CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DYING BREATH: DEATHBED RITES
AND DEATH POLLUTION IN EARLY
MEDIEVAL JAPAN

JACQUELINE I. STONE, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Attendants [at the deathbed] should match their breathing to that of the sick person and assist him by chanting the nenbutsu in unison with him on each outbreath...Deeply desiring that he achieve the Pure Land, you must never abandon him [but remain at his side], for one day, two days, seven days, or until the breath ceases. The ritual procedure for dying persons always ends with the [last] outbreath. You should be ready for the last breath and chant [the nenbutsu] together.

Ichigo tayō himitsu shū

One who encounters defilement or who sits in the same place [with a defiled person] becomes defilement source A (kō). One who sits together with the defiled person A becomes defilement source B (otsu). One who sits together with the defiled person B becomes defilement source C (hei). After C, there is no [further transmission of] defilement, but [person] D (sei) should not visit shrines on the day of contact. In the case of [contact with] deceased persons, one should regard the cessation of the breath as marking the onset of [death] defilement.

Bunpōki

Among the distinctive features of Japanese Buddhism in the latter part of the Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1185-1333) periods was the rise of aspirations for birth after death in a pure land (ōjō). The goal of ōjō was shared among clerics and laity and across social classes. Of the realms of the various
buddhas and bodhisattvas to which people aspired, the most widely sought was the Pure Land of Utmost Bliss (Sanskrit [Skt.] Sukhāvatī, Japanese [Jpn.] Gokuraku), far away in the western part of the cosmos where the Buddha Amida (Skt. Amitābha, Amitāyus) is said to dwell. Those born in that realm, it was said, would never again fall back into the painful cycle of rebirth but were assured of eventual buddhahood. In conjunction with the rise of Pure Land thought and practice, special deathbed rites (rinjū gyōgi) were developed to assist the dying in focusing their last thoughts on the Buddha. Often dying persons were moved for this purpose to an expressly designated ritual space, such as a hall or chapel. As discussed in the famous treatise Ōjō yōshū (Essentials of birth in the Pure Land) by the scholar-mönk Genshin (942-1017), in the liminal moments of death’s approach, even “ten consecutive thoughts” of Amida were deemed sufficient to override the sins and errors of a lifetime; all those who placed their faith in Amida Buddha and invoked his name with their dying breath would be welcomed by Amida himself, who would descend, together with his bodhisattva attendants, to escort them to his pure land. Hagiographical collections known as ōjōden (“accounts of those born in the Pure Land”), produced from the late tenth through thirteenth centuries, recorded the serene and noble deaths of persons who passed away facing west toward the Pure Land with the name of Amida on their lips. Ōjōden also note the appearance of extraordinary signs accompanying such deaths—purple clouds, mysterious lights or fragrance, or music heard in the air—all testifying that Amida and his holy retinue had indeed made their welcoming descent. Under the influence of aspirations for the Pure Land, the moment of death came to be seen as a numinous juncture when the devout might come face to face with the Buddha.

At the same time, however, the last moment was also held to mark the onset of death pollution (shiei), the most serious of the various tabous, avoidances, and interdictions designed to ward off malign influences or deflect the anger of the kami, or local deities, and which restrained the activities of day-to-day life for certain social groups, especially among the nobility. Those who had come into contact with death were expected to abstain from visiting kami shrines or engaging in kami rituals and from attending the imperial palace or government offices, and—since pollution was thought to be transmitted in a manner similar to infection, from one individual to the next—to refrain from social contact outside the family for an extended avoidance period, typically thirty days. The latter Heian and Kamakura periods, when ritualized deathbed practices aimed at achieving birth in the Pure Land emerged and spread, were also a time of heightened concerns about death pollution.

What are we to make of the presence, in the same historical period, of these two contradictory views of life’s end—the “dying breath”—as both the moment of liberation and also as dangerous and polluting? Did they exist in isolation, consigned to separate social and ritual spheres? Or did they interact or perhaps even influence or sustain one another? Were those persons, usually Buddhist monks, who assisted in deathbed rites constrained in any way by taboos on death pollution? Notions of pollution or defilement (kegare) and avoidance (imi) current in the period under discussion—which, for convenience’ sake, we will here term “early medieval”—are enormously complex and varied according to place, context, status, profession, and the nature of one’s social or religious responsibilities. Much about the topic remains to be researched, and a thorough treatment, even of death pollution alone, lies beyond the scope of a single study. This essay will focus on the sole issue of tensions between competing representations of the moment of death, as an occasion of both defilement and liberation, and the practices in which these tensions were embodied. It will approach this problem from three interrelated perspectives: (1) competing discourses in early medieval Japan about Buddhism, kami, and death pollution; (2) the significance of conducting Buddhist deathbed rites in a distinct ritual space, especially in connection with other social practices involving removal of the dying from their ordinary surroundings; and (3) the role of monks in nursing the terminally ill, along with issues of impurity and pollution surrounding the actual deathbed scene.

Part One: Buddhism and Death Pollution: Competing Discourses

Buddhism and Pollution in Japan: A Brief Background

The Japanese word kegare—defilement or pollution—“at the most general level... designates that which is unclean, polluted, possibly taboo, and often inauspicious,” in the words of Jayne Sun Kim.5 Among its more common sources are death, childbirth, and disease. Pollution of this kind, known as contact defilement (shokue), was thought to be spread from one person or place to another up to the fourth individual in sequence and needed to be exercised by observing a prescribed period of seclusion or avoidance (imi). During this period, the affected person or persons restricted their social intercourse to avoid further transmission. Recent scholarship has heuristically distinguished contact defilement from transgression defilement (tsumi kegare), pollution arising from sin or crime.6 Transgression defilement was not deemed contagious but, over the course of Japan’s medieval period, came increasingly to be understood as an innate condition that could not be purified and was thus linked to the formation of hinin or outcaste groups. Of the two, it is contact defilement, specifically, the pollution of death, that will concern us here.
Fears in Japan about pollution arising from contact with death have often been traced to the myth, found in eighth-century dynastic histories, of the deity Izanagi’s journey to Yomi no kuni, the land of the dead, to retrieve his spouse, Izanami, who died giving birth to fire. When he arrives, Izanami agrees to consult the gods of Yomi about the possibility of her return to the land of the living but in the meantime enjoins Izanagi not to look at her. He disobeyes and is horrified to see her body teeming with maggots. Shamed and angered, Izanami sends the hags of Yomi in pursuit of him, and Izanagi flees, blocking the pass between the two worlds with a boulder. He then purifies himself by bathing in a river, a cosmogonic act that gives rise to multiple new deities. The presence of this myth in Japan’s earliest chronicles for a long time bolstered assumptions that pollution was an inherently “Japanese” concern, predating the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century. However, while the myth of Izanagi’s visit to the underworld would indeed seem to reflect very early fears of death pollution, recent research has also shown that no clear linear trajectory exists between Izanagi’s simple act of illustration and the detailed codes of avoidance surrounding death and other forms of defilement that appear in the regulations of Heian court protocol and the diaries of court nobles. Heian-period concerns about defilement and ritual purity were by no means a mere extension of pre-Buddhist ideas but developed under specific historical circumstances and drew on elements from kami worship, yinyang practices (Onmyōdō), and even Buddhism itself.

The role of Buddhism in premodern Japanese discourses and practices involving purity and pollution is a complex one. In formal Buddhist doctrine, pollution has little place, except, perhaps, as metaphor: an awakened mind is said to be “pure,” while a deluded mind is “defiled.” Similarly, the realm of a bodhisattva, being free of delusion and suffering, is called a pure land (jōdo), while a realm inhabited by ordinary deluded beings such as our present, Sahā world, full of greed, hatred, and ignorance, is called a defiled land (edo). In the sphere of ethical and ritual practice, however, monastic Buddhism in particular has its own standards of “pure conduct,” such as refraining from killing living beings and abstaining from eating meat or pungent roots, drinking alcohol, and engaging in sexual activity. Even before the Heian period, such norms were absorbed into and in turn helped shape the practices of abstinence (imi) observed before undertaking kami rites. Prohibitions framed in Buddhist language against killing animals (sesshō kindan) or forbidding meat-eating, sake-drinking or the taking of life during the six monthly precept days (rokusainichi), when lay people observe extra rules of discipline, were often adopted as measures to quell or avert disasters attributed to the kami’s anger. Shōjin—the Buddhist virtue of unremitting effort in religious discipline—took on the meaning of observing ritual purity. Similar processes of assimilation had occurred in China and Korea, and in Japan, as on the Asian continent, the Buddhist soteriological distinction of “pure” and “impure” was readily assimilated, and gave support, to the more concrete ritual and social dichotomies of pure and defiled, auspicious and inauspicious, found in the specific taboos and interdictions of Confucian, Daoist, and other local religious practices. Under the influence of Buddhist teachings about karmic causality, defilements once understood as temporary and contingent acquired a permanent, morally determined character; menstruation and childbirth, for example, came to be seen, not as temporary defilements to be dispelled by periods of avoidance, but as signs of women’s innately polluted condition resulting from evil deeds in prior lifetimes. Discrimination against lepers and outcaste groups also found support from the doctrine of karmic causality. Yet at the same time, other Buddhist doctrines were deployed to undercut or even reject notions of pollution. As we shall see, the notion of this world as a defiled realm to be rejected, in favor of the Pure Land, which is to be sought (onnō edo gongu jōdo), enabled some practitioners to dismiss concerns about death pollution altogether. Thus there was no unified “Buddhist stance” on questions of pollution; elements within Buddhism were mobilized both to bolster and to critique defilement taboos, including avoidance of death pollution.

**Kami, Buddhism, and death pollution**

The primary rationale given for avoiding pollution was that the kami were thought to find it repugnant. Heian-period sources frequently attribute sickness, natural disasters, and other calamities to the anger of local kami at defilement of their shrines, and formal codes for pollution avoidance began to be promulgated in connection with their worship. Thus the topic of Buddhism and death pollution in this period must also take into consideration relations between Buddhism and the kami (or the more sinified jingi, “deities of heaven and earth”). Scholarly consensus has now moved away from an earlier “two-room flat” concept of premodern Japanese religion, in which “Buddhism” and “Shintō” were imagined as autonomous traditions, and has instead come to embrace a “combinatory” model in which not only kami worship but Daoist and yinyang practices, along with the worship of multifarious deities of continental origins, were incorporated—doctrinally, ritually, and institutionally—within a dominant Buddhist framework. Nonetheless, the assimilation was never complete; certain protocols delimited kami worship (jingi saishiki) from the Buddhist surround as a distinct ritual sphere. One such protocol was pollution avoidance, especially of the defilement of death. Such avoidances were a prominent feature of the imperially sponsored shrines, such as Ise and Kamo, and the jingi rituals of the court. Codes of pollution avoidance to be observed in
kami festivals crystallized in the famous 927 Engi shiki (Regulations of the Engi era), which stipulated that those who have come into contact with the death of human beings must practice avoidance for thirty days from the day of the burial, refraining during that period from participating in kami-related affairs or entering the imperial palace. Contact with disease and childbirth, or with the death of domestic animals, entailed shorter avoidance periods.\(^{13}\)

The Heian court also sponsored Buddhist rituals, and clergies performing rites for protection of the emperor and the nation found it necessary to observe the same codes of ritual purity that characterized the imperial jingi cult.\(^{14}\) We note this, for example, in the steps taken to avoid all polluting elements in connection with the Ninnoe, or ceremonial lecture on the Sutra of Humane Kings, the only court-sponsored Buddhist ceremony to be accompanied by performance of the Oharae or Great Purification. Closely linked to the imperial cult and its authority, the Ninnoe was held twice annually in the Daigokuden or main ritual hall of the palace for the sake of nation protection and avoidance of disaster, as well as following a new emperor’s accession and at times of perceived national urgency. Fujiwara no Sanesuke (950-1046), one of the court diarists responsible for maintaining and transmitting correct protocol, makes repeated note of the exclusion from the Ninnoe performance of monks who had recently taken part in funerals or who were in mourning;\(^{15}\) persons who had incurred pollution were also prohibited from making offerings to the Buddha or even giving donations to participating monks.\(^{16}\) Unanticipated contact with death or other sources of pollution on the part of designated participants routinely caused state-sponsored jingi rites to be rescheduled, relocated, or assigned to other officiants; alternatively, those who had incurred defilement might themselves decline to participate. Similar strictures were maintained with Buddhist rites sponsored by the court or involving high officials or imperial family members. For example, in 1108, the ajari (esoteric master) Senkaku, who was to officiate at the annual Taigen no hō, an esoteric rite for the protection of the realm, was replaced because he was still in mourning for his deceased parents.\(^{17}\) In 1109, a Buddhist consecration to be held for the imperial consort (chūgū) Tokushi was cancelled because of contact with death pollution.\(^{18}\) In 1116, the retired emperor Shirakawa cancelled a retreat at Hōshō-ji, his imperial vow temple (gogarji), because of the discovery of a corpse on the grounds of his residence, the Shirakawa gosho.\(^{19}\) In 1170, the regent Kujō Kanezane absented himself from Buddhist rites held at the residence of the retired emperor because of death pollution incurred under similar circumstances.\(^{20}\)

