-moment accordance with suchness, which is liberation. Deathbed nenbutsu is for Jichihana a form of empowerment through ritual union with the three secrets of a cosmic buddha (sammitsu kaji); the practitioner’s reverent posture corresponds to the secret of the Buddha’s body; the chanting of his name, to the secret of his speech; and the contemplation of the name’s meaning, to the secret of his mind. Another figure to develop himitsu nenbutsu practice in the deathbed context was Kakuban, revered as the founder of “new doctrine” (shingi) Shingon, whose synthesis of Pure Land and esoteric thought is discussed in James Sanford’s essay in this volume. Kakuban’s Ichigo taiō himitsu shū (Esoteric collection of essentials for life’s end), which explicitly draws on Jichihana’s Byōchū shugyōki, also equates the deathbed nenbutsu with esoteric three secrets practice. Kakuban’s text is sometimes regarded as embodying a more “orthodox” esoteric position than Jichihana’s in explicitly defining Amitābha as an aspect of the cosmic Buddha Dainichi (Mahāvairocana), but the two are alike in stressing union with the Buddha as the focus of the shingon practitioner’s deathbed contemplation. Kakuban writes:

Amida is Dainichi’s function as wisdom. Dainichi is Amida’s essence as principle.…. When one contemplates in this way, then, without leaving the sara world, one dwells in [the Pure Land] of Utmost Bliss. One’s own person enters Amida, and Amida, without transformation, is precisely Dainichi. One’s own person emerges from Dainichi; this is the subtle contemplation for realizing buddhahood in this very body.

The deathbed scene in Kakuban’s instructions even appears to be arranged in a mandalic structure: four chishiki who assist the dying person’s nenbutsu take up their positions around him so that together they reproduce the configuration of the five wisdom buddhas, the dying person occupying the central position of Dainichi.

Although Genshin had encouraged those in attendance to chant the nenbutsu together with the dying to help them focus their contemplation, in light of his Ōjō yōsha, it is ultimately the dying person’s own deathbed practice that determines his or her success or
failure in achieving the Pure Land. However, rinjū gyōgi texts of the late Heian and Kamakura periods take cognizance, as the Ōjō yōshū does not, of the fact that many people lapse into unconsciousness before dying, and these texts therefore increasingly stress the power of the chishiki's nenbutsu to lead the dying person to the Pure Land. Kakuban's instructions, for example, advise that, should the dying person lapse into unconsciousness, the chishiki are to observe his breathing carefully and match their breathing to his, chanting the nenbutsu in unison on the outbreath, for a day, two days, a week, or as long as necessary until death transpires. In this way, the dying person can be freed of sins and achieve the Pure Land, because the power of Amitābha'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 Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu in Siddham letters, entering the dying person's mouth with the inbreath, transforming into six sun disks, and dispelling with their brilliance the darkness of the obstructions of sins associated with the six sense faculties. Here the deathbed chanting of the nenbutsu by the chishiki in attendance is assimilated to the visualization and breath meditations that were to figure largely in the esoteric nenbutsu tradition.

A similar theme appears in the Kanbyō yōjin shō (also known as the Kanbyō yōjin or Kanbyō gyojin, Admonitions for attending the sick), a very detailed set of deathbed instructions compiled by Nen'ya Ryōchū (1199–1287), third patriarch of Hōnen's Pure Land sect. Ryōchū places immense responsibility on the kanbyō to encourage the dying person's chanting of the nenbutsu with wholehearted reliance on Amitābha as the “foremost essential” and to let him hear the nenbutsu chanted when he himself can no longer chant it; so long as the aural faculty is still operative, Ryōchū suggests, hearing the nenbutsu alone can be sufficient to enable the dying to reach the Pure Land. The kanbyō must watch over the dying person with compassion, attentive to the exact moment at which life ends, and then continue chanting the nenbutsu for two to four hours after the person has died. “Perform the transfer of merit in all sincerity so that, by the virtue of this deed, the dead person will achieve ōjō, even from the interim state.” Ryōchū's emphasis on the kanbyō's ritual influence over the dying person's passage to the Pure Land may seem at odds with the spirit of abandoning reliance on the power of one's own efforts and instead placing wholehearted trust in the “other power” of Amitābha's original vow, which is often associated with Hōnen's Pure Land thought. However, it must be borne in mind that Hōnen's disciples embraced widely varying understandings of his teaching, a point underscored by their divergent attitudes toward deathbed practice, to which we will return.

The thrust of such deathbed ritual instructions was to emphasize the authority of the chishiki or kanbyō as an emerging religious specialist. With him rested the ritual control of the final moment with its brief window onto the possibility of escape from samsaric suffering, and thus a large share in the responsibility for a dying person's success or failure in reaching the Pure Land. Kakuban stipulates that the chief chishiki should be a person of wisdom and aspiration for the Way; the sick person should look upon him as the bodhisattva Kannon come to lead him to the Pure Land. Ryōchū for his part writes: “Without the compassionate encouragement of the chishiki, how could this sole great matter [of birth in the Pure Land] be achieved? Thus the sick person should look upon the chishiki as the Buddha, while the chishiki should extend compassion to the sick person, as though toward his only child.” The chishiki's authority in turn worked to strengthen the larger religious networks, old and new, in which it was embedded: monastic fraternities; nenbutsu societies (kessa), sometimes including laypeople; or the ties between lay patrons and the ritual specialists who served their religious needs. In the founding regulations of the Nijūgozanmai-e, the dying person and the attending chishiki are assumed to be fellow monks; later, deathbed ritual became a service also performed by monks for lay patrons. Hōnen and his disciples, for example, are known to have acted as chishiki to lay followers as well as fellow clerics. A recent study by Jonathan Todd Brown analyzes how T'a'amidabutsu Shinkyo (1237–1399), successor to Ippen as leader of the Jishū, skillfully secured this fledgling movement an institutional base among the bushi of the eastern provinces by emphasizing how hard it is for those professionally engaged in the sin of killing to reach the Pure Land, and thus, the immense benefits to be gained by any warrior who supported a local Jishū practice hall, thus ensuring himself the presence of a chishiki in his last hours. In later medieval times, as is well known, Jishū “camp priests” (jinsō) chanted the nenbutsu on the battlefield to ensure the ōjō of
the fallen and dying—an extension of the chishiki's role at the deathbed and of belief that, by hearing the chanted nenbutsu, the newly deceased could be guided to the Pure Land.38

Good and Bad Deaths

What was the ideal death supposed to look like? While rinjū gyōgi texts emphasize how deathbed scenes should be conducted, images of exemplary deaths were circulated in a very different sort of literature known as ojōden (literally, accounts of ojōjin, or persons who achieved birth in the Pure Land). The first of these, Nihon ojō gokurakuki (A record of Japanese who achieved birth in [the Pure Land] of Utmost Bliss, c. 985), was compiled by Yoshihise no Yasutane, the scholar of Chinese learning and close associate of Genshin traditionally said to be the author of the Nijūgozanmai-e’s initial regulations.39 Yasutane was inspired by earlier Tang-dynasty accounts recording the ideal deaths of men and women believed to have reached the Pure Land, such as Jiacai’s jingtu lun (Treatise on the Pure Land, c. seventh century), whose sixth chapter contains twenty such biographies of both clergy and laity, and the Wangsheng xifang jingtu ruixing zhuàn (Accounts of auspicious responses accompanying birth in the western Pure Land), compiled by Wenshen (n.d.) and Shaoxian (d. 805), which contains forty-eight such accounts. Yasutane’s own collection includes forty-two accounts that he discovered in older records and through personal inquiry, of individuals said to have died exemplary deaths. His collection was followed by five subsequent major and several minor ojōden collections, chiefly written in the latter part of the Heian period.40 Typically these include examples of the ojō of monks, laymen, nuns, and laywomen, representing a range of social classes. In these accounts, the lives of ojōjin tend to be summarized in a few sentences, as though mere headnotes to their deaths, which are often described in detail. The stated purpose of this literature, for both compilers and readers, was to form a karmic tie, or kechien, conducive to birth in the Pure Land by gathering or reading stories of those believed to have reached this goal. Yasutane quotes Jiacai on this point: “The wisdom of the beings is shallow, and they cannot understand the sagely intent [set forth in sūtras and treatises]. Unless one records examples of those who actually achieved ojō, one will not be able to encourage them.”41 But in addition, ojōden served to circulate

images and thus, expectations, of what a death with “right mindfulness” should look like.