As kami shrines and Buddhist temples were amalgamated in temple-shrine complexes (jisha), Buddhist monks became increasingly scrupulous about pollution avoidance in connection with kami worship. In 973, Ryōgen, chief abbot (zasu) of the great Tendai monastery Enryakuji on Mt. Hiei, submitted a written apology to the Sannō protector deities, worshipped at the Hie shrine complex located at the foot of Mt. Hiei. Ryōgen prayed that the deity would lift a curse (tatarī) that he, Ryōgen, had incurred by an unintentional defilement of the shrine precincts. After having participated in the funeral of his patron, Fujiwara no Koremasa (924-972), Ryōgen had carefully waited out a thirty-day avoidance period before joining in a seasonal sutra recitation ceremony; after the funeral, however, before the thirty days were out, due to illness he had left Mt. Hiei for his residence at the foot of the mountain and, in the process, unwittingly passed through the Hie shrine precincts during a period of kami rites while still in a polluted state. This example shows, not only that ranking Buddhist monks such as Ryōgen needed to avoid death pollution in connection with the kami and their shrines, but that important Buddhist ceremonies (such as the sutra recitation referred to in this episode) had also incorporated avoidance requirements.\(^{21}\)

Shōjin—ritual purification—seems to have been part of expected preparation for pilgrimage, not only to kami shrines, but also to major Buddhist temples. The diary of the courtier Fujiwara no Yorinaga (1120-56), for example, refers to his observance of shōjin prior to visiting a number of Buddhist sites, including the Konpon Chūdō at Enryakuji, the Nan’endo at Kōfu-ji, Temnōji, and Mt. Kōya, suggesting that these temples too may have adopted pollution restrictions.\(^{22}\) Death defilement was especially to be excluded, and some Buddhist temples seem to have enforced the thirty-day avoidance period following contact with the dead. In 1132, when a young boy was killed in a fight in a corridor of Kōfu-ji, the Fujiwara clan temple, the clan head Tadamichi judged that “in accordance with temple custom,” the resulting death pollution affected only the main hall (kondō) and had not spread through the entire temple compound.\(^{23}\) While this decision in effect worked around the defilement, enabling scheduled ceremonies to continue as planned, the fact that Kōfu-ji even had a “temple custom” in this regard suggests that avoidances related to death defilement had become part of Buddhist temple life. Similar avoidance practices seem to have been adopted at other temples as well, as suggested, for example, in two episodes from the twelfth-century tale collection Konjaku monogatari (Tales of times now past). In one story, a lowly warrior, without connections and at the end of his resources, begs for help from the bodhisattva Kannon enshrined in the Hasedera temple in Nara and lies prostrate before the bodhisattva image. The monks say anxiously to each other, “If he stops breathing here, the temple will be defiled.”\(^{24}\) In another story, in an elaborate ruse staged to steal a bell from the temple Koyadera in Settsu province, an elderly mendicant pretends to die beneath the temple’s bell tower; accomplices acting as his “sons” remove the “body” but, for thirty days thereafter, the bell
tower is deemed polluted, and the monks will not approach it. Such examples suggest that the formal protocols of death pollution avoidance mandated in the imperial cult were not confined to contexts of kami worship but, to a considerable extent, were also observed by Buddhist institutions and clerics.

Shunning Death and Tabooing Buddhism

Even as Buddhist temples adopted the death taboos characteristic of court-centered kami worship, we find a parallel move within the imperial cult to taboo and exclude Buddhist elements. This phenomenon, known by scholars as the “isolation of kami from buddhas” (shinbutsu kakuri), was most pronounced within imperial jingi rites; while limited, it worked to preserve a degree of separation between jingi and Buddhist ritual systems and helped stimulate the emergence in late medieval and early modern times of an independent Shinto tradition. Well-known instances include the linguistic taboos of the Ise shrine, where code words were used to replace forbidden Buddhist terms (“long hairs” for monks, “colored paper” for sutras, etc.), and where monks and nuns were forbidden close access. Taboos on Buddhism can be documented at the shrine of the sun deity at Ise from at least the early ninth century and eventually spread to other shrines and temples. Most striking is the banning of Buddhist elements during the imperial enthronement ceremony (Daijō-sai). The 871 Jōgan shiki (Regulations of the Jōgan era) prohibited the performance of Buddhist rites, both at court and in the government offices of the home provinces, during this rite. Such prohibitions were elaborated throughout the Heian period; by the twelfth century, those participating in the ceremony were asked, from the time of their appointment, not only to refrain from participating in Buddhist rites but to remove all Buddhist scriptures and ritual implements from their homes, avoid contact with monks and nuns, relocate to separate structures any Buddhist renunciates who were household members, and erect wooden placards warning that they were undergoing purification connected with kami ritual. Avoidance of Buddhist clerics and other Buddhist elements was incorporated into other imperial kami rites as well. Thus the Engi shiki stipulates, “At all times, during the days of partial abstinence before and after the [kami] festivals of Toshigoi, Kamo, Tsukinami, Kawanome and Nii-name, monks, nuns and persons in mourning...may not enter the Imperial Palace.”

The conjunction of “monks, nuns and persons in mourning” might suggest that the excluding of Buddhist elements from imperially sponsored kami festivals stemmed from an association of Buddhism with death and funerary rites. Buddhism possessed a repertoire of rites and doctrinal teachings dealing specifically with the afterlife that had no parallel in kami traditions, and in that limited sense, a “natural” division of labor may have occurred between the two ritual systems. At the same time, however, the association of Buddhism with death in the same set of prohibitions may well reflect a deliberate effort at court to limit the political influence of Buddhist clerics and protect the prerogatives of the jingi ritual system in maintaining the legitimacy of rule. The elaborate avoidances set forth in the Engi shiki were no mere reassertion of ancient “native” fears about pollution; they drew on Confucian and Daoist elements in their exclusion of Buddhism from kami rites and may also have been influenced by the protocols of the Korean Paekche court. Whatever the reason for their establishment, over time, such prohibitions clearly came to be associated with, and thus also served to promote, the growing role of Buddhist monks in the performance of death rites. The association of Buddhism with death, along with taboos on contact with death and other forms of pollution, was at least in part a construction of court jingi ritual in its self-definition as a distinct ritual sphere.

Possibly under the influence of formal protocols excluding Buddhist elements from court-centered jingi rites, more diffuse and informal avoidance of specific Buddhist practices associated with death came to be observed in other social spheres. A particular object of avoidance, according to Heian-period hagiographies and setsuva (didactic tales), was the vocal nenbutsu, the invocation of Amida Buddha’s name, which was often chanted as a deathbed practice and at funerals. Yoshishige no Yasutane (d. 1002), author of the first Japanese collection of ōjōden, or accounts of men and women said to have been born in the Pure Land, writes in his biography of the itinerant holy man Kuya (a.k.a. Koya, 903–972): “Prior to the Tennyō era (938–47), practice of the nenbutsu samādhi was rare in temple communities. It was even rarer among inferior persons and foolish women, who in many cases regarded it as taboo. But after the holy man arrived, people chanted it themselves and taught others to do so also.” We also find stories of people, otherwise devout Buddhists, who objected to the chanting of the nenbutsu on auspicious days devoted to kami observance. Another ōjōden collection mentions one Otsuki Kaneto, a minor noble and Pure Land devotee, whose wife reproaches him for his habit of continually chanting the nenbutsu without regard for the occasion. “New Year’s day is commonly a time of avoidance (imī),” she says, “You should refrain from chanting the nenbutsu.” Kaneto smiles and replies, “That is children’s foolishness. How could I accept it? Living in this fleeting world, what should there be to avoid?” And he makes a point of deliberately going about the house on that day ringing a bell and chanting the nenbutsu. A similar story occurs in Shasekihiti, a thirteenth-century tale collection by the monk Muji Dōgyō (a.k.a. Ichien), in which the lady Machi no Tsubone, who is “stern and meticulous in observing the tabus and festive proprieties,” upbraids a devout maidservant who unthinkingly utters the nenbutsu even as she is setting out trays of food on New
Year’s Day, a day sacred to the kami. “How auspicious,” the lady exclaims, “to say the nenbutsu on today of all days, as though someone had died!” and she punishes the girl by burning her cheek with a coin that she has heated in the fire. It is not that she dislikes Buddhism; Machi no Tsubone is herself an Amida devotee, as we learn later in the story when she enters her private chapel to perform her Buddhist devotions once the kami rites have concluded (and is horrified to discover that her votive buddha image has taken upon itself the scar she inflicted on her maid servant). She simply subscribes to an idea, evidently fairly widely held, that certain kinds of Buddhist practices, having associations with death, should not be allowed to intrude upon occasions of kami worship.

Aspirations for the Pure Land could by definition be fulfilled only via the mediation of death. Thus, even outside kami-related contexts, excessive preoccupation with this goal was sometimes deemed inappropriate or unlucky for lay persons still at the height of their powers. When asked to compose a dedicatory vow for an offering service sponsored by Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1027), the leading courtier of his day, the literatus Ōe no Masahira (952–1012), wishing “to avoid what should be shunned,” was reluctant to comply with Michinaga’s desire that the dedication be directed solely to achieving birth in the Pure Land—an objection presumably centered on the absence of a complementary prayer for good fortune in this world. For similar reasons, serious devotion to Buddhism on the part of young people, especially children and young women, often met with disapproval; Kanetō’s reference to avoidance of the nenbutsu as “children’s foolishness” may have its basis here. This attitude is occasionally documented in ōjōden accounts. When the pious daughter of the Yamashiro governor Ono no Takaki (appointed 887) begins to study Pure Land texts and to practice prostrations, her parents admonish her, saying, “Such behavior is not appropriate for young people. You will exhaust your spirits and surely ruin your looks.” Similarly, the wife of Fujiwara no Chikasuke deems it inauspicious when her young son takes to playing with a Buddhist rosary and uttering the name of Amida. Child mortality was high, and young women were also at particular risk of death from complications in pregnancy and childbirth. Takatori Masao has suggested that reservations about young women’s earnestness in Buddhist practice stemmed from an anxiety to restrain such already vulnerable persons from too deep an engagement with the next world.

From this perspective, Buddhist devotions aimed at birth in the Pure Land were to be kept “in their place,” that is, they were the province chiefly of the aging, the dying, or the critically ill, or of persons who had renounced the world. In contexts emphasizing celebration, youth, fecundity, or worldly success, they were considered inappropriate.

At the same time, however, this impulse to keep Buddhist practices for the next world “in their place” coexisted with a sharply contrasting rhetoric of "shunning this defiled realm and aspiring to the Pure Land" (orri edo gongu jōdo). In Buddhist narrative literature, such as setsuwa and ōjōden, this latter stance is typically represented as the outlook of those monks such as hijiri ("holy men") and other ascetics practicing in reclusion, outside formal temple hierarchies, and of lay monks and nuns or other devotees who have in spirit already left the world and care only for the afterlife. In this discourse, concerns of auspicious versus inauspicious, pure or defiled, are dismissed as mere worldly matters irrelevant to one’s salvation, while death, for those with true religious understanding, is neither shunned nor feared but rather joyfully welcomed as an escape from samsāra and the point of entry into the Pure Land. In the ōjōden accounts just mentioned, the parents’ qualms about their children’s precocious devotion prove prescient: Takaki’s daughter dies from complications following childbirth, and Chikasuke’s son dies while still a child. But in the didactic framework of the stories, both achieve birth in the Pure Land, and it is the children’s piety, not their parents’ worldly disapproval, that is held up for admiration. Similarly, mention in such stories of avoidance of the nenbutsu serves only as a foil to celebrate those who ignore this custom: Kanetō, rather than his convention-bound wife, and the maid servant, rather than her punitious mistress, are the ones presented as having true Buddhist insight. Thus these tales point, both to a popular current of thought that associated Buddhism with death and tabooed certain of its observances, especially the nenbutsu, as inauspicious outside world-renouncing or death-related spheres, and also in a countervailing discourse that dismissed such taboos altogether as misguided and irrelevant to Buddhist soteriological concerns. Both these attitudes would inform thinking about the deathbed observances in the latter Heian period.

Honji suijaku and Death Pollution

Exclusion of Buddhist elements from court-sponsored jingi rites represents a significant, although limited, divergence within a broader tendency toward amalgamation of the worship of kami and Buddhist deities, a trend institutionalized, for example, in such forms as shrine-temples (jingū), kami temples (myōdōra), and temple-shrine complexes (jisha). Chief among the various discourses emerging in the Heian period to explain the relation of Buddhism and kami cults was the unity of “origins and traces” (honji suijaku), a combinatory paradigm in which kami and other non-Buddhist deities were explained as local manifestations or “traces” of the universal buddhas and bodhisattvas, who were understood as their hypostases or “original ground.” In a phrase borrowed from the Daode jīng, the buddhas and bodhisattvas were said to have “dimmed their light and mingled with the dust of the world” (watō
appearing in the culturally specific form of kami as an expedient suited to the people’s capacity. Honji suisaku discourse thus entailed the ideological premise that kami ultimately endorse Buddhist soteriological goals. We have seen how the “separation of kami from Buddhism” in the imperial cult served both to strengthen avoidance of death defilement in connection with kami worship and also to promote broader, informal avoidance of Buddhist practices associated with death. But how were such taboos viewed from the perspective that kami and buddhas are ultimately one?