Where texts of instruction for deathbed practice tend to stress the importance and authority of the chishiki, the men and women whose stories are recounted in ojōden are in most cases very much the principle agents in their own deathbed scenes. Death never takes them by surprise; they foresee it to the day and announce it to disciples or family. They bathe, put on clean clothes, then sit upright in the posture of meditation or lie down facing west. They die peacefully, as though sinking deep into contemplation or falling asleep. Though no doubt considerably idealized, such accounts provide a useful index to the range of deathbed practices carried out in the latter Heian period. Some ojōjin are described as entering meditation in their last hours, but, for most, deathbed practice seems to have entailed some form of vocalization, whether of mantras, dhāranis, sūtras, or other sacred texts. Most popular was the invocation of Amitābha’s name, Namu-Amida-butsu. Genshin had recognized the value of the chanted nenbutsu as an aid to deathbed visualization, and although the emphasis on contemplative practice remains paramount in his Pure Land thought, he also argued that invoking the name of Amitābha in one’s last moments carried an immense salvific potency that it did not possess at ordinary times.42 In addition, contemplation was thought to be extremely difficult to practice in one’s last moments, when the “winds of dissolution” (dannatsumano kaze) were said to wrack the body with excruciating pain. Even for those trained in meditation, the chanted nenbutsu may well have proved more practicable at a time when one was greatly weakened and perhaps suffering. It was at least partly in the context of deathbed practice that the practice of chanting the nenbutsu spread.

Takagi Yutaka, tabulating the evidence from seven Heian-period ojōden collections, found sixty-seven examples, dating from 951 to 1153, of people who died chanting the nenbutsu in their last hours. Most of these are concentrated after 1051.43 The year 1052, of course, was widely thought to mark the beginning of the Final Dharma age (mappō), when sentient beings are said to be greatly burdened by ignorance and evil, and liberation becomes exceedingly difficult to achieve. Although consciousness of mappō has often been invoked uncritically as a convenient explanation for a range of complex religious phenomena, the growing popularity of the invocational nenbutsu may in part have stemmed from its rep-
utation as a practice suited to benighted worldlings of the last age. Certainly it was accessible to people across the boundaries of class and level of education. The examples identified by Takagi of ōjōnin who chanted the nenbutsu as their deathbed practice include not only aristocrats and literati but also warriors of both high and low rank, as well as provincial officials and commoners.

A second form of deathbed practice, also aimed at achieving birth in Amitābha’s Pure Land, was reciting the Lotus Sūtra, or individual chapters, verses, or phrases from the Lotus Sūtra. In the same survey of ōjōden, Takagi found examples of thirty-six individuals who chanted the Lotus Sūtra or some portion thereof on their deathbed. This is a much smaller percentage than those who employed the invocational nenbutsu and includes only seven laypeople. Reciting the Lotus Sūtra would presuppose either literacy and access to a copy of the text or proximity to a teacher who could instruct one in recitation and memorization. Sūtra recitation as a deathbed practice would also have carried the risk that one might fall unconscious or die in mid-sentence, a death that one imagines would have been viewed as both inauspicious and unesthetic. In contrast, one could die at any point while chanting the nenbutsu and it could still be said of that person that he or she died in admirable fashion, invoking the Buddha’s name.

However, while some ōjōnin relied solely on the chanted nenbutsu, this was not yet linked to a doctrine of the nenbutsu’s exclusive validity, such as would emerge in the Kamakura period with Hōnen, founder of the independent Japanese Pure Land sect. The mainstream of early medieval Pure Land thought recognized a spectrum of practices as efficacious for achieving birth in the Pure Land, and both ōjōden as well as court diaries and other historical accounts describe the use of a range of deathbed invocations. Sacred texts other than the Lotus were also employed; Genshin himself, when near death, in addition to chancing the nenbutsu, is said to have recited from the “Twelve Salutations” (Chn. Shí-er lǐ, Jpn. Jüniri), twelve verses in praise of Amitābha attributed to Nāgārjuna, a practice that may also have been adopted by some members of the Niōgōzanmō-e and others. Deathbed invocations included dhāranis believed able to dissolve karmic hindrances, such as the name of the bodhisattva Kokūzō (Àkāśagarbha) or the dhāranī of the Augustly Victorious One (Skt. usṇīṣaviyā dhārani, Jpn. sonshō darani). Also employed were so-called “hell-harrowing texts,” or hajigokumon, sūtra passages believed to protect the reciter against falling into hell. A famous example is taken from the Flower Garland Sūtra (Avatamsaka sūtra): “One who desires the knowledge of the Buddhas of the three time periods should contemplate the dharmarāgam as being entirely mind-created.” Others derive from the Lotus Sūtra (for example, “One who has a pure mind believes and reveres and does not give rise to doubt will not fall into [the realms of] the hells, hungry ghosts, or beasts but will be born in the presence of the Buddhas of the ten directions”), or from the Larger Sūtra: “By the power of that Buddha’s [Amitābha’s] original vow, those who hear his name and desire birth in his Pure Land shall at once arrive at that land, where they will achieve [the stage of] non-retrogression.” The efficacy of hajigokumon is also stressed in some deathbed ritual texts; Ryōchū recommends several examples to be recited by the chishiki should the dying person become deranged by extreme pain.

Such vocalization practices were accompanied by other ritual acts, such as holding a five-colored pennant or cord tied to the hand of a Buddha image, recommended by Daoxuan and specified in instructions for deathbed practice from the Ōjō yōshū on. Alternatively, some ōjōnin are described as forming mudras on their deathbed or holding ritual implements, such as vajras or incense burners or, in some cases, a written vow to be born in Pure Land or a record of the good deeds they had performed in their lifetime. Here again we find a resonance between descriptions in ōjōden and instructions in rinjū gyōgi texts. Both Tanshū’s Rinjū gyōgi chūki and the Kōyōshū (Collection on filial conduct), a collection attributed to Kukanban and containing a set of instructions for deathbed practice, specify that a record should be made of the dying person’s good deeds in that lifetime, which is then to be read aloud and praised at the deathbed to encourage that person.

Ishida Mizumaro writes: “Right mindfulness in one’s last moments is a subjective matter, and whether or not the sick person had in fact achieved it could not easily be known. . . . To inspire confidence in those attending, some more immediately recognizable, outwardly visible sign of a good death was required.” This helps account for the fact that “right thoughts at the last moment,” or rinjū shōnen, quickly came to be understood, less in terms of the dying person’s inward state of mind, inaccessible to outward observers, than as a matter of conformity to prescribed ritual behavior,
which was assumed to reflect a proper mental attitude. Dying calmly, holding a cord attached to the hand of a Buddha image with the name of Amītābha on one's lips, was itself deemed proof of ōjō. However, additional evidence was sought, and three kinds of indicators are particularly stressed in ōjōden. First are wondrous signs appearing at the time of death or shortly after. Yasutane records that when the prelate Zōmyō, chief abbot (zasu) of Enryakuji, passed away: “That evening a golden light suddenly illuminated the place, and purple clouds arose of themselves. Music spread through the heavens and a fragrance filled his room.”  

Mysterious fragrance or radiant light in the death chamber, music of unearthly beauty heard in the air, or purple clouds rising in the west all appear in Yasutane's Chinese prototypes and became staples of Japanese ōjōden and other deathbed accounts. Sometimes these signs were described as perceptible only to the dying person, but in other cases they were depicted as objectively evident to bystanders or even unrelated persons at a distance.

The second and most widely reported index to a person's ōjō was the revelatory dream, examples of which were recorded in immense variety. Such dreams could be precognitive, indicating that the dying person would reach the Pure Land and appear either to the individual concerned or to other parties. More common were the dreams after the fact, indicating that the dead person had indeed achieved ōjō. Dream reports of this variety recall the charter oath of the Nijūgozanmai-e, which mandated that deceased members should make contact with those still living and inform them of their postmortem fate. Dreams appearing to more than one person were deemed especially reliable. An example is the case of the monk Ryōhan, a member of the Nijūgozanmai-e, who died while still a very young man. Both his parents subsequently dreamed that he appeared to them and announced, “I am now in the land of Utmost Bliss, where my name is Bodhisattva Benevolent Wisdom (Ninne).” As in this case, dreams could reveal not only the fact of ōjō but the level of birth achieved: Ōe no Masafusa (1041–1111), in whose ōjōden collection this account appears, concluded that Ryōhan must have achieved the ninth and highest grade of birth, presumably because he referred to himself as “bodhisattva.” The dreams and visions reported by the dying, and their artistic and literary representations in raiōzu, ōjōden and, other sources, probably stood in a circular relationship: reports of dreams and deathbed visions would have informed the representations, and the representations in turn shaped the dreams and visions; people saw what they knew they were supposed to see.

A third class of indicators was the appearance of the corpse. Numerous accounts tell of ōjōjin whose bodies did not decay but emitted wondrous fragrance. Even in the crematory fires, their bodies retained the posture of meditation and their hands, the mudras they had formed. In the liminal period right before and after death, the body, normally opaque, became in effect a lens opening onto the individual's postmortem fate. ōjōden report only success stories, but behind such accounts lurked the specter of a bad death and consequent rebirth in the evil realms, which, it was thought, could also be known from the manner of dying and the subsequent appearance of the body. “When those who do evil are about to die,” Genshin had written, “the wind and fire elements depart first, so they are restless and feverish, and suffer greatly. When those who do good are about to die, the earth and water elements depart first, so they are calm, and experience no pain.” Passages in canonical Buddhist texts dealing with corporeal indices to a dying person's realm of rebirth attracted considerable interest in the late Heian and Kamakura periods. For example, Kakuban’s instructions for deathbed practice cite the Chinese esoteric scripture Shōshū guojiechu tuoluoni jing (Sūtra of the dhāraṇī for protecting the ruler of the realm), which enumerates fifteen signs that the dying will fall into the hells (such as crying aloud with grief or choking with tears, urinating or defecating without awareness, refusing to open the eyes, foul breath, or lying face down); eight signs that the dying will fall into the realm of hungry ghosts (such as burning with fever or suffering from hunger or thirst); and seven signs presaging a descent into the bestial realm (such as contorting of the hands and feet, foaming at the mouth, or sweating from the entire body)—all signs requiring the chishiki’s immediate ritual intervention. Although further evidence is needed, one suspects that the emphasis on dying with right mindfulness may have served in part to counter fears about onnyō (vengeful ghosts), the products of painful or untimely deaths, who could vent their resentment on the living in the form of sickness or other disasters. The manner of death of both worldly and religious leaders was appropriated for a variety of polemical agendas. The epic Tale of the Heike, for example, represents the usurper Taira no Kiyo- mori as dying in an agony of fever and convulsions, while his wife
dreams that horse- and ox-headed demons arrive to carry him off to the Avīci hell. The treatise on poetics Nomori no kagami, attributed to Minamoto no Arifusa, criticizes the death of the Jishū founder, Ippen:

Beforehand, people insisted that [when Ippen died.] purple clouds would rise and lotus blossoms would fall from the skies, but when the time actually came, there was no sign of Amitábha’s descent. His body was in such a state that his disciples’ expectations that he would achieve the Pure Land were completely thwarted, and they had to hurry to cremate him before others could see it.

The monk Nichiren (1222–1282), who preached exclusive devotion to the Lotus Sûtra and opposed Pure Land practices in any form, argued his case not only on doctrinal grounds but by charging that, among the leaders of the exclusive nenbutsu movement in particular:

There are some who have died without [auspicious] signs appearing [even] in two weeks’ time, or who have broken out in evil sores, or spit blood, or had hot sweat pour from their entire bodies. In general, of Hōnen’s more than eighty disciples, not one has died a good death.

Nichiren also lamented the frequency with which his contemporaries concealed the facts of a teacher’s or parent’s inauspicious death and instead claimed that the deceased had achieved birth in the western Pure Land—thus hinting indirectly at a crisis of interpretation that must have arisen with some frequency when a deceased loved one’s reputation for virtue or piety was not borne out by the manner of his or her death.

The Last Nenbutsu and the Ōjō of Evil Men

Many of the ōjōen biographies simply tell how virtuous persons died exemplary deaths, and thus offer no moral or soteriological surprises. But these collections also include accounts of the ōjō of persons who, according to ordinary social morality or conventional understandings of karmic causality, might be thought to face great, even insurmountable hindrances to achieving the Pure Land. By including such cases, ōjōen reinforce the notion of life’s final moment as a realm of unique liberative potential, radically discontinuous with society’s values, ordinary moral codes, and even the

efficacy of everyday practice. One notes, for example, accounts of female ōjōin, both nuns and laywomen. Although not barred from Buddhist liberation, in being bound by the “five hindrances and three obediences” and subject to the pollution restrictions associated with menstruation and childbirth, women were often thought to constitute a soteriologically challenged category. The treatment of women in ōjōen is ambivalent; not infrequently, they are represented as potential hindrances to the deathbed contemplation of men. Nonetheless, by including tales of women ōjōin, these collections underscore the point that, by right mindfulness at the last moment, anyone—even those thought to have severe karmic limitations—could at once escape the round of rebirth and achieve the Pure Land.

Also significant in this regard are accounts celebrating the ōjō of people who deliberately reject conventional values, including those of the religious establishment. Examples include hijiri, or holy men who leave their Buddhist temples, renouncing the possibility of high monastic office, fame, and remuneration to lead an ascetic life or practice in reclusion; monks like Zōga and Ninga who deliberately feign madness to avoid the snares of clerical promotion and worldly honor; and the nun Myōbō, who defies her noble parents’ plans for her marriage in order to take the tonsure. Laypeople, too, although on more modest a scale, are sometimes depicted as subverting social norms in their aspiration for the Pure Land. A woman from Nara stubbornly ignores her household duties despite her husband’s rebukes and spends her time reciting the Lotus Sûtra. Her death is calm and exemplary, and her body emits fragrance for several days. Such nonconformist ōjōin may flaunt this-worldly conventions, but they know how to prepare for the last moment, whose rules are clearly not those of quotidian reality.

But the strongest emphasis in ōjōen on the extraordinary soteric potential of the last moment lies in their examples of the ōjō of “evil men” (akunin). Yasutane’s original ōjōen collection contains no such examples, although he notes that one of his sources of inspiration, the Tang-dynasty collection Ruizijing zhuansu, includes cases of people who butchered cattle or sold chickens and yet still were able to achieve ōjō by meeting a “gooc friend” and completing ten deathbed thoughts of Amitábha. By the latter Heian period, however, accounts of evil men achieving the Pure Land (akunin ōjō) begin to appear with some frequency. The emblematic “evil men” of these
Japanese collections are not butchers or poultry dealers but warriors (bushi), a group emerging as a powerful force within medieval society but whose professional obligation to engage in killing—of animals in the hunt, as a form of war training, and of men on the battlefield—was seen from a traditional Buddhist perspective as deeply sinful.

The first two examples of evil men’s ōjō in Japanese ōjōden occur in the second such collection, compiled more than a hundred years after Yasutane’s by Ōe no Masafusa. An official, Minamoto no Noritō no Ason, governor of Tajima, amasses great wealth and is stingy; nevertheless, he reads the Amitābha sūtra forty-nine times a day and dies in a state of right mindfulness, being welcomed by the Buddha.67 In the second example, Minamoto no Yoriyoshi no Ason, former governor of Iyo and an outstanding military leader (“the number of heads he cut off and exposed and the lives he took were beyond calculation”) repents of his sins and practices the nenbutsu: his birth in the Pure Land is confirmed by the dreams of many. Masafusa comments: “Thus we may surely know that even those who commit the ten evils and five pernicious offenses may be welcomed into the Pure Land. All the more so, those who are guilty of other [that is, lesser] offenses! In considering these two cases, we may be greatly reassured.”68 Some tales make explicit that the power of the deathbed nenbutsu is what enables such sinful men to achieve the Pure Land. Sange ōjōki tells of Tanba no Taifu, a warrior from Kai province who hunts and exacts harsh tribute from the peasants on his estates; his atrocities are “too many to record.” But in later life, he repents his evils and dies calmly, after having chanted the nenbutsu. Renzen, the compiler, remarks: “Surely this shows that even those who commit the ten evils and five pernicious offenses can achieve birth in the Pure Land, by the power of the last nenbutsu!”69