A recurring theme in medieval Buddhist literature drawing upon honji suisaku discourse is that of a particular kami intervening to suspend the death taboos that would ordinarily surround its worship, in order to uphold Buddhist ethical norms. For example, a story in the thirteenth-century collection Shasekishū tells how the monk Jōkan-bō of Miwa in Yamato, on a pilgrimage to Yoshino, presumably to the Kinpu shrine, came upon some children weeping by the roadside. Their mother has died of illness, their father has gone away, and the neighbors “wish to have nothing to do with such nasty, unpleasant business,” so there is no one to see the dead woman’s final rites. Funerals at the time were conducted within the family, and it was considered polluting for outsiders to take part. Moved to pity, Jōkan-bō carries the woman’s body to a nearby field and briefly chants some dhāra ṭas (spells) over it—a common method among non-elites of disposing of the body and conducting a funeral.43 Having thus incurred defilement through contact with death, Jōkan-bō decides he must abort his pilgrimage and return to his home in Miwa. Strangely, however, he finds himself physically unable to move in that direction, which he attributes to the kami’s anger at his violation of the ritual purity demanded by shrine pilgrimage. To his amazement, however, he is still able to proceed in the direction of Yoshino. When he nears the shrine, the kami, speaking through a medium, welcomes him and says, “I certainly do not abhor what you have done. On the contrary, I respect compassion.”44 In a similar story from the same collection, the monk Shōren-bō is carrying his mother’s ashes to Mt. Kōya for interment. In the vicinity of the Atsuta shrine in Owari, he is denied lodging because of the polluted nature of what he is carrying. However, a shrine official comes as a messenger of the deity in a dream to the head shrine priest and admonishes him that Shōren-bō is to be well treated. The narrative concludes, “If only the heart is pure, the body is likewise not defiled.”

Tales on this theme exist in several versions. In one, the kami reveals that “taboos are also be temporary expedients (hōben),” thus subsuming pollution avoidance within the Buddhist discourse of “skillful means,” or the notion that buddhas and bodhisattvas accommodate their teaching methods to the receptivity of living beings.46 A related episode occurs in the hagiography of the itinerant Pure Land teacher Ippen (1239-89). In the seventh month of 1282, Ippen and his company of mendicants were en route to Kyoto and had stopped at the Mishima shrine in Izu. On the day they reached the shrine, purple clouds trailed across the sky from morning to night, and seven or eight of Ippen’s followers all at once achieved ojō (died). Death in a shrine precinct would ordinarily constitute a most serious defilement. However, the shrine priest, having been able to form an auspicious karmic connection (kechien) with Ippen, did not regard this as polluting, nor was the kami angered. This, we read, is because the kami, as manifestations of the buddhas, desire only the liberation of living beings; thus those who practice Buddhism must also revere the kami.47

All such stories share a relativizing or transcendence of death taboos; because the kami in their original ground are really buddhas and bodhisattvas, the strict avoidance surrounding their shrines are not absolute and may at need be set aside in favor of Buddhist ethical values or soteriological goals. These stories have sometimes been taken at face value to mean that such taboos could indeed be abridged when compassionate deeds required it.48 However, we have already seen that avoidance of death pollution was observed not only at kami shrines but also at a number of Buddhist temples. Thus one must ask: Does this recurring theme in hagiography and tale literature reflect a weakening of kami-associated death pollution avoidance as kami rites were increasingly subsumed within a Buddhist interpretive framework? Or should it instead be understood as asserting a normative Buddhist interpretive agenda, one that did not necessarily reflect actual shrine practice? Let us turn to an episode recounted in a document from the imperial Ise shrine, which, although roughly contemporaneous with these Buddhist didactic tales, tells a very different story.

According to this account, on the fourth day of the second month, 1279, one Kunihide, a shrine servant, was inadvertently responsible for an act of pollution at the sacred premises during the rites of renewal. While in Iida district on shrine business, Kunihide sat for a time in company with a monk named Man’ami, or simply Man’a, who had recently gone to nearby Niuyama to venerate the body of one Kawata Nyūtō, a lay monk who had died on the fifteenth day of the first month.49 Rumor spread that Kawata had achieved ojō, and many people gathered to pay homage to his remains. Man’a, while there, had sat down in the deceased man’s house. Ordinarily persons who sit in a house where a death had taken place, or who sat with other persons who had incurred defilement, were thought to incur defilement themselves; in this case, the pollution was transmitted from Man’a to Kunihide, who then worshipped at Ise while unknowingly in a defiled state. Man’a had not informed Kunihide of his recent contact with defilement because he himself had been told that “the death of an ojōnīn is not polluting” (ojōnīn ni kegare nashi). Shrine officials, however, disagreed and judged that “even in the case of an ojōnīn, there is pollution, and avoidance (imō) to be observed.”50
Nishigaki Seiji, who first drew scholarly attention to this account, notes how it illustrates the existence of mutually incompatible, situationally grounded views about death pollution. Shrine personnel, Nishigaki suggests, were committed to an official position that deemed all contact with death to be defiling, yet local people believed as a matter of certainty that exposure to the body of someone who had achieved ōjō was not only not polluting but formed a karmic connection conducive to their own eventual birth in the Pure Land. Chijiiwa Itaru, who has discussed this episode in detail, cites it to argue that ordinary death and ōjō were, at least among Pure Land aspirants, understood as distinct phenomena, one defiling and the other transcending defilement. The distinction, he argues, hinged on the presence of extraordinary signs, such as purple clouds, radiant light, or mysterious fragrance, which were widely accepted as “proofs” that the deceased person had reached the Pure Land. From this perspective, the purple clouds appearing over the Mishima shrine in Ippen’s hagiography may have indicated that the demise of half a dozen of his followers in the shrine precincts was regarded, not as “death” but rather as ōjō, and was therefore not deemed defiling. By the same logic, of course, we could also imagine that the detail of the purple clouds was added by the hagiographer to provide an acceptable gloss for an episode that would otherwise have been seen as an appalling transgression.

Even explicitly Buddhist sources occasionally suggest that death within kami shrine precincts was to be scrupulously avoided. For example, a biography of the Zen monk Shōshō Eison (1195-1272), a disciple of the famous master Enni, fell ill while staying in a temple on the grounds of the Usa Hachiman shrine. When he became clear to him that he would not recover, he left for his home temple in a palanquin, because “since ancient times, people were not permitted to die within the Usa precincts.” Such accounts suggest that the literary theme of kami suspending death taboos in favor of Buddhist soteriological aims should be understood at least in part as a rhetorical strategy for subordinating kami worship within a Buddhist ideological framework and did not necessarily mean that it was becoming acceptable for monks who had incurred death pollution to visit shrines. On the contrary, these tales depend for their moral impact on the anomalous nature of the situation they depict and thus indicate that taboos against such behavior were still very much in force.

One must also ask whether or not the claim cited in the Ise document, that “the death of an ōjōmin is not polluting,” represented a general understanding or was merely an isolated instance, a question to which we shall return in Part III. Such explicit assertions do not occur frequently in medieval writings, and in fact, on-the-ground ideas about pollution and ōjō may have varied considerably. This is suggested, for example, by a record of answers to various questions given by the Pure Land teacher Hōnen (1133-1212). “Is it true,” someone asked, “that even though the Buddha [Amida] comes to welcome one at the time of death, he will return [alone] if that person is in a state of impurity?” Hōnen replied that “the Buddha takes no account of purity or impurity.” But this particular interlocutor seems to have understood Amida as being very like a kami in requiring a state of purity among his devotees; far from assuming that an ideal death resulting in ōjō would nullify the issue of pollution, this individual clearly worried that pollution could hinder ōjō from occurring.

Claims about kami endorsing Buddhist soteriological aims did not in fact produce any uniform attitude toward death pollution but were instead enlisted in support of varied and sometimes contradictory agendas. In contrast to Ippen’s biographer, who asserted that “those who practice Buddhism must also revere the kami,” the “single practice” Pure Land sectarian teachings of Hōnen and Shinran (1173-1262) generally deemed kami worship to be superfluous; rather, the kami were said spontaneously to rejoice at and protect those who relied wholly upon the nenbutsu. Not worshipping the kami (jingi fuhai), and especially refusing to observe the purification rituals customary before entering shrines, served both as an identity marker for single-practice nenbutsu devotees and as a target of criticism by their opponents. Ikemi Chōryū has traced how Shinran’s later followers repeatedly invoked the idea that kami support Buddhist soteriological goals in order to defend such unorthodox practices. For example, according to the Jōdo Shinshū evangelist Zonkaku (1290-1373), the deity Hachiman had revealed in an oracle: “I do not shun an impure, defiled body, but I abhor a crooked, insincere mind.” Zonkaku continues, “One should understand the deities of the other shrines in the same way. Thus we see that even if one’s body should be pure, if he conveys false views at heart, the kami will not accept [his prayers]. But even if one’s body should be impure, the kami will protect him if he has a mind of compassion.” Another Shin preaching text states, “To abhor birth and death and to long for [salvation in] one’s next life is the true meaning of avoidance. . . . The death taboo means to witness the suffering of transmigration in the six paths, dying here and being born again there, and to detest and shun it.” Such statements deliberately conflate “birth and death” as occasions of ritual defilement, through contact with parturition or corpses, with “birth and death” as samsaric suffering, whose transcendence is Buddhism’s ultimate aim. In other words, pollution taboos having actual force in social observance are rendered merely metaphorical by assimilation to Buddhist doctrinal concepts. A similar interpretation is reflected in medieval Shinshū texts in a recurring gloss on the character for ini (taboo or avoidance), which is written with the heart radical over the character for “self” or “one’s own”; Shin exegetes interpreted it to mean that what must be “avoided” is not external pollution but the defilements of one’s own mind. Such readings no doubt served leaders of Shinshū congregations as a way of both deflecting external
criticisms for their neglect of kami rites and also of persuading their own followers to conform to normative Shin practice.

But if the conflation of pollution avoidance with aversion to samsaric suffering could be used to rationalize non-participation in the customary purification rites accompanying kami worship, it could also be used to argue that such observances were vitally necessary for the Buddhist devotee. For example, Nomori no kagami, a late thirteenth-century treatise on poetics attributed to Minamoto no Aritusa (n.d.), criticizes Zen monks and nenbutsu practitioners who refused to honor traditional avoidance: "The deities' abhorrence of [the pollution involved in] birth and death is no mere worldly custom. By abhorring birth and death, [the kami] seek to restrain permanently the acts of living beings that bind them to samsāra."61 This assertion involves a contrasting rhetorical move, in which the abstract Buddhist existential problem of "birth and death" is concretized in specific prescriptions of ritual purity. The notion that kami support Buddhist soteriological aims thus did not in and of itself dictate a unified stance toward defilement issues but was deployed both to undermine and to support avoidance connected with death pollution. This ambivalence would seem to reflect a larger tension emerging in the latter Heian period between discourses emphasizing pollution taboos and other voices prepared to override or dismiss them altogether.

Pollution avoidance is often explicitly rejected in the formal discourse of the new Buddhist movements of the Kamakura period, such as the Ritsu or vinaya revival movement led by Eisô (1201-1290) or the exclusive nenbutsu movements of Hōnen and Shinran, which became independent sects, over and against the practices of the Buddhist establishment. As Hōnen is said to have remarked, "In the Buddhist teachings, there is no such thing as avoidance, as it is commonly spoken of in the world" (Bukkyō ni wa imi to i koto nashi, sezoku ni mōshitaran yō nyi).62 The doctrinal claims of the exclusive nenbutsu movements, in making birth in the Pure Land wholly dependent on the single element of wholehearted reliance on Amida, did indeed serve—at least at a prescriptive level—to marginalize devotion to the kami and to deemphasize concerns about pollution. In the case of the Ritsu movement, it was not a single-practice orientation but emphasis on strict precept observance that served to marginalize defilement issues: "In [the case of one who upholds] the pure precepts, there is no defilement," Eisô's disciple Kakujō is said to have remarked.63 However, well before these movements emerged, we already find evidence of voices skeptical of the need to avoid death defilement. We have seen the example of Kanetō, whose Pure Land aspirations led him to ignore informal taboos about chanting the nenbutsu on a kami festival day. In a far more striking episode, found in Konjaku monogatari, a certain Shimotsuke no Atsuyuki, formerly an officer of the palace guards of the right, has taken Buddhist vows as a lay monk (nyūdō) and now lives in the western part of the capital. One day, his neighbor dies suddenly. Because the single gate of the neighbor’s house faces an inauspicious direction, the family is at a loss for how to remove the corpse. In his desire to repay his obligations to the neighbor, and over the strenuous objections of his own family, Atsuyuki orders the wall between the two houses knocked down so that the body may be removed through his own gate. Walls and boundaries were thought to contain pollution, so Atsuyuki’s act in effect results in the defilement of his entire household.64 Dismayed, his wife and children protest that “not even holy men who abstain from grain and renounce the world” would agree to such a thing. Atsuyuki retorts that people obsessed with taboos die prematurely and lack descendants; besides, he insists, the ethical imperative to repay kindness outweighs any personal consideration. The narrative praises his act as expressive of a broad, compassionate mind and adds, as though in validation of his conduct, that Atsuyuki himself lived to ninety and his progeny were all long-lived and prosperous.65 Such stories suggest that, however non-representative, attitudes relativizing or even dismissing death pollution avoidance existed in the late Heian, without reference to single-practice logic, to the protective power of the precepts, or for that matter—as in Atsuyuki's case—even to Buddhism itself.

It has sometimes been assumed that Buddhist monks in premodern Japan naturally “stepped in” to assume responsibility for Buddhist funerary and mortuary rites, filling a void created by a preexisting death taboo in kami ritual. Historical reality, however, was more complex and supports a more fluid, interactive view of Buddhist observances and kami rites. Not only did jingi ritualists of the imperial cult and its associated shrines have to scrupulously avoid death pollution, but so did those Buddhist monks involved in kami rites or other rites conducted for nation protection. As we shall see, the growing Buddhist monopoly over death ritual did not mean that all monks habitually engaged in deathbed or funerary practices. At the same time, the exclusion of Buddhist elements from the imperial cult, although a limited phenomenon, contributed to growing associations of Buddhism with death, since both were objects of taboo, and also helped generate more socially diffuse, informal avoidance of Buddhist death-related practices such as the nenbutsu in contexts emphasizing kami worship, renewal, or worldly prosperity—even on the part of otherwise devout Buddhists.

Yet, side by side with concerns about death defilement, we also see an emergent discourse denying that pollution or its avoidance, has any soteriological significance. This discourse was assimilated to various Buddhist normative agendas: promoting an ethos of world renunciation aimed at birth in the Pure Land, as in ojōden, assimilating kami worship to Buddhist soteriological aims; or asserting the self-sufficiency of the exclusive nenbutsu or
Part Two: Death in a Place Apart

Let us turn now to the deathbed rites (rinjū gyōgi) aimed at birth in the Pure Land that spread widely in the latter Heian and Kamakura periods. In Japan, formal inception of such rites can be traced to the latter tenth century, to the Yokawa retreat of the Tendai monastery Enryakuji on Mt. Hiei. Yokawa lay at some distance from Enryakuji’s other major temples and practice halls and was known as a place of especially strict religious discipline. There, the scholar-monk Genshin had composed his famous 985 treatise Ōjō yōshū, devoting a portion of this text to discussing how dying practitioners should visualize Amida Buddha and chant his name in their final moments, so as to achieve birth in his Pure Land.66 Deathbed practices of the sort recommended in Ōjō yōshū were actually conducted by a group of Yokawa monks who in 986 formed an association called the Nijūgo zannai-e, or Samadhi Society of Twenty-five, devoted to assisting one another in practices aimed at achieving birth in Amida’s Pure Land.67 Genshin himself joined the Society shortly after its formation. In their common faith, members pledged to gather each month to recite the Amida Sūtra and to contemplate the Buddha (nenbutsu zannai). They also vowed to assist one another at the time of death as “good friends” (zenchishiki) and encourage one another’s dying reflections with the mutual aim of achieving ōjō.

Both Genshin’s Ōjō yōshū and the charter regulations of the Nijūgo zannai-e cite, from passages quoted in Chinese commentaries, accounts purporting to describe how deathbed practices for achieving ōjō were conducted at the Jetavana monastery in Śrāvastī in India.68 According to this account, dying monks were moved to a separate structure at the monastery called the Mūjōin (Hall of Impermanence), located in the direction where the sun sets. There a buddha image was enshrined, with a five-colored pennant tied to its hand. The sick monk was to hold one end of the pennant and arouse the thought of following the Buddha to his pure land. Attendant monks were to adorn the ritual space, burning incense and scattering flowers, and encourage the dying monk to focus his mind on the Buddha. Drawing on other Chinese sources and also setting forth his own recommendations, Genshin’s discussion of deathbed practice in Ōjō yōshū further stresses how attendants should chant the nenbutsu or name of Amida together with the dying person; perform repentance together with him; turn away visitors whose presence would be distracting; and exhort the dying person to visualize Amida descending in welcome with his holy retinue. The Nijūgo zannai-e regulations, which were designed for practical application by the group’s members, place greater emphasis on the logistics of deathbed practice. Were any of their number to become ill, fellow members were to attend him in rotation; two monks were to watch over him, until relieved, for a full day and night, one encouraging his contemplations and the other attending to food and other necessities. The regulations read in part:

Rebirth in a good or evil realm depends solely upon one’s thought at the last moment. Ties with good friends (zenchishiki) are formed solely for this occasion. Thus, were we to abandon [a dying companion] before his life had ended, our purpose could not be accomplished. Even if you should suddenly be called upon [to attend the dying] when it is not your usual turn, you must still be willing to touch defilement, send him off at the end, and carry out all that may be needed. Herein lies our intent in forming [this society].69

Monks in attendance at the deathbed are referred to explicitly as “those incurring defilement and keeping watch” (shōkkei banshu); they are to dwell together with the dying person in the same hall, chanting the nenbutsu and reciting sūtras for his sake. Nijūgo zannai-e members also pledged to establish a shared burial ground and conduct funeral rites for one another “without regarding whether the day is auspicious or inauspicious, and without concern for directional taboos.”70 In their regulations, all considerations of pollution avoidance or other interdictions are explicitly subordinated to the aim of helping their dying fellows to achieve birth in the Pure Land.

The deathbed rites practiced by the Yokawa Nijūgo zannai-e soon spread, and similar groups were formed at a number of monasteries.71 It was not only monks, however, who found such deathbed practices attractive. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, notices begin to appear of aristocrats dying in the ritualized manner that Ōjō yōshū and the Nijūgo zannai-e regulations prescribe. The famous depiction of the death of Fujiwara no Michinaga in the historical tale Elga monogatari (A Tale of Flowering Fortunes) is clearly based on Ōjō yōshū.72 Similar accounts also occur in diaries of the court nobility: Prince Sukehito (d. 1119) is said to have passed away chanting the nenbutsu while holding a five-colored cord attached to an image of Amida, as Ōjō yōshū recommends; Nishi no Okata (d. 1120), adoptive mother of the courtier Fujiwara no Munetada, also died with the colored cords in her hand.73 By the thirteenth century, nenbutsu societies (nenbutsu kessha) of local monks, quite
possibly inspired by the Yokawa precedent, had formed throughout the country and sometimes provided deathbed and funerary services, not only for one another but also for lay patrons.74 Ōjōden also tell of persons of humble status who, to the extent their circumstances allowed, met their death in ritualized fashion, chanting the nenbutsu and focusing their last thoughts on the Buddha.

And yet, as noted at the outset of this essay, this ritualizing of the last hours as a juncture when one might come face to face with the Buddha contrasted sharply with the heightened fears of death pollution that characterized the same historical period, especially in aristocratic circles. The regulations of the Nijūgo zammai-e suggest awareness of this tension, in their explicit injunctions that those nursing the sick must be willing to come into contact with death defilement. Ikemi Chōryū writes of the Society: “Before the mutual friendship of members who shared the aspiration for birth in the Pure Land, the defilement of sickness and death was not to be made an issue...In the fact that they had to insist on such a point, we can glimpse the transcendent attitude of Pure Land followers toward pollution. And from the late Heian period on, Pure Land followers displayed an attitude of overcoming the taboos against impunity.”75

The readiness of the Nijūgo zammai-e monks to incur defilement by attendance at the deathbed certainly suggests itself as a precursor to those voices that we have already encountered in later Heian Buddhist narrative literature, dismissing pollution taboos as soteriologically irrelevant. But was this a radical innovation on their part? Was it specifically linked to their aspirations for ōjō, and did it indeed serve to “overcome” pollution taboos? Was such an attitude especially characteristic of Pure Land followers? Did the ideal that the Society helped to popularize, of a ritualized death leading to birth in the Pure Land, need to be reconciled with notions of death as dangerous and defiling, and if so, how was this accomplished? These questions will be addressed in the remaining two parts of this essay. This part, Part Two, considers the relationship between deathbed ritual and death pollution in the context of broader social practices of relocating the dying. Part Three will address practices and discourses specific to the ritualized deathbed scene that bear on the issue of pollution and impunity: nursing the dying, cleaning up their bodily discharges, and venerating the bodies of those recently deceased thought to have attained ōjō.

In the “Hall of Impermanence”

Central to the instructions for deathbed practice set forth in Genshin’s Ōjō yōshū and the regulations of the Nijūgo zammai-e was the relocation of dying monks to the “Hall of Impermanence” or mujōin, an element derived, as we have seen, from Chinese accounts of practice at the Jetavanā Monastery. At Yokawa, a hall called Kedain (“[lotus] flower pedestal hall”) was established for this purpose. As deathbed practices of this kind spread among other monastic communities and then to lay devotees, a variety of structures was employed. Mujōin were established at some monasteries for the collective use of the community, while individual ascetics and recluses built small temporary huts in which to perform their last contemplations or moved into chapels where other ascetics believed to have achieved the Pure Land had died. As death neared, well-to-do laity—including lay monks (nyūdo) and lay nuns (nyūdō ama)—men and women who had taken Buddhist vows but continued to live in the household—often withdrew to their private chapels or to temples outside the capital of which they were patrons, to devote themselves to religious disciplines at the end of life.

“The reason [the dying] are moved to this separate location,” says Ōjō yōshū, citing a “Chinese tradition,” “is that people subject to craving, if they gaze on their robe, begging bowl, and other implements in their own dwelling, will give rise to all types of attachment and have no dispassion of mind.”76 Virtually all subsequent instructions for deathbed practice (rinjū gyoōsho) produced in the latter Heian and Kamakura periods stress the importance of removing dying persons from their accustomed surroundings into a separate hall or chapel or even a different room, in order to minimize worldly attachments and potential distractions that might disturb their right mindfulness at the time of death. According to the esoteric master Kubakun (1095-1143), the move to the mujōin enacts the spirit of world renunciation. “It represents abandoning the defiled Sāha world and achieving birth in the Pure Land of Utmost Bliss...The prince [the future Buddha, Siddhartha] left [his father’s] palace to ascend the peak of the five wisdoms, and the great teacher [Kūkai] entered meditation, obtaining the ghee of the three mysteries. Herein alone lies the intent of moving to a different dwelling.”77 Once it becomes clear that death is inevitable, the dying person is to withdraw to a separate place where a buddha image is ensnared and incense burned; with the assistance of a zenchishiki, or religious guide, he or she is to single-mindedly chant the nenbutsu or perform other recitations until the last breath transpires.

If the dying succeeded in achieving proper mental focus, then, in their final moments, it was believed that Amida would make his welcoming descent (raigo) to receive them. Ōjōden accounts abound with descriptions of wondrous signs indicative of Amida Buddha’s coming—purple clouds gathering in the west, unearthly music heard in the air, mysterious lights or sweet fragrance in the death chamber, and auspicious visions appearing to the dying. Chijiwa Itaru has argued that relocating dying persons to the mujōin served precisely to incubate such visions. There, they occupied an enclosed space, removed from ordinary affairs, ritually adorned and ensnaring a buddha image, where flowers
were scattered and incense burned; they were enveloped by the continuous sound of the nenbutsu or other invocations and sometimes liturgical music. Such an atmosphere was conducive to perception of the auspicious signs—the mysterious lights, fragrance, or music—sought by dying persons and their associates as “proof” that ōjō had occurred. 78

Heian deathbed rites resemble many other Buddhist rituals, exoteric and esoteric, in which a ritual space is adorned and specific buddhas, bodhisattvas, or other deities are invoked, worshipped, or visualized, for a range of worldly and transworldly aims. However, practices for the time of death differed from all other invocation rites in one key respect: at their conclusion, the ritual space contained at its center the body of a dead person. Thus the mujōin would have been simultaneously a ritual site and a place of pollution. How did those engaged in deathbed practices understand this apparent contradiction? To arrive at an answer, let us consider the relocation of the dying to the mujōin, not only in terms of the monastic context, as in the Ōjō yōshi’s prescriptions or the observances of the Nijūzanmai-e, but in terms of broader social practices involving relocation of the dying.

Death in court circles

Among the nobility, dying persons often moved (or were moved by their relatives) to private chapels built on their estates apart from their main residence or located at Buddhist temples outside the city. There, assisted by their preceptors, family members who were Buddhist clerics, or other Buddhist ritual specialists in their employ, they could focus during their last days or hours on devotions aimed at birth in the Pure Land. Unlike the Nijūzanmai-e monks or their counterparts in other monastic settings, however, who willingly incurred pollution to assist their dying fellows, lay aristocrats were sometimes constrained from attending the deathbed of relatives and associates by the need to avoid defilement.

An instructive episode occurs in Eiga monogatari, which recounts the events surrounding the death of the lay nun, the mother of Rinshi, Michinaga’s chief consort. When the older woman falls ill, Michinaga tells Rinshi to “order plenty of prayers to keep her alive for the rest of the year...With all the important events coming up, it would be terrible if anything went wrong.” In other words, it would be awkward for Michinaga, the chief minister of state, to incur death defilement mandating an extended avoidance period just at the time of the official observances surrounding the recent accession of the new emperor, Go-Ichijō (r. 1016-1036)—the Ōharae, or Great Purification, and the Daljōsai enthronement ceremony. The dying woman herself expresses anxiety on this account and says, “I am so sorry to die just when our beloved emperor is beginning his reign. Please keep your mourning private, leave the body at a mountain temple for a while, and have the cremation when it will not be a nuisance, after the great ceremonies are over.” 79 In the end, she dies in her own residence before the year is out, attended by her daughter Rinshi; the Tendai prelate Ingen (971-1038), who enjoyed Michinaga’s patronage; and her brother Tokinobu, a lay monk known as the Ōhara Nyūdō, as well as other monks who have been called in to recite the nenbutsu and perform the lotus repentance rite (Hokke senbō) at her side. Michinaga, however, calls his condolences to Rinshi from where he is standing outside in the garden, unable to enter a house where a corpse is present for fear of incurring defilement just at the time of crucial state ceremonies. Rinshi, who has no such ceremonial obligations, remains at her mother’s deathbed until the end. 80

As Takatori Masao points out, such restrictions had not always been a feature of court life. 81 According to the Nihon shoki (Chronicles of Japan), the Empress Kōgyoku (r. 642-645) kept watch over her dying mother until the very end, refusing to leave her side. 82 The same source even criticizes the strict death pollution taboos of the Korean aristocracy. It records that in 642, a Prince Gyōgi of the Korean kingdom of Paekche, accompanied by his family, made a state visit to the Nara court. While in Japan, his child died, and the prince and his wife were so fearful of defilement that they would not approach the corpse. The chronicle notes, “In general, the custom of [those of] Paekche and Silla is that, when someone has died, every one’s father or mother, brother or sister, one does not look upon them. In such utter lack of affection, how do they differ from birds or beasts?” 83 By the mid-Heian period, however, as Takatori observes, virtually identical aversions had been adopted among Japanese nobles.