Obara Hitooshi has argued that the evil of warriors as described in ōjōden—that is, their identification as akunin—is inseparable from their social status and occupation and so reflects an aristocratic bias on the part of the compilers; warriors themselves did not necessarily regard their profession as sinful.70 It may be, as Masafusa’s comment suggests, that the ōjō of warriors who kill served in these collections as extreme examples, reassuring in their very extremity to the merely ordinarily sinful aristocratic reader: If even such evil men as these can attain the Pure Land, surely one’s own hopes for ōjō are not unreasonable! But in fact, most ōjōden compilers were aristocrats of rather low rank, and a majority of the ōjōnin whose deaths are described in their collections come, not from the highest social levels, but from the lesser nobility and literati down to local officials, nameless monks and warriors, and even servants. These facts have led some scholars to argue, in a manner opposite to Obara’s view, that ōjōden reflect an attitude critical of the aristocracy and a nascent religious egalitarianism.71 Although this argument has sometimes been carried to excess, the presence in these collections of many humble ōjōnin does suggest both the spread of Pure Land practices in the Heian period among a range of social groups and a growing belief in the possibility of liberation for anyone who could face death with a mind fixed reverently on the Buddha, even the lowly and evil. It should also be noted that ōjōden contain examples, although very few, of persons whose wrongdoings cannot be attributed to their social circumstances but appear to be gratuitous. A notable case is the monk Junken. An accomplished scholar, he is clever in exegesis but gives no sign that he ever meditates or chants the nenbutsu. At one point, he engages in sexual relations with his daughter. When reproached, he responds speciously: “Haven’t you read the Buddha’s teachings? All women are our mothers and children, our elder and younger sisters. How should one distinguish who is a relative, and who a stranger?” But when death comes, he meets it well, chanting the nenbutsu and facing west, and the god Bishamon (Vaiśravaṇa) escorts him to the Pure Land.72

In short, in these collections, the last moment is represented as a realm apart: its rules are not those of this world, nor can it be calculated by ordinary standards. An ideal death is not the monopoly of the highborn, the virtuous, or the socially conforming. Especially in accounts of the ōjō of evil men, we see an implicit questioning of a direct causal relation between morality or merit-accumulation and salvation, which was to become one of the dominant themes of Kamakura-period Buddhist thinkers.73

**Anxieties and Extreme Acts**

As suggested above, the notion of life’s last moment as a unique window of liberative opportunity was on one hand a hopeful one; it was linked to, and helped promote, popular doctrines of universal
salvation, especially for those unable to keep the Buddhist precepts or perform demanding practices. Yet precisely because the last moment was seen as discontinuous with ordinary karmic causality, it was also deemed potentially dangerous. That is, even a virtuous Buddhist who had practiced devoutly throughout life could inadvertently negate such accumulated efforts at the last moment by a stray doubt or distracted thought. Hōnen eloquently voices such concerns:

Even though you may have admirably accumulated the merit of the nenbutsu over days and years, if you should meet with some evil influence at the time of death and in the end give rise to evil thoughts, you will lose [the opportunity of] birth in the Pure Land immediately after death and be swept away to suffer in the currents of samsara for another lifetime or two lifetimes. How vexing that would be!74

In other words, one had to be concerned that, whether due to insufficiency of training in practice or to a lack of good roots, one might not be able to focus on chanting the nenbutsu when death overtook one. In this sense, the demand for right mindfulness at the last moment could be terrifying.

Sudden or distractingly painful death might, of course, come upon anyone. But for some groups of people this posed a particular danger. Most obvious were the bushi, who could be cut down suddenly in battle with no time to fix their minds on the Buddha. We see such concerns reflected in the recorded teachings of religious leaders who counted many warriors among their following, such as Hōnen or Ippen’s successor, Shinkyō. Such writings may of course reflect the efforts of Buddhist proselytizers to convince warriors that they were in fact “evil men” in need of salvation, as well as the warriors’ own spontaneous concerns. But in either event, Buddhist teachers addressing themselves to bushi were often willing to abridge many of the conventions of deathbed ritual. Hōnen, for example, is said to have counseled the samurai Amakasu Tadatsuna as follows:

Since [A]mitābha’s original vow was made entirely for the sinful, the sinful person just as he is can achieve birth in the Pure Land by chanting the name... Even someone born into a warrior house who loses his life on the battlefield, if he dies having said the nenbutsu, then, in accordance with the original vow, Amitābha will come to welcome him and he will achieve birth in the Pure Land.75

Tadatsuna, a retainer of the Minamoto, is said to have achieved òjó on the battlefield, fighting against the armed monks of Mt. Hiei.76

Shinkyō, too, taught his warrior patrons that many of the conventions of deathbed practices could be dispensed with: one need not be reclining or sitting upright, nor was it necessary to place the palms together. One need only chant the nenbutsu, even once:

When you face [the enemy’s] military camp, or when you are about to fight a hated foe, your desire to destroy your opponent at all costs must indeed be very powerful. Such [feelings] are karmic causes which should make you fall immediately into the evil realms. But for those who faithfully practice the nenbutsu, since they end their lives after having chanted the name, their sins are extinguished by its sound, and they definitely achieve birth in the Pure Land.77

Parenthetically, it should be noted that the sufficiency of a single battlefield nenbutsu was not an idea altogether original to these Kamakura-period teachers. Two twelfth-century ôjóden include the example of the warrior Sukeshige, who is struck down by an arrow from behind but achieves birth in the Pure Land by uttering a single Namu-Amida-butsu.78

While willing to simplify greatly the ritual requirements of the last moment, both Hōnen and Shinkyō stressed the importance of chanting up until the moment of death: Shinkyō in particular is explicit about the absolute necessity of chanting at least one last nenbutsu as one’s final conscious act.79 This very simplification throws the ambivalence of the rinjó shōnen ideal into stark relief: So great is the power of one’s dying nenbutsu that it can remove even a warrior’s grave karmic hindrances; but if he fails to chant that single nenbutsu, he will at once be dragged down into the evil realms. Fears about inability to chant even a final nenbutsu in the thick of battle led to the emergence, in the Muromachi period, of the jinzó mentioned above, who followed their warrior patrons to the battlefield and conferred on them the ten nenbutsu—the traditional basic requirement of ôjó—in advance of the fighting.80

How could one maximize one’s chances of dying with one’s mind serenely fixed on the Buddha? Probably the most common strategy was to accumulate enough religious merit during one’s life that one would be predisposed to right thoughts at the last moment. Genshin had cited Daochuo on this point: “If a person accumulates good practices, then at death there will be no evil thoughts. When a tree
leans and topples over, it inevitably falls the direction in which it has been bent.” This accounts in large measure for what art historian Willa Tanabe has termed the “merit of surfeit,” a quantitative approach to merit-making seen in an emphasis on reciting the Lotus Sūtra hundreds of times, or chanting millions of nenbutsu, or, if one had the means, commissioning dozens of Buddha images or sūtra transcriptions, or tens of thousands of miniature votive stūpas. All such efforts were geared, ultimately, to the final moment, in the hope that virtue accumulated in this life would enable one to meet one’s end with a calm and focused mind. Examples abound: Shōnen, a member of the Nijūgozanmi-e mentioned above, is said to have practiced the Amitābha offering rite (Mida kuyōhō) twice daily and chanted the nenbutsu ten thousand times at each of the six divisions of the day and another: hundred times together with prostrations at each of the twelve divisions of the day, every day for fifteen years, during which period he also recited the Lotus Sūtra 4,200 times. Miyoshi no Tameyasu, compiler of two twelfth-century ôjōden, is said to have recited the Heart Sūtra three hundred times, the nenbutsu ten thousand times, the smaller Amitābha sūtra nine times, the Diamond Wisdom Sūtra (Skt. Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā sūtra, Jpn. Kongō hannya kyō) three times, and the invocation of nyoirin Kannon a thousand times, every day for the last twelve years of his life. This quantitative emphasis is especially marked in later Heian ôjōden: A monk of Kuramadera chants the nenbutsu twelve thousand times daily for four thousand days (about thirteen years), counting his recitations with small beans. At the end of the period, he has accumulated 287 koku, 6 to of beans—an amount that Frederic Kotas has calculated at about thirteen thousand dry gallons. Even Hōnen, while insisting that ôjō is achieved through the power of Amitābha’s compassion and not by one’s own amassed merit, nevertheless stressed continual chanting of large quantities of nenbutsu as the practice conforming to Amitābha’s original vow and essential to ensuring that one would be able to chant the nenbutsu at the moment of death. He himself for years chanted the nenbutsu first sixty thousand, and then seventy thousand, times a day. He is even said to have remarked: “Sometimes one dies from choking on food while eating. You should chant Namu-Amida-butsu whenever you chew and Namu-Amida-butsu whenever you swallow.”

By the Power of One’s Last Nenbutsu

The demand for a proper death encouraged such unremitting efforts in continuous practice and merit accumulation while at the same time undercutting any certainty that such efforts would ultimately be efficacious. The resultant anxiety sheds light on the obsessive quality of much of late Heian aristocratic Buddhist practice. The Pure Land devotions of the nobility have often been characterized as overly aestheticized, preoccupied with ceremony and outward display. But as Nishiguchi Junko writes:

Behind the proliferation of Amida halls, the various Buddhist ceremonies that were conducted, the cultivation of good deeds, the burial of sūtras, pilgrimages, nenbutsu chanting, and sūtra recitation, lay the severe demands of ôjō. Unless we understand such phenomena in this light, we do no more than skim the surface of aristocratic Pure Land devotion. Similarly, the quantitative approach to faith that spread among ordinary people should be understood in the same way. For those who chanted the nenbutsu so many hundreds or thousands times daily, counting their recitations with small beans, such efforts did not in themselves translate into a guarantee of ôjō. In the figures of these people, fully aware of this uncertainty and yet continuing to count their beans, we cannot fail to see the distress of those who aspired to the Pure Land.

Some individuals are said to have turned to even greater extremes in coping with the uncertainty of the last moment. Rather than await a natural death, when senility or the pain of illness might interfere with deathbed contemplation, they literally took matters into their own hands and deliberately ended their lives while in full possession of their faculties. The reasoning behind such acts is voiced by a hitiri of Mt. Shosha described in the Hoshininshū (A collection of religious awakenings) by Kamo no Chōmei (1155–1216), who embarks on a terminal fast: “Although I am deeply resolved to meet death with right mindfulness and so achieve birth in the Pure Land, it is impossible to know how one will die. So I am resolved to cast aside this body now, while no particular deluded thoughts are troubling me and I am free from bodily illness.” Religious suicide, committed in hopes of quickly achieving the Pure Land (jigai ôjō), is especially well documented around the late Heian period, and a range of methods was employed. Among the most widely publicized was auto-cremation, which has its textual basis in the Lotus Sūtra, where a bodhisattva called Beheld with Joy by All Living Beings (Skt. Sarvasattvapriyadarśana, Jpn. Issai Shujō Kiken) burns
his body in offering to the sūtra. Auto-cremation in Japan is attested from the late tenth century and was soon assimilated to aspirations for birth in Amitābha's Pure Land, much more consistently so than on the continent. The Hokke genki, for example, relates the case of an unknown monk from Satsuna who resolves to immolate himself as an offering to the three treasures, in emulation of the bodhisattva described in the Lotus Sūtra. As he approaches the act, he vows:

"By virtue of my thousand recitations of the [Lotus] Sūtra, I will surely be born in the land of Utsukot Bliss. After my body has burned, there will be marvellous signs." Though no wind was blowing, as his body burned, the smoke rapidly drifted toward the west, and though the skies were clear, purple clouds rose in the east. The monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen who had assembled all shed tears of rejoicing.

Drowning was another common method of religious suicide. A preferred spot was in the sea off Shintennōji, a temple founded by Prince Shōtoku on the shore at Naniwa, now Osaka. According to tradition, the western gate of this temple, which faced the ocean, communicated directly with the eastern gate of Amitābha's Pure Land. Devotees habitually gathered there to chant the nenbutsu, and ōjōnin would sometimes row out from the western gate and throw themselves into the sea. Again, people gathered to watch, and wondrous signs were recorded. A particularly poignant case, also described in Hosshinshū, is that of a woman of the court, who, grieving over the untimely death of her daughter, goes to Shintennōji and practices intense nenbutsu recitation for twenty-one days. Telling the landlord where she lodges that she wishes to see the famous coast at Naniwa before returning to the capital, she persuades him to row her out to sea, where she faces west, chants the nenbutsu, and flings herself into the waves. Purple clouds rise and envelop the boat, and there is a strange fragrance. A dream diary discovered in her room, reveals that on the successive weeks of her stay she had dreamed of being welcomed, first by Jizo (Kṣitigarbha) and Ryūjū (Nāgājuna), then by Fugen and Monju, and finally, by the Tathāgata Amitābha and his retinue.

Religious suicide for the stated purpose of quickly achieving the Pure Land, including such forms as fasting, auto-cremation, self-burial, drowning, and the like, clearly exhibited continuities with earlier forms of ascetic practice, of both Buddhist and non-Bud-
services so that others can establish a karmic tie with this holy monk, and also issues invitations to ranking prelates. When the day arrives, the monk’s resolve fails him, but, ashamed to back out after all the publicity, he hangs himself anyway. Six months later, the abbot falls ill. He has been possessed by the spirit of the dead man, who has fallen into the demonic realms for his deluded thoughts and is nurturing a grudge because no one prevented his reluctant suicide.

In the second story, an unnamed monk resolves to drown himself in order to quickly reach the Pure Land, and prevails on a companion to row out onto a lake with him to render assistance. He worries, however, that under the discomfort of drowning, delusive thoughts might arise at the last moment and impede his salvation. He has his companion fasten a rope to him, instructing that he will jerk on it if he changes his mind. Once in the water, his resolve wavers; he tugs on the line and is hauled out, dripping. After some days’ interval he makes a second, and then a third, unsuccessful attempt. Finally, the day arrives when he dives in and does not jerk on the rope. “In the sky, celestial music was heard and a purple cloud trailed over the waves. When his friend beheld these auspicious signs, tears of gratitude fell, with the water dripping from the oars.” Here, dignity of performance is humbly sacrificed in the interests of insuring death with right mindfulness, and the monk achieves the Pure Land.

Contestation and Routinization

The beginnings in Japan of concern with a properly ritualized death, leading to birth in Amītābha’s Pure Land or other ideal realm, are fairly easy to pinpoint in the Ōjō yōshū and the regulations of the Nijūgozanmai-e. Identifying: is end, however, is more complex. Deathbed rituals continued to be performed, and instructions for deathbed practice to be compiled and published, throughout the early modern period (1603–1863). It may even be the case that, under the Tokugawa system of mandatory temple registration, deathbed rituals became available at this time to all social classes, as one of the standard ritual functions provided by local priests to their parishioner families. However, concern for dying in a state of right mindfulness does not figure as prominently in early modern literature as it did during the medieval period. Tokugawa-period texts of deathbed ritual instruction are for the most part simply collections or reworkings of early medieval rinji gyōgi texts and show little new development of content. Although the postmedieval development of deathbed practice requires further study, one might say, at least as a preliminary thesis, that it became routinized.

By the Kamakura period, a number of fault lines and points of contestation were becoming evident in the discourse of death with right mindfulness. A major social factor in this process, as suggested above, was the emergence of warriors as a new and influential body of religious consumers, whose needs mandated some modification of traditional deathbed ritual. Another was the appearance of doctrinal challenges to one or another fundamental component of the rinji shōnen ideal, leading to loss of consensus.

Hōnen, for example, as noted above, maintained the necessity of chanting the nenbutsu up until the moment of death; nevertheless, his conviction that dōjō is achieved solely through wholehearted reliance on the “other power” of Amītābha’s vow led him to de-emphasize the ritual aspects of deathbed practice, especially in his later teachings.86 In a famous letter to the nun Shōnyo-bō (d. 1201), a daughter of the retired emperor Goshirakawa, Hōnen—having just embarked on an intensive nenbutsu retreat—declined her request that he visit her in her final illness, explaining that Amītābha would come to welcome those who chanted the nenbutsu in all sincerity, whether a zenchishiki was in attendance or not. “You should abandon thought of a zenchishiki who is an ordinary worldly, and rely on the Buddha as your zenchishiki,” he said.96 Contrary to the accepted idea that right mindfulness on the part of the dying practitioner is what brings about Amītābha’s welcoming descent, Hōnen argued that Amītābha comes to welcome the dying person because he or she has practiced in accordance with the original vow all along, and that it is rather the appearance of Amītābha and his retinue before the dying that induces them in the state of right mindfulness.100 This reversal of traditional ideas about the raigō is linked to Hōnen’s radical denial of the by then traditional position that one’s deathbed nenbutsu possessed a particular efficacy that it did not have at ordinary times. “How could the nenbutsu at ordinary times be in any way distinguished from the nenbutsu at the moment of death? If one dies while chanting nenbutsu as one’s ordinary practice, then that is the deathbed nenbutsu, and if one’s deathbed nenbutsu were to be prolonged, it would be the nenbutsu of ordi-
Honen’s reading thus allowed for an abridgment of deathbed formalities, and he understood the deathbed nenbutsu—as he did the nenbutsu in general—less in terms of exerting personal control over one’s last moments than of entrusting oneself to the compassionate power of Amitābha’s vow. According to some biographical accounts, on his own deathbed, Honen refused up until the end to seize hold of the cords fastened to the hand of the Buddha image, saying, “That is people’s usual way of practice, but it is not necessarily appropriate for me.” This may have been the reason why his contemporary Jien (1155–1225), the eminent Tendai prelate, criticized Honen’s manner of death, saying, “People gathered there [at Ōtani], saying over and over that he had attained the Pure Land, but it is by no means a certain thing. There was nothing remarkable about his deathbed observances, as there was in the case of Zōka Shōnin and others.”