As already noted, formal codes governing avoidance of death defilement and other sources of pollution first appear in the early ninth century and crystallize in the 927 Engi shiki, which draws on earlier Heian sources. These codes of avoidance appear to have been part of an effort to exclude defilement and the dangers it posed, insofar as possible, from the locus of imperial authority—the palace, government bureaus, and the area of the capital of Heian-kyō itself. This effort is particularly evident with regard to the disposal of the dead. Early Heian ordinances sought to restrain former practices of burial beside homes or on the slopes of nearby hills, where they might pollute shrines sacred to the kами. Among the aristocracy, cremations and burials were restricted to the desolate and largely uninhabited areas in the empty fields and foothills outside the city, such as Higashiyama to the east, Funaoka to the north, and Sagano to the west. Here on the city’s periphery, leading families had their clan graves, the northern Fujiwara at Kohata in Uji, and Murakami Genji at Kitashirakawa in Higashiyama, and—beginning with Michinaga’s founding of

The Dying Breath: Deathbed Rites and Death Pollution in Early Medieval Japan

195
Such restrictions obviously limited who could attend a deathbed, as we have seen in Michinaga's case. Similar indications occur in court diaries. When Emperor Murakami's chief consort Anshi (d. 964) was dying of complications following childbirth, he repeatedly dispatched the chamberlain Fujiwara no Fumitoshi to report to him on her condition. But despite his grief, he himself could not approach her for fear of defilement, and those who had attended her were instructed not to enter the inner palace. In 1011, the diarist and court councilor Fujiwara no Yukinari recorded what transpired at the deathbed of Emperor Ichijô, whom he had attended during Ichijô's fatal illness. On the twenty-first day of the sixth month, Yukinari noted that Ichijô was attended by monks and courtiers, divided into three watches. The next day, the archbishop (sōdō) Keien performed an esoteric empowerment rite to ward off demonic obstructions that might hinder the emperor's ōjō, while the other monks present chanted the nenbutsu. But when it became apparent that the end was near, the Minister of the Left, Michinaga instructed that the Minister of the Right, Fujiwara no Akimitsu, and all other courtiers should leave the palace—presumably, in order to avoid defilement resulting from the imperial death. On another occasion, when his own beloved son was critically ill and dying, Yukinari recorded that he had had to leave the house so as to avoid pollution and waited in the garden; when he heard his consort's anguished cries, he knew that the boy had died.

Exceptions certainly occurred, especially in cases involving family members, unexpected death, or on occasions when affective ties outweighed official considerations. Yukinari himself, who had retreated outdoors when his son had died, four years later remained at his dying consort's side, chanting the nenbutsu together with her. Yukinari had also been very close to Emperor Ichijô and chose voluntarily to incur pollution by taking part in his funeral. As somewhat later examples, the then minister of the right and later regent, Kujô Kanazane (1149-1207), attended the deathbed of his sister, Kôkamon'in; he also rushed to the side of his son, the young minister of the center Yoshimichi, when the latter suddenly collapsed and died; Kanazane then sent word to the retired emperor that he had incurred pollution. Often, however, those with pressing official obligations—or who simply wished to escape an extended period of exorcistic seclusion—stayed away from deathbed scenes.

Such being the case, we can readily imagine that the removal of dying aristocrats to their private chapels was intended, not only to help the dying to cast off worldly attachments and focus their thoughts on the Pure Land, but also to protect the living from death defilement. Some evidence makes this explicit, as when the poet Fujiwara no Teika noted in his diary, "This evening I heard that the person known as the Hachijôin princess died at the hour of the snake (9:00-11:00 a.m.). . . . People around her are saying that the Hachijô mansion did
Reversing Death and Disposal

Judging from őjőden accounts, a mujōin was not the only place to which one might relocate before dying, nor was the desire for circumstances conducive to right mindfulness in one's last moments necessarily the only motivation for relocating. Among accounts of hijiri ("holy men") or other renunciates, we find occasional stories of those who leave their accustomed dwelling, not to seek ideal circumstances in which to die, but to protect their associates both from incurring the defilement accompanying their death and from the task of disposing of their body. On nearing death, the monk Rentai, an ascetic of Mt. Kōya, admonishes his disciples not to hold a funeral but to leave his body in an open field as an offering for beasts and birds, a paradigmatic final act of giving well attested in Buddhist cultures. Another monk objects: "In that case, won't your decaying corpse become strewn about and defile this sacred site?" "That's true," Rentai says, and though others try to detain him, he leaves Mt. Kōya, eventually achieving őjō beneath a tree in a remote spot far from human habitation. Here, the need to avoid polluting a holy place clearly wins out over Rentai's desire to benefit living beings with the offering of his body. In another account, the desire not to leave behind a defiling corpse is even given as a rationale for ascetic self-immolation. "I will die on the thirteenth of this month," the holy man Kuwatori announces to his disciples. "It would be very wrong on my part, were I to leave behind a stinking polluted corpse that you would then have to carry away to [abandon in] a mountain or field. I will die without troubling you." And, piling up a great heap of firewood, he performs his own cremation, calmly chanting the Lotus Sutra as the flames consume him. In this case, the holy man's intentions are somewhat ambiguous; one is not sure if he wishes to spare his disciples from the pollution of his corpse or the logistical problem of its disposal. These two issues were of course closely interrelated, as we can see from accounts of őjōnin still living in their household. Shortly before his death, the former governor of Shinano, Fujiwara no Nagakiyo (d. 1096), speaks to his brother, the scholar-monk Gyōken, and announces his intention to die in the lodging temple of a "meditation monk" (zensō) of Sōrinji, with whom he has made an agreement to this effect some years earlier. This monk, he says, has also agreed to handle his burial, because "it is troublesome for those living in the capital to hold a funeral." Nagakiyo is referring here, not to the funeral rite as such, but to the logistics of disposal. As noted above, the bodies of aristocrats were cremated or buried in the empty fields or foothills outside Heian-kyō, and their remains might be interred in or near family temples that sprang up in such areas. Nagakiyo, himself of the nobility, has made his own advance arrangements. Significantly, he turns for help, not to his brother, a career scholar-monk appointed to the Office of Monastic Affairs (Sōgō), but to a zensō or "meditation monk." Funaoa Makoto has identified such zensō as monks committed primarily to practice or ascetic disciplines (including but not necessarily confined to "meditation"), as opposed to the elite kakyūryō, or scholar-monks. They were outside the status system of official monastic posts and appear to have overlapped the category of dōso (literally "hall monks") responsible for routine liturgical functions at monasteries and also bessho hijiri, "holy men" (hijiri) who chose to pursue their religious disciplines in "places apart" (bessho), retreats affiliated with major temples but on their outskirts or at another location altogether. Sōrinji, where Nagakiyo went to die, is thought to have been a bessho of Mt. Hiei and was located in Higashiyama, near the channel grounds on the eastern outskirts of the capital. Both zensō and bessho hijiri also appear to have performed deathbed and funerary rites for a range of clients. It was because of pollution issues, Funaoa argues, that monks such as these, outside the formal temple hierarchy, came to specialize in conducting death-related ritual services, including deathbed practice and funerals. In the twelfth century, not long after Nagakiyo's death, we begin to see notices of monks providing burial for aristocratic patrons in cemeteries they had established at their own temples—also located outside the city—for themselves and their fellow monks. The Sōrinji zensō who attended Nagakiyo may have represented an early example of this practice.

In another account, the elderly nun Myōhō (d. 1107) of the Tachibana family, who is still living in the household, announces that she has been told in a dream of her impending death and directed to go at once to Amida-temple "because it will cause trouble for my sons if I die in this house." Amida-temple, literally "Amida peak," was also in the Higashiyama district outside the capital,
overlooking the Toribeno cremation grounds. Here again, the “trouble” Myōhō wishes to spare her family would seem to include not only the problem of death pollution but also the logistical difficulties and perhaps the expense of transporting a corpse to the city outskirts. In Nagakiyo’s words, it was indeed “troublesome for those living in the capital to hold a funeral,” especially for those without means. The Tachibana were a noble family, and it is not clear whether or not economic considerations played a role in Myōhō’s decision. But for ordinary people, cremation or burial outside the city as practiced by aristocrats was not readily available. Charnel grounds for common use outside the city, such as Rendaino and Toribeno, were established only in the late Heian period, and even then, in the absence of cooperative funeral associations, they were of little help to poorer families in Heian-kyō who could not afford to hire someone to remove their dead. Instead they placed them in empty fields or in abandoned buildings within the capital area. When bodies piled up in great numbers, as in times of famine or epidemics, they were cleared away by kiyome (literally, “those who purify”), a menial group working under the direction of the police or keibiishi, who removed them to the river banks—usually the Kamo River but possibly the Katsura and Tenjin rivers as well—where the currents at their height would carry them away.\(^{105}\)

Economic concerns find explicit mention in the öjōen account of the end-of-life arrangements made by one Shimotsumichi Shigetake, a lowly fellow who lives by hunting and fishing. On learning that he is fatally ill, he says: “I have no wealth in this house, and no relatives, either. Who will dispose of my body? There is a deserted field in Hachijō-kawara; I will go die there. Otherwise, my death will only be a burden to my wife and children.” Hachijō-kawara, too, lay on the outskirts of the capital in an area reserved for cremation and mortuary rites, and Shigetake’s choice of venue clearly suggests a desire to spare his immediate family the problem of dealing with his corpse when he has no financial resources or relatives who can assist. Seen off by his neighbors and accompanied by two sensō who had previously agreed to assist him at the end, Shigetake proceeds there, spreads a mat over the grass, sits on it facing west, and dies chanting the nenbutsu, his mind undisturbed.\(^{106}\)

The accounts of Nagakiyo, Myōhō, and Shigetake all have in common the theme of a devotee living in Heian-kyō who, knowing death to be imminent, voluntarily leaves the city to die in areas in or near cremation or charnel grounds. In effect, these individuals reverse the customary order of things and dispose of their own bodies before they have actually died. Their stories strongly suggest that, especially in the case of lay devotees or renunciates still living with their families, going to die in a “place apart” was not necessarily just to distance oneself from the distraction of worldly affairs in order to compose one’s mind at the end but might also have involved social concerns about burdening others with the problems of death defilement and corpse disposal.

**Ousting the Terminally Ill**

Behind these stories of öjōen who obliquely leave home before dying to spare their families the problem of dealing with their dead body lurks the specter, attested in historical documents as well as literary sources, of terminally ill persons, usually servants or other dependents not related by blood, who were involuntarily removed or evicted from the household before they died. According to a court diary entry from 1154, a couple was living in a small chapel belonging to the chancellor of state, Fujiwara no Tamamichi (1097–1164), when the man became ill and died.\(^{107}\) An inquiry was conducted by the police (keibiishi) to determine whether death defilement had spread to the chancellor’s household. The dead man’s wife explained that, to avoid polluting a dwelling not their own, she had summoned a kiyome to remove her husband from the premises before he actually died. Interrogated, the kiyome in question affirmed that, yes, in accordance with the wife’s instructions, he had in fact removed the dying man to a small hut she had caused to be constructed for that purpose outside the bounds of the chancellor’s property; then, after the man died, he had removed and abandoned the body. However, another witness testified that, while he had seen the kiyome abandon the dead man by the highway, he suspected that the man had already ceased breathing before he was removed from his residence. The verdict held that pollution had indeed spread to the chancellor’s household, mandating a thirty-day period of avoidance and the consequent postponement of important jingi rites.\(^{108}\)

In this case, we glimpse the perceived need, already touched upon, to ward off death defilement from the household of a high-ranking courtier. But this incident was also linked to a growing tendency, already under way in the late Heian period, to stigmatize the sick and the terminally ill. Fujiwara Yoshiaki, drawing on tale literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, notes evidence that sick persons without means or family to care for them were often turned out to become beggars and were included, along with the disfigured, lepers, and criminals, in the category of hinin (literally “non-persons” or outcasts).\(^{109}\) The twelfth-century Konjaku monogatari includes the story of a servant girl ousted from her master’s house when she becomes ill during an epidemic; in this case, the master does not seem altogether heartless, as he provides the girl with food and necessities and promises to send someone to look after her once or twice daily.\(^{110}\) Fear of contagion from illness, as well as her lack of blood ties to the family and concern for death pollution, may have
played a part in his decision. In some cases, temporary huts or rooms in structures outside the household premises were established for terminally ill servants, or they were delivered to the care of outcastes occupying the liminal areas of the riverbanks (kawara hinin). Often, however, they were abandoned unceremoniously by the roadside and left to starve or die from exposure. Both riverbanks and highways were liminal areas where pollution was not thought to be transmitted.

The fate of becoming one of the “outcaste sick” (byōsha hinin) or “sick without [social] ties” (muen byōsha) could, through adversity, befall even prominent persons. An episode in Shasekishū tells of a distinguished scholar-monk from eastern Japan who in his old age becomes bedridden and paralyzed and is eventually abandoned by his disciples when they tire of nursing him. In another episode, the monk Churen-bō of Yamato is similarly forsaken by his followers when he becomes paralyzed and is seen living in a hut near the highway. While some of the abandoned sick persons in these stories become roadside beggars, others, like the nun Myōhō or Shigetake in the Tōden accounts mentioned above, are described as going to await death in cemeteries or cremation grounds. In Konjaku monogatari, for example, a nun related in some way to the governor of Owari, is abandoned by him and by her children. She becomes dependent on her elder brother, but when she falls ill, he turns her out of the house, saying, “I will not permit you to die here.” When she is similarly rejected by a former friend, the nun goes to the cremation grounds at Toribeno, where she arranges herself on a mat that she spreads out and then passes away.