Honen’s disciple Shinran, revered as the founder of Jōdo Shinshū, denied the necessity not only of the chishiki but of deathbed nenbutsu altogether. In keeping with his understanding of Honen’s teaching as one of absolute reliance on the absolute “other power” of Amitābha’s original vow, Shinran understood the decisive moment in one’s salvation to be, not the moment of death, but the moment when—abandoning all calculation and reliance on personal effort and entrusting oneself wholly to Amitābha—one is seized by the power of the Buddha’s compassion, never to be let go, and faith arises in one’s heart: “When faith is established, one’s attainment of the Pure Land is also established; there is no need for deathbed rituals to prepare one for Amitābha’s coming.” He also wrote, “Those whose faith is not yet established are the ones who await Amitābha’s coming at the time of death.”

The Jishū organizer Shinkyō, as seen above, insisted on the need for both a chishiki and the final nenbutsu. But, as Jonathan Todd Brown has noted, Shinkyō also undercuts the tyranny of inauspicious signs by ingeniously arguing that the good or evil omens accompanying a death reflect, not the dead person’s success or failure in achieving the Pure Land, but the good or evil of that person’s deeds in this samsaric realm:

When purple clouds form and flowers fall from the sky, this [indicates] the ōjō of a good person. When there are bad omens, this [indicates] the ōjō of an evil person. In either case, if the person died

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chanting the nenbutsu, then he or she achieved birth in the Pure Land.

By shifting the referents of good and evil omens from one’s postmortem destination to relatively insignificant matters of this life, Shinkyō mitigated some of the fears associated with demands for an ideal death.

Such innovations met with criticism, even within the new Pure Land movements, from those who took a more conservative stance. For example, Benchō (also known as Ben’ā or Shōkō, 1162–1238) of the Pure Land Chinzei lineage, the second Jōdōshū patriarch, understood his teacher Honen as having mandated the deathbed presence of a zenchishi. Benchō’s own view of deathbed signs was traditional and severe:

A good death is when [the pain of] the last illness abates, so that the dying do not suffer but pass away as though sleeping, with a composed mind and palms pressed together, or when they die saying Namu-Amida-butsu as their final words. Or, if purple clouds gather, or if the dying see radiant light or behold a manifestation of the Buddha, that is the highest form of death. . . . A bad death is when they thrash about, spit blood, or become deranged before dying. . . . All such persons fall into the three evil paths. One hears of those who say that whatever the manner of their death, nenbutsu practitioners achieve the Pure Land. But theirs is a distorted understanding of the nenbutsu.

Benchō’s very vehemence, along with his reference to those of distorted understanding, suggests that traditional understandings of rinjū shōnen were now being contested.

Such contestations did not mean that deathbed practice declined, simply that unanimity on the subject was fragmenting and mechanisms were being devised for coping with some of the more acute anxieties surrounding the demand for right thoughts at the last moment. By the end of the Heian and early Kamakura periods, although stories of ideal deaths continue to appear in tale collections, they are increasingly accompanied by others, some clearly intended to amuse, of people whose death fell short of the mark—suggesting that the ideal was now subject to criticism. By the latter part of the thirteenth century, ōjōden ceased to be produced as a genre. This same period also saw the proliferation of great variety of mortuary rituals (tsuizō kuyō) performed by survivors on
behalf of the deceased, a development linked to the spread of Buddhism among an increasingly wider social range.\textsuperscript{109} Especially among the bushi, one notes the growing popularity of gyakushū, or “preemptive funerals”—services performed for an individual’s postmortem welfare but held while he or she was still alive.\textsuperscript{110} Both gyakushū and mortuary ritual aimed at ensuring postmortem welfare but did not depend on the person involved dying in a state of right mindfulness. This was equally true of the standardized funerals that began to spread among people of all classes in the late medieval and early modern period.\textsuperscript{111} Increasingly, the energy of ritual efforts to influence the postmortem state shifted from deathbed practice to funerary ritual. Deathbed practices aimed at birth in the Pure Land, and the ideal of a good death, remained important throughout the medieval and early modern periods, but in a more routinized way, and accompanied by new ritual forms.

Notes

This essay is preliminary to an in-progress booklength study of deathbed practices in medieval Japan. I would like to thank Yasuko Makino, Gail Chin, and Sarah Horton for helping me obtain relevant sources.

1. Ryōgō-in nijūgozanmai kōmon keshū nijūgigen rensho kotsugumon, in Nijūgōzanmai shiniki, Dainihon Bukkyō sensho (hereafter, DNBZ), ed. and pub. Suzuki Gakujutsu Zaidan (Tokyo: 1970–1971), 49.31b. Though this text has been attributed to Genshin, his name does not appear on the list of founding members; thus this attribution was probably made retrospectively.


3. It is not clear whether the group was so named because it had twenty-five members or whether the number of members was set at twenty-five to correspond to the “twenty-five samādhis” (nijūgōzanmai). The “twenty-five samādhis” originally referred to twenty-five contemplations aimed at escaping the twenty-five realms of samsaric existence (Da bannian jing, T 12.690b; see also Zhiyi’s Suijiao, T 46.755c–758b, which correlates the twenty-five samādhis with stages of the bodhisattva path). Eventually, however, they came to be associated with twenty-five bodhisattvas who protect the believer in Amitabha (Foshuo shiwangsheng Amittuofo guo

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jing, Xu zanying 1, 87.292b verso–293a recto), a view also found in Genshin’s Ōjō yōsō, in Genshin, Nikkō shikō taisai 6, ed. Ishida Mizumaro (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1970), 235. In time, these twenty-five bodhisattvas were identified with the bodhisattvas who accompany Amitabha when he descends to escort the dying person to his Pure Land. Against prevailing scholarly opinion that places this development in the Muromachi period (1392–1568), Fuji Chikai argues that its origins can be traced to Genshin’s time (“Nijūgo bosatsu raigō ni tsuite,” Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyû 12, no. 1 [1964]: 118–123).

3. In 964 Yasutane had played a leading role in establishing an earlier association called the Kangaku-e (Society for the Promotion of Learning), comprising both lay scholars of Chinese history and literature and Tendai monks of Mt. Hiei. The members met twice yearly for lectures on the Lotus Sûtra, nenbutsu recitation, and the composition of Chinese poetry, often on Buddhist themes. Since the Kangaku-e ceased to meet around the time of Yasutane’s ordination, the Nijūgōzanmai-e has often been considered a successor group to the earlier Kangaku-e, although organized with more explicitly religious aims. However, the relationship between the two societies is far from clear; and, though Yasutane has traditionally been considered the author of the eight-article regulations, he himself appears never to have joined the Nijūgōzanmai-e. For a summary of the Japanese scholarship on these issues, see Horton, “The Role of Genshin and Religious Associations,” 94–103.

4. The two sets of regulations are the eight-article Kishō hachikō (DNBZ 49.28c–30b; T 84.878b–880b) and the twelve-article Yakuwa Shuryōgan-in nijūgōzanmai kishō (a.k.a. Tanaka) (DNBZ 31.301–305; T 84.876b–878b). The printed versions of these texts are all ultimately derived from a manuscript, possibly dating to the Kamakura period, held at the Chūshin at Tōdaiji, but they contain numerous discrepancies in titles, misprints, and other errors. These have been detailed in Koyama Masazumi, “Tōdaiji Chūshin shōzō Yakuwa Shuryōgan-in nijūgōzanmai (Kishō, Yasutane) rinjū gyō ni no saiken no sōshobon no gokasho ni yoru mondai,” Bukkyōgaku kenkyû 53 (1997): 56–95. Koyama also provides a critical edition of the two sets of regulations based on the Chūshin manuscript; the titles Kishō hachikō and Yakuwa Shuryōgan-in nijūgōzanmai kishō as used here follow Koyama’s edition.

5. It has often been assumed that articles four and five of the eight-article regulations, which deal with treatment of the dying, represent a summary of the “deathbed practice” (rinjū gyō) section of the Ōjō yōsō. However, Koyama Masazumi notes that these articles of the Kishō hachikō draw primarily, not from the Ōjō yōsō, but from the Fayan Zhulin by Daoshi (d. 668?) (ibid., 63–65; see also n. 8 below). Yet, even though the exact nature of the connection between Genshin’s Ōjō yōsō and the Nijūgōzanmai-e documents remains obscure, both clearly reflect an emerging concern with deathbed practice aimed at achieving birth in the Pure Land.


7. Sifenli shanfan buque xingshi cha, T 40.144a; cited in Ōjō yōsō, Genshin, 206.

8. Fayan Zhulin, T 53.987a; cited in Ōjō yōsō, Genshin, 206, although Genshin does not mention this text, or its author, Daoshi, by name. Daoshi and Daoxuan were
close associates, and Daoshī's Fayanun shuden contains a description of purported deathbed practices at the Jetavana monastery very similar to that occurring in Dao-

xuan's vinaya commentary.


10. Ibid., T 47.244b-c, cited in Ojō yōshō, Genshin, 207.


18. According to a collection of Pure Land biographical accounts compiled around 1134, Genshin inscribed a mandala depicting Amitābha’s coming for Tokei no Koshoji to use in his deathbed contemplation. The compiler, Miyoshi no Tame-

yasu, notes: “Probably this was the origin of the spread in our country of mandalas depicting Amitābha descending and welcoming [the dying]” (Goshati ojōden II:15, in Ojōden, Hokke genki, Zoku Nihon Bukkyō no shū 1, new edition of the 1974 Nihon shisō taikei 7, ed. Inoue Mitsusada and Oosone Shōsuke [Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995], 659). This account in turn probably derives from Genshin’s biography in the obituaries of the Nijūgojōjīn-e, which says that he drew a picture of the raigō based on his study of scriptural passages (Ryōgen-in nijūgojōjīn keshō kakōcho, Zoku Tendai-sha zensho, ed. Tendai Shiten Hensanjo [Tokyo: Shunjyōsha, 1987-], Shiden 2:289a). For discussion of Genshin’s relation to raigō, see Hayami Tasuku, Genshin (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Köbunkan, 1988), 216–220.

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19. An example is the famous Kamakura-period “Amitābha crossing the mountain” (yamagoe no Amida) painting held by Konkaikōmyōji in Kyoto. For an introduction to Japanese Pure Land art, see, for example, Murayama Shūichi, Jōdo geijutsu to Mida shinkō (Tokyo: Shibundō, 1966); and Ōgushi Sumio, Raigō geijutsu (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1983).


23. Ryōgen-in nijūgojōjīn keshō kaka o, Zoku Tendai-sha zensho, Shiden 2:285b. Variant accounts occur in Shūi ojōden III:28; Ojōden, Hokke genki, 387–388; and in Sengi ojōki 12, ibid., 673–674. This monk’s name appears in these sources variously as Shōzen, Shōki, or Shōzen.


25. This work was discovered by Ishii Kōdō at the Chūshōin of Tōdaiji in Nara. It is part of a composite text, a transcription possibly dating to the Kamakura period with the outer title Yokawa Shuryōgon-in nijūgojōjīn (Eshin, Yasutane) rinjū gyō, consisting of Tanshin’s instructions preceded by the two sets of regulations for the Nijūgojōjīn-e mentioned in n. 4 above. Its existence suggests a close connection between Tanshin’s work and the deathbed protocols of the Nijūgojōjīn-e; it also refers explicitly to the rinjū gyō of “Yokawa Šōzu,” or Genshin (Rinjū gyō chōki, DNIB 49.48a).


27. Rinjū gyō chōki, DNIB 49.48a–49b.


29. Ichigo taisyō himitsu shū, Kōgyō Daishi senjutsu shū, rev. ed., ed. Miyasaka Yūshō (Tokyo: Sankibō Busshin, 1989), 1:172. Although some researchers have questioned Kakuban’s authorship, scholarly consensus generally holds this work to be authentic.


31. Ichigo taisyō himitsu shū, Kōgyō Daishi senjutsu shū, 1:173–174. This represents Kakuban’s esoteric reading of the nisokin, or contemplation of the setting sun, the first of sixteen meditations leading to birth in Amida’s Pure Land set forth in


33. Kanbyō yōin, in Nikō Jōdōkyō bunkashi kenkyū, 456; Tamayama, “Ryōchō no Kanbyō yōin shō ni tsuite,” 348. The text says “one or two hours”, the day was divided into twelve hours, so this would be two to four hours by our current way of measuring time. Scholarly discussions of the Kanbyō yōin shō sometimes note a similar passage in the Rinjū no yōi attributed to Gedatsu-ō Jōkei (1155–1213): “When the dying person’s life has ended, you should chant in his ear for at least two hours. Although he may to outward appearances be dead, consciousness may remain, or the spirit may not have departed but he linger in the dead person. Even if he should be destined for the evil path, because he hears the name, he may be born in the Pure Land even from the interim state” (Nikō daiyōkō, 51 vols., ed. Naka Takkei et al. [Tokyo: Nikō Daizōkyō Hensan kai, 1914–1915], 64:25b). However, Jōkei’s authorship is problematic, and this may be a considerably later text (see Mitoike Moritsuna, “Chūsei no rinji gyōgi no Myōkō,” Ōkayama ronshū 44 [1999]: 22–25).

34. Ichigo taimyō kiitsu shū, Kögyō Daishi senjutsu shū, 1:173.


36. Hōen is said to have acted as chisshiki at the deathbed of his disciple Shin-kan-do Kansai (see Shōbō-ō ni shimakuru o onzoku to Jakue Shōnin taniyukai no onzoku, Shōwa shinsu Hōen Shōnin zenshū, ed. Ichirō Kyōdō [Kyoto: Heirakujō Shoten, 1959], 747, 769). The diary of Kujū Kanzean records that Hōen (Kurodani Shōnin) served as zenchishiki to a courtier and lay monk known as Kunisada Nyoō (Gyokuyō, entry for Isshō 5 [1181], 2 [intercalary]/23, ed. and pub. Kukusho Kannōkai [Tokyo: 1906], 2:909a). According to the forty-eight fascicle biography, Hōen attended the deathbed of the retired emperor Goshirakawa and of Fujiwara no Tsunemune, Minister of the Left, and also dispatched his disciples Anraku and Jurei to serve in this capacity for Go-ko-daiho to Takanobu no Ōmon Gojōshi zenshū [Tokyo: Sankibō Busshōin, 1970–1972], 16:20b, 213a–b, 215b–216a). However, Tamura Encho has noted that the monk who attended Goshirakawa as zenchishiki was not Hōen but one Honjō-ō Tankyō (a.k.a. Tanbo) of Ōbara (Hōen Shōnin den no kenkyū [Kyoto: Hōzekan, 1972], 143–144).


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40. In the Heian period, Yasutane’s Nikō ōjo gokuraku-ki was followed by Onno Masafusa’s Zoku honchō ōjōden; Miyoshi Yameyasu’s Shōki ōjōden and Gōshō ōjōden; Renzō’s Sange ōjōki; and Fujiwara no Munetomo’s Honcho shinshū ōjōden, all from the fourteenth century. These collections are included in Ōjōden, Hokke genki, cited in n. 18 above, as is the Dainihonkokoku Hokkekyō kenki, which, while not exclusively an ōjōden collection, contains many such stories. Kamakura-period Ōjōden include Nyōjakus’s Kōyasan ōjōden and Ōzen’s Shinjō ōjōden, dealing with accounts of the ōjō of monks of Mt. Kōya and Onjōji, respectively, and also Gyōgetsu’s late thirteenth-century Nenbutsu ōjōden, which appears to have been influenced by Hōen’s thought. The Kōyasan and Nenbutsu ōjōden appear in Ōjōden, Hokke genki; Mii ōjōden is in Zoku Tendai-shū zenshū, Shiden 2. Individual ōjōden accounts also appear in various setsuwa (tale) collections, such as Hoshinshō and Konjaku monogatari shū (vol. 15).

41. Jittō bun, 47.97a, cited in Yatsurane’s introduction to Nikō ōjo gokuraku-ki, Ōjōden, Hokke genki. 11. Yatsurane’s wording of this passage differs slightly from the Taishō version of the Jittō bun. On the perceived value of compiling such accounts for strengthening one’s own merit conducive to birth in the Pure Land, see Frederic J. Lott, “Ōjōden: Accounts of Rebirth in the Pure Land” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1987), 35, 302–305.

42. Ōjō yōshō, Genshin, 296.


44. Takagi notes that ōjōden accounts of Lotus Sūtra recitation as a deathbed practice always describe the dying person as completing recitation of the sūtra, or of individual chapters, before passing away. Takagi suggests that, whether this was indeed the case or the product of editorial intervention, it reflects an importance placed on proper completion of the deathbed practice (ibid., 462).


46. Ibid., 229–230. 238. The Shi-er ii verses (Xu zangjing 1. 2:195a recto—a verso) were incorporated into influential Pure Land texts, including Shandao’s Wangsheng lian ji (T 47.442a–c) and the Nittōzangōzai shiki (DNB 49.32a–33c).