The practice of abandoning sick persons by the roadside began at least as early as the ninth century and, despite laws prohibiting it, seems to have been common in both Kyoto and Kamakura. It was driven by multiple factors, including fears of pollution, of disease, and of the dead, as well as economic necessity, and, in some cases, a rather brutal callousness toward persons outside the family. Occasionally, abandoned sick persons were gathered up and placed in hospices for the indigent terminally ill, though such institutions were by no means adequate to the need. These places, often administered by Buddhist monks, were termed alternatively hidden, seyakun, or mujūdo—the last term clearly inspired by the Jetavana mujūdo or “Hall of Impermanence.” Fujiwara has noted that, like mortuary temples and charnel grounds of the capital, such institutions were located outside city bounds in both Kyoto and Kamakura and were viewed, he suggests, as “death containers,” places that isolated death defilement from the cities; in that respect, they resembled the leprosaria of medieval Europe.

As the preceding discussion suggests, the act of relocating the dying to a mujūdo could carry multiple meanings. From the normative perspective of Buddhist teachings about end-of-life contemplations aimed at achieving birth in a pure land, it meant leaving the profane space of worldly affairs to approach the holy realm of the Buddha. But this practice was also enacted in a social context in which dying persons were frequently removed from their habitual surroundings to protect the living from death pollution. Scholars have debated whether the mujūdo should be understood as a sacred ritual space, set apart from the world’s defilements, or as a containment device to keep death pollution away from the living. But in fact, both meanings held true and were to some extent interdependent. In either case, the mujūdo shared something in common with other liminal areas—such as riverbanks and highways, or the mortuary temples that sprang up in the foothills outside the capital—in that they stood “outside” the sphere of ordinary life, where the usual need for defilement avoidance did not apply. We can better understand this idea by considering those monks, active within this ambivalent realm, who attended the dying and sometimes arranged their funerals.

“Death-Managing” Monks

Whether in a separate hall at a monastery, in a noble’s private chapel, or on a mat spread out in a charnel ground, persons who died aspiring for the Pure Land were often attended by monks who encouraged their dying reflections and assisted their last nenbutsu. Clearly the monks who routinely served in the capacity of “good friends” to the dying and sometimes even arranged for disposal of their bodies were not, indeed could not, be overtly troubled by concerns about death pollution. And for that very reason, not all Buddhist monks engaged routinely in such activities. As we have seen, Buddhist clerics with official temple appointments, responsible for nation-protecting prayers or rites directed toward the kami, could not conduct deathbed or funerary rites without requiring subsequent purification via a thirty-day period of avoidance. What kind of monks, then, specialized in death related practices?

A story in the late-Heian collection Hoshinshū (Tales of Religious Awakening) tells of a monk known as the Agui hijiri, who, while traveling to the capital, is approached at a roadside well by a nun of shabby appearance who seeks his assistance. She leads him to a monk living nearby, who explains that he is near death and needs someone to attend him as zenchishiki. Having no resources, he has sent the nun to summon “a person concerned for the next life” (goseisha) to assist his deathbed practice. If the hijiri will agree, the monk adds, then after his death, the hijiri can inherit his dwelling, poor as it is, since he has no other heir. Significantly, the dying monk seeks help, not from just any Buddhist cleric, but from “a person concerned for the next life.” This term specifically indicated not merely persons hoping for birth after death in a pure
land, but semi-reclusive monks such as hijiri or zensō, especially those who engaged in practices for the sake of ōjō as their primary religious endeavor.

In aristocratic circles, clerics holding positions in the Office of Monastic Affairs or in temple administration might sometimes attend a deathbed when the dying individual was a relative or influential patron, but these "official" monks did not regularly perform such services for persons outside their close acquaintance. The monks most frequently summoned to ritually assist dying aristocrats were in many cases not career scholar or administrator monks but semi-reclusive practitioners referred to by such terms as hijiri or shōnin (holy man), kenja (adept), or ajari (esoteric ritual master). Often based at besso retreets, they enjoyed a reputation for holiness or thaumaturgical power and also served their patrons as healers, ritualists, and preceptors. Several such individuals are mentioned, for example, in the diary of the regent Kujō Kanezane. They include such monks as Ashō-bō Inzai (or Inzai, n.d.), known as the "shōnin of Chōrakuji," a temple in the area of Higashiyama, who conferred the precepts on the dying Emperor Takakura (d. 1181);118 Honjō-bō Tankyō (n.d.), of the Ōara besso, who served as zenchishiki at the deathbed of Kanezane’s eldest sister, the former imperial consort Kōkamon’in (Fujiwara no Seishi, d. 1181), and who performed the same service for the retired emperor Goshirakawa (d. 1192);119 and the esoteric adept Butsugen, who served as preceptor, ritualist, and healer to Kanezane’s family. Butsugen acted as zenchishiki at the deathbed of Kanezane’s former wetnurse (d. 1171) and was among the monks summoned when Kanezane’s son died suddenly, administering the precepts to him posthumously.120 Butsugen also represents an instance of overarching categories, being both a hijiri and a scholar-monk who served as head of instruction (gakutō) for the Daidenbōn cloister at the Shingon monastery at Mt. Kōya.121 For the most part, however, Funaoaka’s distinction holds true, in that it was semi-reclusive thaumaturgical adepts, rather than monks with formal administrative posts, who were summoned to serve as zenchishiki on a regular basis.

One also finds mention of monks who received noble patrons nearing death into their private chapels at besso or temples on the city outskirts, providing them with deathbed assistance and sometimes burial at cemeteries they had established at their temples. The Sōrinji zensō who attended the dying Nagakýyo would appear to belong to this category. And while not as prominent as the noted hijiri who served court nobles, monks similarly outside the formal temple hierarchy were the ones to whom commoners turned for deathbed and funeral services, such as the zensō who accompanied Shigetake to the empty field outside the city and encouraged his last nenbutsu. Even at the lowest end of the social scale, there may have been very humble monks who attended the dying. The early Kamakura-period story collection Senjishō includes an account of a monk living in a field called Ōba in Sagami, who survives by begging and running errands for others. When a destitute woman, widowed in an epidemic, falls ill, the monk goes to her secretly at night and tends to her. He begs for money and food for her care and also teaches her to chant the nenbutsu, eventually enabling her to achieve ōjō.122

From hijiri of aristocratic origins who attended court nobles to this humble monk of Sagami, what enabled certain monks to specialize in attending the dying and the dead without fear of death pollution was their "outside" status: they stood apart, not only from lay life, but also from the official clerical world of the major monasteries and its responsibilities for performing state-sponsored ritual and conducting kami rites. Ordinary distinctions of "pure" and polluted pertained to those realms, both secular and clerical, that such adepts had left behind. Some took up the reclusive life from the outset, while others underwent what amounted to a second act of renunciation, abandoning monastic office or temple administrative positions to engage in solitary ascetic practice. It is their voices—or more accurately, literary representations of their voices—that we read in ōjōden and satsuwa (didactic tales) dismissing pollution taboos as irrelevant to Buddhist soteriological concerns. Their status "outside" the world, and their semi-reclusive practice, often in mountain retreats, was thought to endow them with thaumaturgical powers, including the ability to manage the dangers and pollution associated with death. We can see this, not only in the fact that such monks attended deathbeds as zenchishiki but also in their ritual management of the especially volatile dead, those who had died in a miserable and untimely fashion and whose return as vengeful ghosts was much feared. The tenth-century itinerant holy man Kūya, for example, is said to have cremated the bodies of the deceased abandoned in fields and chanted the nenbutsu for their sake.123 Rūgyō Hōin of Ninnaji, out of pity for those who died during the great famine of the Yōwa era (1181-1182), is said to have organized a number of hijiri who wrote the Sanskrit syllable "A," representing the originally unborn, on the forehead of each corpse they encountered to enable that person to form a karmic bond with the Buddha; in two months' time, they performed this service for more than 42,300 deceased.124 As expressed in the phrase "shunning this defiled realm and aspiring to the Pure Land," aspirations for ōjō may indeed have served to conceptualize a standpoint from which the distinction between purity and impurity in a worldly, conventional sense was collapsed and death taboos might be transcended. But the ability of certain monks to reject pollution taboos depended less on Pure Land doctrinal teachings than on their liminal status, apart from both worldly and official clerical affairs. Although their social location differed considerably, in their ability to manage matters relating to sickness and death, the position of such monks bore some structural similarity to that of the kiyome responsible for clearing corpses from the roadsides, whose
status as hinin or members of an outcaste group made it possible for them to remove defilement.123

The instructions of the Nijūgo zanmai-e, which required that its members willingly incur defilement to encourage one another’s deathbed practice, certainly stood in dramatic opposition to the death pollution taboos of the day. But the spread of such deathbed practices among lay devotees—centered on their removal to a separate place—and the emergence of distinct groups of monks who attended them at the end, hardly constituted a challenge to social concerns about death defilement, let alone a transcendence of them. Rather, in the latter Heian period, deathbed rites and pollution taboos stood in a reciprocal relationship. As Nishiguchi has noted, fears about death pollution helped to popularize Yokawa-style deathbed practices among lay elites; rites requiring removal to a separate hall or chapel made it possible to honor and assist the dying but also contained the pollution of their death at safe remove from the living. Indeed, death defilement taboos could be maintained precisely because such rites—separating the dying from the social world of the living and ritually managing their death—were available. At the same time, the growing attraction of deathbed rites, along with the fact that monks serving in official capacities could not regularly undertake them, generated a new area of ritual specialization and income source for a range of monks and adepts practicing outside the structure of official temple appointments. For many such adepts, one imagines, the continued perception of death defilement as a threat was essential, as a foil and against which their powers to manage and neutralize it could be demonstrated. Over time, the activities of such monks helped pave the way for Buddhism’s increasing domination of death-related practices in general. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as is well known, the newly emergent Zen and Ritsu monastic orders began routinely to perform funerals for their lay patrons; Zen monks in particular laid the basis for the near-universal Buddhist funerary culture of the late medieval and early modern periods.124 But in their readiness to engage the pollution of death, such monks had precedents in the hajiri and yenzō of the Heian period.

Part Three: Nursing the Sick and Visiting the Dead

Above we have seen how the removal of the dying to a separate place was understood both as separating them from worldly “defilements,” in a metaphorical or Buddhist doctrinal sense, and as protecting others, still involved in the world, from death defilement in the literal sense of pollution and taboo. Those who attended the dying as ritualists and spiritual advisors were often monks practicing outside formal temple organizations, for whom contact with pollution was not prohibited. Nonetheless, deathbed practices of the kind

popularized by the Nijūgo zanmai-e had their own accompanying discourses of bodily purity and impurity, which intersected, but were not identical to, broader social concerns about death defilement and its avoidance. This final part, Part III, will examine, first, the attitude displayed toward the bodily wastes and discharges of the dying as reflected in monastic literature and its place in a broader tradition of monastic nursing, and second, the profoundly negative symbolism of feces in connection with death seen in hagiography and other sources. Both topics afford considerable insight into notions of “impurity” (fujō) as a category similar to but distinct from pollution (kegare). Lastly, this section will return to a topic introduced near the beginning of this essay, the practice of venerating the dead bodies of those believed to have achieved ōjō, as an illustration of questions still unanswered with regard to how death pollution taboos and deathbed practice aimed at birth in the Pure Land intersected.

Nursing the Sick and the Significance of the Nijūgo zanmai-e

Among the many wondrous signs described in ōjōden as proof of a given individual’s birth in the Pure Land is a mysterious fragrance in the death chamber, attesting that Amida and his holy retinue have indeed descended to welcome that person. For example, when a woman of the Tomo family, a lay devotee, lies dying, a scent of lotus blossoms fills the air.127 Fragrance similarly fills the room at the death of the consort of Fujiwara no Tsunezane (d. 1131), imbuing the surmise of the adept summoned to assist her with her final nenbutsu.”128 According to deathbed ritual instructions from Ōjō yōshū on, those nearing death were supposed to purify themselves by bathing and donning clean clothes, and the room itself was to be swept clean and adorned by scattering flowers and burning incense.129 Normatively speaking, the ideal death occurred in an atmosphere of purity and fragrance. In reality, however, dying is typically a messy business. The terminally ill often lose control of bodily functions, and at death, the anal sphincter releases; urine and excrement, rather than sweet perfume, are death’s usual olfactory accompaniments. Unlike hagiographical writings, instructions for monks attending the dying speak frankly of the need to clean up bodily wastes and discharges. This was, in fact, a well established theme in continental Buddhist vinaya literature dealing with the treatment of sick monks in monastic settings, and both Genshin’s Ōjō yōshū and the Nijūgo zanmai-e regulations draw on Chinese sources dealing explicitly with this subject. Genshin, as we have seen, cited a “Chinese tradition” purporting to describe practice at the Jetavana monastery, as quoted in a commentary on the Dharmaguptaka vinaya by the Chinese master Daoshan. According to this source, after the dying monk has been removed to the hall of impermanence, “Those in attendance should burn incense and scatter flowers to adorn [the
room]. If the sick monk soils himself, urinates, vomits, or spits, it should be cleaned up, and he is not held responsible for any transgression.\textsuperscript{130}

It is worth looking briefly at the larger context of this passage in Daoxuan's commentary, as it clearly informed notions of deathbed practice as prescribed in Japan by the Nijūgo zanmai-e documents and other, later works on the subject. Daoxuan prefaced this passage with another from the Dharmaguptaka vinaya explaining how the Buddha came to instruct monks in their responsibility to care for each other in times of sickness. According to this account, one day, the Buddha did not go out on his customary alms round but instead visited the monks' quarters. There he found a sick monk lying in his own excrement. When the Buddha inquired why no one was caring for him, the monk replied, "While I was not sick, I failed to attend to other sick monks. Therefore, now that I am sick, no one is attending to me." The Buddha helped him to rise, wiped the filth from his body, washed his robe, and cleaned his bedding. He then instructed the assembly of monks, "From now on you should look after sick monks... If anyone wants to serve me, he should attend to the sick."\textsuperscript{131} Daoxuan then cites again from the "Chinese tradition":

The Buddha patiently guides sentient beings in this world with the intention of removing their suffering. He does not consider [even] cleaning up excrement to be abhorrent. To the gods, human beings are smelly and filthy in the way that latrines are to human beings. Their stench is indescribable, and yet [the gods] do not think of [human beings] as repugnant but constantly protect them. How much less in the case of the Buddha's virtue, could he [arbitrarily] love some and hate others?\textsuperscript{132}

As Koichi Shinohara has noted in his discussion of this passage, the stench of the sick and dying is assimilated here to the universal impurity and defects of the human state, and care of the terminally ill—specifically, the act of cleaning up their bodily wastes and discharges—to the Buddha's non-differentiating compassion for all beings.\textsuperscript{133} Such lofty associations, one imagines, may have served to make such tasks tolerable to those monks unavoidably engaged in them, or even to shame the unwilling into sharing nursing responsibilities.