47. Dafangguang fo huayan jing (T 10.102a–b). This is an example of a subset of haigokuron whose content deals with the emptiness of the dharmas. As haigokuron, however, they were understood less as philosophical propositions than as magical incantations able to literally to "empty" situations of fear and suffering.

50. For examples, see Ishida, Ōjō no shōsō, 235–236.
51. Rihō gyōgi chōki, DN8Z 49.48c; Kyōshū, DN8Z 43.28a. Kakuban's authorship of the Kōyōshō is unlikely, and this is almost certainly a later text, perhaps from the Kamakura period.
52. Ishida, Ōjō no shōsō, 228.
54. In surveying the 364 accounts contained in the six major Ōjōden collections, Nishiguchi Junko finds 72 examples of precognitive dreams and 116 examples of revelatory dreams after the person's death ("Jōdo ganshōsha no kunō: Ōjōden ni okeru kiizu ni mukoku", Ōjōden no kōkō, ed. Kōten Isan no Kai [Tokyo: Shinokusha, 1968], 140). For discussion of dreams as indices to Ōjō, see also Ishida Mizumaro, Ōjō no shōsō, 266–273; and Kotas, "Ōjōden," 272–279.
56. Ōjō yoshū, Genshin, 53.
61. Myōshō-ana gozen gohenji, Shōwa teishon Nichiren Shōnin ibun 2:1535.
62. An extreme case concerns a monk from Higo who achieved the Pure Land despite the intentions of his wife, who confessed to having served him over many lifetimes solely in order to obstruct his enlightenment (Shōi Ōjōden III:20, Ōjōden, Hokke genki, 375; Kotas, "Ōjōden," 509–509). Nishiguchi Junko has also drawn attention to other Ōjōden accounts of men who abanoned their wives shortly before dying or their daughters from their deathbed (Orna no chikara [Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1987], 10–11).
64. Sange Ōjō, ibid., 678–679.
66. Nikkō jōkō gokurakushi, Ōjōden, Hokke genki, 11. Yasutane is probably referring to accounts 38 and 39 (Wansheng xifang jingtu ruisheng zhuan, T 50.107c).
68. Zoku honchō Ōjōden 33, ibid., 250. The claim that even those who commit the ten evils and five perverse offenses can achieve birth in the Pure Land if they complete ten deathbed thoughts of the Buddha appears in the Guan wu liangshou fo jing (T 12.346a). However, this contradicts the text of the eighteenth vow, which specifically excludes from the Pure Land those guilty of the five perverse offenses (Wu liang...
personal anxieties about achieving birth in the Pure Land and a desire to establish proof that the Buddha’s original prediction was indeed possible (“Ojōden,” 149–150).


86. Tsune ni òkerareku onkotoba, Shōwa Shinshū Hōnen Shinshū zenshū, 493. See also the very similar statement attributed to Hōnen in Ichigong hōdan, Gunsho ruijō no. 840, 28 (1): 290a.


89. See Yoshida Yasuo, “Shashinglyō no tenkai to sono shiso,” Nihon kodai no bosatsu to minshū (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1988), 187–222. The appropriateness of the word “suicide” in this context is much disputed, given its modern pathological overtones. Here it is used in the minimalist sense of a death whose proximate cause is the individual’s own action; no assumptions about agency, intent, or inner states are implied.

90. According to Chingen, compiler of the eleventh-century Hokke genki, the first case of auto-creation in Japan was that of the monk Ōshō, an ascetic of Mt. Nachi, who burned himself as an offering to the Lotus Sutra (Hokke genki I.9, Ojōden, Hokke genki, 64–65; Yoshikura Kurutsu Dōketsu, trans., Miraculous Tales of the Japanese Buddhist Tradition: The Dalinhokoku Hokhekyō kenki of Priests Chingen [Osaka: Kansai University of Foreign Studies, 1983], 38–39). However, since Ōshō’s dates are unknown, this claim is difficult to verify for several cases attested prior to the compilation of Hokke genki, see Yoshida, Nihon kodai no bosatsu to minshū, 209; these are mentioned in court diary entries that give no indication as to motive. In the account of Ōshō’s auto-creation, the only suggestion of a connection to Pure Land devotion is that he seats himself on the pyre facing west. Subsequent accounts, however, almost invariably present burning the body as a practice directed toward ojō.

91. Hokke genki I.15, Ojōden, Hokke genki, 72.


93. Hosshinshū III.6, Hōjōki, Hosshinshū, 139–142.

94. Hosshinshū III.8, ibid., 149.

95. Kirei mondō, Gunsho ruijō no. 139, 9:450a–b.


97. Shasekishū 4:7, 4:8, Nihon koten bungaku taikai 85, ed. Watanabe Tsunaya
98. Hōnen's teachings on this point are not entirely consistent; in some cases he is on record as approving both the presence of a chishiki and the traditional accoutrements of deathbed ritual, such as the five-colored cords. However, especially in the period of his life following the writing of the Senchaku hongan nembutsu shū, Hōnen's declaration of the invocational nembutsu as the only valid path of salvation in the Final Dharma age, he seems to have denied the need for such outward formalities. For Hōnen's understanding of deathbed nembutsu, see, for example, Suzuki Jogen, "Rinjū gyo ni tsuite," Jodojutsu 27 (1960): 393–419; Itô Shintetsu, "Jodojyō girei to Hōnen Shōnen," in his Nihon Jodojyō bunkashi kenkyū, 46–65, and Nabe shima Naoki, "Hōnen ni okeru shi no kankyō no mondai," parts 1 and 2, Ryōkoku Daigaku ronshū 434–435 (1989): 173–155; 436 (1990): 272–299. These studies, however, stress Hōnen's rejection of deathbed formalities but do not address his emphasis on the need to continue chanting until the last moment, as suggested in the passages cited in nn. 74 and 86 above.

99. Shōnyō-bō e tsukawasu onshū, Shōwa shinshū Hōnen Shōnin zenjū, 545. See also Ippaku shūgōgokko mondō (ibid., 657), which denies the need for a zenchishiki at one's deathbed.

100. See, for example, Gyakushu seppū, Ōgo no Tadō Sanshū, e tsukawasu gohenshō, Ōjō jido yōjin, Jodojyō ryakushō, and Saizan'ya Gyōkan Gyōe shoden no onkotoba, Shōwa shinshū Hōnen Shōnin zenjū, 276, 520–522, 562–564, 596–597, and 778, respectively.

101. Nembutsu ōjō yōgi shō, Shōwa shinshū Hōnen Shōnin zenjū, 686. See also Sarin ryōken oyobi gohō (ibid., 453).

102. See, for example, Gokojō no toku mon'ai to ni shimesarekeru onkotoba, Shōwa shinshū Hōnen Shōnin zenjū, 724–725. However, the nine-fascicle biography says that Hōnen held the cords only for the sake of others (Hōnen Shōnin denki, Jodojyō zenjū, 17:210b). Another talebible feature of accounts of Hōnen's last hours is his awareness of the presence of Amida, invisible to his disciples, on whom he focused, rather than on the Buddha image enshrined by his bedside. For variant accounts, see Hōnen Shōnin den no sōrittsushūkōki kenkyū, vol. 2 (Tatsuihōken, ed. Hōnen Shōnin Den Kenkyūkai, Kyoto: Rinzai Shoten, 1991), 271.


104. Matte shō 1 and 18, Shinran chosaku zenjū, ed. Kaneko Daie (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1964), 580, 608.


106. "At the time of death, ikkō practitioners should make use of a zenchishiki."

That is what Hōnen Shōnin instructed" (Shōka-bō ni shimesarekeru onkotoba, Shōwa shinshū Hōnen Shōnin zenjū, 747).


108. Ōjōjō collections were again compiled in the Edo period. However, my cursory impression—to be tested by further research—is that these early modern collections reflect a very different ethos from those of the Heian period, stressing conformity to moral and social norms as characteristic of Ōjōjō. For early modern Ōjōjō, see for example Kasahara Kazuo, Rinzai Ōjōjō shakai, 5 vols. (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1978–1980).


110. On the development of gyakushū, see for example Kawakatsu Shōtarō, "Gyakushū shinbō no reikisishiteki kenkyū," Otomena Joshi Daigaku ronshū 6 (1972): 147–165. Kawakatsu argues that, with increased patronage by well-to-do warriors and local landholders, the form of gyakushū shifted in the Kamakura period from the elaborate ceremonies sponsored by nobles to the erection of small commemorative stone tablets or Buddha images. "Preemptive funeral" is Willa Tanabe’s translation (Paintings of the Lotus Sutra, 40).