The influence of such argumentation can be clearly seen in the regulations of the Nijūgo zanmai-e mandating that its members attend their dying companions as senchishiki, serving in watches, two at a time, for a full day and a night, and not leaving until relieved by the next watch. They are urged to emulate Šākyamuni Buddha, who, "in the past, with his hands of purple gold, himself washed the body of a sick monk," a clear reference to the story cited by Daoxuan. The regulations also note that care of the sick is regarded as preeminent among the "eight fields of merit," a reference to the well-known Fanwang jing (Brahma-net sūtra), which lists care for the sick as one of the forty-eight minor precepts.\textsuperscript{134} Members are to treat their sick companions as devotedly as they would their father, mother, or teacher and are specifically admonished, "Do not shun smells, pollution, or impurity.\textsuperscript{135}

Daoxuan's "Chinese tradition" expressly stipulates that a dying monk who soils himself, urinates, vomits, or spits is not guilty of a transgression. Since the deathbed rite took place in the presence of a buddha image, one assumes that the "transgression" being denied here was that of defiling a ritual site. In the medieval Japanese case, urine and feces did not technically constitute "pollution," in that they were not the object of specific avoidances, but they were definitely a form of "impurity" (fuji) and were to be avoided in ritual contexts.\textsuperscript{136} In this regard, the regulations of the Nijūgo zanmai-e also stipulate, "Even if he [the dying monk] must relieve himself where he sits while [holding the cord attached to the buddha image], the Buddha does not regard this as repugnant,"\textsuperscript{137} showing recognition that deathbed practice was one ritual situation where such impurity was simply unavoidable.

Subsequent instructions to Japanese monks caring for the sick and dying also make specific mention of bodily discharges, such as the Kanbyō yōjinshō (Admonitions for attending the sick) by Nen'a Ryōchū (1199-1287), third patriarch of the Chinzei lineage of Hōnen's Pure Land sect. Ryōchū writes:

One should avoid causing the sick person pain. While [in general] he should rise to urinate or defecate, if he finds that painful, have him relieve himself just as he is, lying down. It would be all the more unreasonable to force him to rise if he is unable to do so. Diapers should be spread out thickly and changed often, being removed when they become smelly or soiled. Mucus and vomit should also be cleaned promptly and the sickbed kept clean.

Screens should be readied, and when the sick person is urinating or defecating, you should set them up before the buddha [image] to separate it from this impurity. However, if the illness suddenly worsens and it is clear that death is imminent, this stricture should be set aside. In addition, one should always moisten the dying person's throat with paper soaked in water and encourage him to chant the nenbutsu.\textsuperscript{138}

These admonitions suggest an attempt to manage, insofar as possible, the often contradictory demands of caring for the bodily needs of the dying and maintaining ritual purity in the muryō, which was, after all, both a sickroom and a ritual space. But it is clear that the imperative to encourage the dying person's reflections on the Buddha overrode all other concerns.

In this context, it may be relevant to note that, in early medieval Japanese Buddhist hagiography, readiness to nurse persons with especially repulsive bodily afflictions is treated as a sign of spiritual attainment. An example is the monk Eiitsu, a jikyōsha or Lotus Sutra devotee:
Chapter Eight

[On one occasion,] there was a sick person lying by the roadside, befouled with the impurity of his own urine and excrement, filthy and emitting a stench. People who noticed him covered their noses, averted their eyes, and hurried past. The holy man Eijitsu approached him and stood at his side. Reciting the Lotus Sūtra, he covered the sick man with his robe and lay down beside him and held him. Thanks to the power of the sūtra and the influence of the holy man, the sick man's illness was completely cured... Such compassion, care of the sick, and relief of pain could not be the acts of an ordinary worldling.139

Eijitsu, like the Buddha washing the monk soiled by his own excrement, is able to behave in this way precisely because he has transcended the discriminative attachments and repulsions of ordinary persons. Another example is found in the medieval accounts of Empress Kōmyō (701-760), honored in retrospect as a manifestation of the bodhisattva Kannon, who is said to have bathed a leper with her own hands and sucked the pus from his sores.140 Here we can glimpse a discourse in which other people's bodily impurity, far from being something to be shunned, becomes an opportunity for cultivating—or displaying—bodhisattva-like compassion and equanimity, expressed through active engagement with precisely those sights and smells that disgust ordinary people. Although such figures are revered, rather than despised, they are, again, structurally similar to the hinin groups who cleared away the abandoned bodies of the dead, being located "outside" the domain of ordinary life, not by outcaste status but by their own transcendent compassion.141

The responsibility of monks to care for their sick fellows is part of a long continental tradition of monastic nursing that, at least in its prescriptive expressions, can be traced back to Buddhist India.142 Were the monks of the Nijūgo zanmai-e the first to appropriate this tradition in Japan, recovering it from Chinese vinaya texts and reasserting it in the context of deathbed practice, over and against the pollution taboos of their day? Or does it have a prior history in Japan? To answer this question, we would need to know how Japanese Buddhist monks living in monasteries were cared for in their last illnesses and how their bodies were disposed of prior to the mid-tenth century. Unfortunately, available data are fragmentary and inconsistent; moreover, they are found in prescriptive literature and thus may serve as a better guide to normative standards than to actual practice. Haseo Fumiaki, one of very few to address this topic, has called attention to a court edict of 679 mandating that bedridden aged or terminally ill monks and nuns should be removed to a separate dwelling lest their presence pollute the "pure ground" of the monastery; in this separate dwelling, they are to be cared for, not by their fellow monastics, but by relatives or other trusted persons.143 Here, sickness and death are clearly seen as a pollution that monastics must avoid. Using this edict as a benchmark, Haseo argues that removal of the dying to a place apart in order to separate them from worldly distractions, as advocated in Genshin's Ōjō yōshū and practiced by the Nijūgo zanmai-e, in effect reversed the significance previously attached to places of caring for the terminally ill, transforming the site of death from a place of defilement into a sacred enclosure. This inversion, he suggests, took place over time, through the establishment under Buddhist auspices of hospitals by such figures as Empress Kōmyō or the monk Gyōki (668-749); the removal of the sick to such places gave rise, among those caring for them, to a positive apprehension of death as an especially valuable juncture for Buddhist practice, eventually culminating in the Yokawa deathbed rites, where the meaning assigned to the place where the dying were taken underwent complete reversal, from a site of defilement to one of detachment and transcendence.144

While Haseo is surely right in noting a diametric opposition between the 679 edict and the prescriptions of Ōjō yōshū or the Nijūgo zanmai-e documents, we need not assume a singular, linear development in attitudes toward the treatment of dying monks over the course of the intervening three hundred years. We are more probably dealing here with a plurality of perspectives. The 679 edict suggests an attempt on the part of the state to maintain ritual purity among the monks and nuns on whom it relied for rites of nation protection, while śutta and vinaya literature, cited in the late tenth century by both Genshin and the Nijūgo zanmai-e regulations in connection with deathbed rites, mandates that monks should care for their sick fellows. There is also the historical question of whether or not, or to what extent, the 679 edict was implemented. Other state regulations from the same period aimed at governing the conduct of monks and nuns seem to have sanctioned what they would not have done.145 Of greater relevance to Genshin and the Nijūgo zanmai-e than early state edicts are the internal regulations for the monks of Mt. Hiei. One set, compiled by immediate disciples of the Tendai founder Saichō (766/767-822), discusses the economic recompense owing to those who attend the sick (kanbyōshū), assist in their burial, and recite sūtras for them, thus suggesting the existence of such practices on Mt. Hiei very early in its history.146 While this again represents only fragmentary evidence from a prescriptive text, it seems possible that practices of Japanese monks nursing their dying companions and assisting with their funerals may well have preceded the formation of the Nijūgo zanmai-e. The Society's regulations about nursing the dying might then represent less a dramatic innovation than an elaboration of preexisting practices, drawing for support on Buddhist śutta and vinaya literature about care of the dying in light of a new interest in deathbed rites that accompanied the rise of aspirations for the Pure Land. The explicit injunctions in the Society's regulations against stunning defilement might then be understood as anticipating objections in light of heightened concerns about death pollution current in elite circles at the time.
Chapter Eight

However, even if the Nijūgo zamai-e did not initiate the hands-on care of their dying fellow monks, their activities may well have served to highlight and promote such practices. After the Society’s founding, we find increasing notices of structures set aside in temple complexes, across denominational lines, with names such as Enjuin (Life-extending hall), Nenandō (Nirvāṇa hall), or Mujōin, for the care of sick and dying monks, as well as references, especially from the latter Heian and Kamakura periods, of actual monk-physician practitioners (isō or sōzu) providing lay patrons with medical care.¹⁴⁷

**Feces as Negative Symbol**

As we have seen, monks in early medieval Japan involved in nursing could draw on a long-established monastic tradition valorizing care of the dying and removal of their bodily wastes as an expression of compassion. But in other sources of the same period, bodily wastes, especially feces, assume a deeply negative symbolic valence in death-related contexts, figuring prominently in representations of karmic retribution for sin. An example occurs in Ōjō yōshū, in the famous harrowing passage on the hells that forms the centerpiece of Genshin’s description of the samsaric realms that are to be rejected in favor of aspiration to the Pure Land. Genshin notes that the first of the eight major hells, in which evildoers are dismembered only to be revived again, has sixteen subsidiary hells, of which he describes only one:

> First is the place of excrement. There is a lake of burning hot excrement, whose taste is vile in the extreme. It is filled with maggots whose heads are as hard as metal. Sinners in this place eat the hot excrement, and the maggots all swarm around them and attack them at once, penetrating their skin and devouring their flesh, breaking their bones and sucking the marrow. Those who in the past [while living in the human realm] killed deer or birds fall into this realm.¹⁴⁸

Another reference to feces in Ōjō yōshū occurs in a quote from the Guanfo sanmeihai jing (Sūtra of contemplating the Buddha’s samādhi sea), which describes how hell wardens use visions of urine and excrement to lure dying evildoers into their clutches. At the time of death, the winds of dissolution will wrack the sinner’s body, and his mind will become disordered and produce delusions. “Observing [the interior] of his own house, the men and women [within it, and the objects,] large and small, [he sees that] everything is [now] impure. It is a place stinking of excrement and urine, which overflow and run outside.” When he wishes himself away from this repugnant scene, in a palace or pleasant grove, the guardians of the Avīci hell transform that hell into the appearance of jeweled trees and clear ponds, thus tricking him into entering their realm.¹⁴⁹ In a similar vein, one may also note a passage from the esoteric scripture Shōhu guojiezhu tuohoni jing (Sūtra of dhāraṇīs for protecting the nation and the ruler), cited in instructions for deathbed practice by Kakuban and others, which lists “urinating or defecating without awareness” as one of fifteen signs that the dying will fall into the hells.¹⁵⁰

Such passages are drawn from Buddhist canonical sources; they are not the product of Heian-period Japan. Nonetheless, they seem to have captured the imagination of at least some artists of the time. The scene of evildoers attacked by flesh-eating maggots in the lake of burning excrement is unforgettably rendered in a twelfth-century hell screen (jigoku zōshi) by an unknown artist, kept by the Nara National Museum. Scenes involving feces also occur in medieval depictions of the sufferings of hungry ghosts (Skt. preta, Jpn. gaki), beings condemned by their evil deeds to a state of perpetual starvation. In discussing these horrific images, William LaFleur has noted how hungry ghosts are depicted “most commonly in places where excrement and other bodily wastes will be found. Gaki...will invariably be present in latrines and cesspools.”¹⁵¹ One scene in a hand-scroll depicting gaki, now in the Tokyo National Museum, shows persons squatting to defecate by the roadside, oblivious to the invisible wretched beings that crouch beside them waiting to fall upon their excrement, so hungry that they will, quite literally, eat anything. Gaki were also thought to feed on corpses, and scenes in the same scroll depict them gnawing on human remains in channel grounds. One scene combines the two locales, depicting a public latrine (not “facilities” in any modern sense but simply grounds where commoners relieved themselves) on the edge of a channel ground, indicated by the presence of votive stūpas. On the basis of this hand-scroll scene, Shimura Taku has hypothesized that—if public latrines and channel grounds were indeed contiguous in actual space, and not merely in the artist’s imagination—along with teeming flies and maggots, the stench of death and excrement in such places would have been intermingled. Deathbed ritual instructions enjoining attendants of the sick to adorn the room with flowers and incense and to promptly clean up feces and urine were, he suggests, not merely a practical matter of nursing but rather helped the dying person focus on the Pure Land by removing substances that had come to be associated with the hells.¹⁵²

It is significant in this connection that, among the auspicious signs described in ōjōden indicating birth in the Pure Land, we find occasional mention of practitioners who have no bodily elimination at the time of death. The monk Jōshū (d. 1076) does not urinate or defecate for three days before his death.¹⁵³ The lay monk (nyūdō) Nakainumaru, monastic name Gansai, similarly neither urinates nor defecates on the day of his death.¹⁵⁴ This detail represents a degree of bodily purity far greater than the mere bathing and donning of clean clothes before death, widely attested in ōjōden biographies. It underscores the
extraordinary spiritual accomplishments of these particular deceased by noting the absence of those very bodily wastes that, in some especially ascetic modes of Pure Land devotion, had come to symbolize the repugnance of the samsaric realm.

Some ascetic practitioners may have taken deliberate steps to avoid bodily elimination at the time of death. *Keiran shitōshū*, a Buddhist compendium compiled by the Tendai monk Kōshū (1276-1350), says:

In meditation lineages (zenke), they do not eat or drink near the end. In explanation, it is said, "Invariably, people release the impurity of feces and urine at the time of death. Thus as death nears, one should avoid eating various things and should not needlessly drink water. One should exercise caution in this regard. Such is the prior example of those who follow the way."  

Here the issue may have been less one of avoiding ritual impurity than of exerting control over the death process. If involuntary urination and defecation at the end was associated with an ordinary death, leading to samsaric rebirth, then by avoiding this common physiological occurrence, one's transcendence of samsāra could be demonstrated. This is suggested by an incident said to have occurred in connection with the death of the Zen abbot Gessen Shinkai (d. 1308), eighth in the lineage of the famous teacher Enni (a.k.a. Bennyen, Shoichi Kokushi, 1202-80). According to his sectarian biography, Shinkai died a most admirable death: seated on the raised lecturer's platform before the assembly of monks, he wrote out his death poem and passed peacefully away. Somewhat more than a decade later, the narrative continues, the scholar-monk Kokan Shiren (1278-1346) was compiling his *Genkō shakusho*, Japan's first collection of monastic biographies. Having learned of Shinkai's exemplary death, Shiren approached Shinkai's disciple Ryōgu and inquired, "I've heard that when your teacher passed away, an unusual fragrance filled the room. Is that so? I would like to include him in the history of monks that I'm compiling. Please tell me the truth of the matter." While Ryōgu could not possibly have been ignorant of the auspicious significance of "unusual fragrance" at the time of death as an index to exceptional spiritual attainment, whether willfully or otherwise, he misunderstood Shiren and flew into a rage. "You dare to slander my late teacher! How can you say that after he died there was a smell of shit? Don't speak to me again of 'unusual fragrances'!" Thus Shinkai was not included in Shiren's biographical collection—most regretfully, the narrative adds, as the *Genkō shakusho* soon became a celebrated work.  

Whatever the reasons for Ryōgu's extraordinary reaction, this account suggests that at least in some instances the smell of excrement at a deathbed may have carried negative soteriological connotations—especially, perhaps, in the death of a prominent abbot. What the Buddha himself "does not find abhorrent" was unthinkable for the Zen monk Ryōgu in connection with his teacher. A good death, after all, was not only the cause for birth in a superior realm but a proof of one's escape from samsaric suffering. If one could not control his own bodily eliminations at the end, then perhaps his mastery of birth and death was also open to question.

As we have noted, vomit, urine, and feces were not considered polluting in the technical sense of requiring a period of avoidance, but they were nonetheless "impure" and thus to be avoided in ritual settings. This produced an ambivalence in the context of deified practice, a rite of utmost solemnity and yet one where such impurities were virtually inevitable. Hence the recurrence of a double theme in which the significance of bodily wastes, feces in particular, is relationally determined: the nursing monk proves his spiritual attainments by his willingness to clean up excrement, while the dying monk proves his by not producing it. In either case, such extraordinary attainments set their possessor apart from ordinary persons. Here we see a structural similarity to the concept of pollution itself, wherein those able to mediate or neutralize it do so by virtue of their liminal status "outside" ordinary society, whether as renunciate ascetics or as hinin.

**Venerating the Corpse: Some Unanswered Questions**

Let us return now to the subject of death pollution, and to some still unanswered questions regarding its connection to ritualized deathbed practice and to the ethos of aspiration to the Pure Land, by addressing a final topic: the practice, frequently attested in *ōjōden*, of paying reverence to the bodies of recently deceased persons believed to have achieved *ōjō*. This act of veneration was thought to establish a favorable karmic connection (kechien) that would assist one's own future attainment of birth in the Pure Land. The monk Man'a, encountered earlier in this essay, who inadvertently transmitted death pollution to the servant Kunihide—and via Kunihide, to the Ise shrine—had been engaged in precisely this activity. In a society where contact with the dead was often deemed polluting, voluntarily going to visit the newly deceased seems altogether counter-intuitive. Was the merit of forming ties with an *ōjōnin* thought to outweigh the dangers and inconvenience of incurring defilement? Did those engaged in this practice feel a need to explain or justify it, to themselves or to others? Was there a mechanism for transcending death pollution in such cases? Or was death pollution simply not an issue for those involved?

We have seen how, in the Ise shrine episode, the monk Man'a did not think it necessary to mention his recent contact with the dead to the shrine servant Kunihide because he had been told that "the death of an *ōjōnin* is not
polluting.” We have also noted Chijiiwa Itaru’s use of this episode in support of his thesis that, on the ground, ordinary death and ōjō were understood as two different things. Ōjō, he argues, was distinguished by the presence of extraordinary signs: purple clouds or radiance in the sky, mysterious fragrance, or music heard in the air; such signs, Chijiiwa says, signaled not only the individual’s attainment of Pure Land birth (and thus, the merit to be gained from venerating that person’s remains) but also the fact that this was not “death” in any ordinary sense and therefore, not polluting.  

Chijiiwa’s thesis finds support in the fact that, in ōjōden, the narrative element of people gathering to pay respect to the corpse of an ōjōnin almost always occurs in cases where—among the possible signs indicative of the deceased having reached the Pure Land—unusual preservation of the body has occurred. For example, the monk Nensai (d. 1131) dies sitting up straight, facing west, and holding an incense burner. For three days after his death, the body remains in this position, and fragrance fills the room; clerics and laypeople of the southern capital (Nara) throng to see this. For ten, even twelve days after his death, people come to view a deceased monk of the temple Komatsudera in Hizen province, whose body, seated upright with its hands still forming a mudrā, looks so unchanged as to arouse the suspicion that he may not be dead at all but merely deep in meditation. The ascetic Yuhan’s body still remains fresh thirty-five days after his death; during that time, the monks assembled at his door to form kechien are like crowds at a marketplace. Such cases also sometimes occur in historical documents: the monk Rinzen (1074-1150), a former superintendent of Kongōbūji on Mt. Kōya, is said to have died seated in the posture of meditation; Rinzen’s corpse was in fact ensnared as a “whole-body relic” (zenshin shari), attracting the devotion of pilgrims. Of course, a prurient curiosity, as well as the desire to form meritorious karmic ties, may well have prompted some such visits. But whatever their motivation, if we go by Chijiiwa’s argument, failure of the body to decay would have marked it as a special case and thus outside ordinary pollution concerns.

The presence of sweet fragrance at a deathbed and an absence of decomposition have, in their absolute contradiction of ordinary physiological processes, been widely understood as indices to transcendent spiritual attainment on the part of the deceased. This phenomenon is by no means confined to medieval Japan or even to Buddhism; the “odor of sanctity” emanating from the holy dead is also well attested, for example, in European Christian hagiography. In a Buddhist context, such refusals of the body to conform to ordinary processes of decay signal that the deceased has escaped the cycle of deluded rebirth; what has happened to that person is not “death”—the mark of deluded existence—but liberation. If Chijiiwa is correct, then a lack of decay would have had a double significance, demonstrating an escape from samsāra in a traditional Buddhist reading and, in a specifically premodern Japanese context, an absence of death defilement.

Nonetheless, some questions remain. First we must ask why the explicit claim reported in the Ise document, that ōjōnin do not produce death defilement, occurs so seldom in premodern Japanese sources. In ōjōden, our chief source for the practice of visiting the deceased to form kechien, one finds almost no indication of awareness that such acts might be deemed polluting or draw criticism on that account. One striking exception concerns the shrine priest Kaya no Sadama’s visit to the new grave of his friend, Fujii Hisatō, who has offered his body in an act of auto-cremation out of his deep aspiration for the Pure Land. “Because I have been charged with overseeing kami affairs,” Sadama says with tears streaming down his face, “I have completely shunned the defilements of human beings. But so great are my feelings of longing for him that I have no scruples about displeasing the kami.” But Sadama is clearly a special case. Precisely because he is a shrine priest (kannushi), the narrative seems to call for some mention of the fact that he is violating a prohibition—one ordinarily observed with great strictness in kami worship—by visiting his friend’s death site. Most ōjōden accounts make no mention whatsoever of pollution concerns in their descriptions of persons visiting the bodies of ōjōnin. This would suggest either that notions about the death of an ōjōnin not producing death defilement were so well established as to need no comment, or alternatively, that those engaged in this practice were simply not concerned about pollution.

Katsuda Itaru has noted that anxieties about death pollution in Heian Japan coexisted, often quite comfortably, with curiosity and eagerness to gawk at the bodies of those who dropped dead suddenly in public places or at victims of personal revenge killings whose bodies had been abandoned by the roadside. In many contexts, barring actual physical contact with a corpse, death defilement was thought to be transmitted only within a walled or otherwise bounded space or by sitting together with someone who had already incurred such pollution. Such restrictions by no means precluded all viewings of dead bodies. In an episode from Konjaku monogatari, the courtier Fujiwara no Sadataka keels over suddenly in the midst of a palace banquet. Those nobles sitting with him hastily rise and flee, presumably hoping that Sadataka may not actually have died yet and that they may thereby escape defilement. Yet even as the body is about to be removed, a crowd of lesser palace officials eagerly gathers by the exit in hopes of watching. The monk Man’ā mentioned in the Ise shrine document is said specifically to have sat down in a dead person’s house, but it is not clear whether others seeking to form favorable karmic ties with deceased ōjōnin by venerating their remains actually entered an enclosed space where the corpse was present or simply stood gazing at it from outside a
door or entryway. If the latter, those venerating the newly dead may not necessarily have been seen as incurring defilement or engaging in a socially questionable act.

Yet another problem arises from the fact that our primary source for this practice, ōjōden, are hagiographies, in which the detail of crowds gathering to view the body—along with mysterious fragrance, favorable dreams, and music heard in the air—often serves as a narrative device emphasizing the auspicious nature of an individual ōjōnin’s passing. In one account, a monk named Kakushō even predicts: “After my death, on the day I am cremated, pure monks will spontaneously gather. By that, you may know that I have been born into the Land of Bliss.” And indeed, after he dies, though the fire in the incense burner has gone out, fragrance fills the room, and more than seventy monks assemble to reverence him. This is not to suggest that the practice of gathering to venerate those dead deemed to have achieved a liberating death was wholly fictional, as it does appear occasionally in historical documents. Azuma kagami, for example, reports concerning the death of Hōjō Tokiyori (d. 1263), the fifth Kamakura shogunal regent: “He formed a mudrā and recited a verse, manifesting the auspicious signs of having realized buddhahood with this very body... Clerics and laity, high and low, thronged to venerate him.” In this case, Tokiyori’s fame as a national leader, as well as his reputed spiritual attainments, may have drawn spectators. The monk Man’n’s mention in the ise account appears to have been venerating a deceased practitioner of considerably lower status, suggesting some distribution of this practice across the social scale. Nonetheless, it is hard to generalize from isolated accounts, and we are left wondering about the extent to which venerating the corpse went beyond a narrative element in Buddhist hagiography and was actually carried out in practice. Parenthetically, we may note that it raises other questions, not directly related to death pollution, such as why—when the bodies of both male and female ōjōnin are described as emitting fragrance and refusing to decay—only male bodies appear to have been the object of such veneration, and how this practice coincided with an aversion, noted by Katsuda in aristocratic circles, to the idea of one’s dead body becoming a spectacle for others.

In any discussion of pollution in early medieval Japan, we must bear in mind the limitations of our sources, which were produced primarily by elites. How far and under what circumstances the avoidance observed by court nobles permeated other social groups is not yet well understood. We must take care not to read an active challenge to, or transcendence of, pollution taboos into situations where they may simply not have operated in the first place.

Summation

We began with two starkly opposed understandings of “the dying breath,” as the moment of potential liberation from samsaric suffering, and as marking the onset of death defilement. We also asked how, during Japan’s early medieval period, the popularity in monastic and elite circles of deathbed rites for achieving birth in the Pure Land coexisted with practices of defilement avoidance and fears of death pollution. This seeming paradox, we noted, implies the coexistence of two opposing stances, one mandating death pollution avoidance and the other in some way minimizing, rejecting, or transcending them. On examination, however, both positions reveal a complex range of overlapping concerns that are not always easily disentangled.

Formal avoidance of death pollution had their origins in court-sponsored ōjō ritual and were aimed at avoiding the anger of the kami and protecting imperial rule. The realm where these avoidance most mattered was on the court; the court nobility, especially those holding government posts; and officially sponsored kami shrines. To the extent that Buddhist monks and temples were active in this ritual world—for example, by participating in court ceremonies such as the Ninnō, other rites of nation protection, or kami worship—they were bound by its rules of pollution avoidance. In time, the taboos and requirements of ritual purity demanded by official ōjō rites, including the thirty-day exorcistic period following contact with human death, were adopted by major Buddhist temples and in some cases by lesser, provincial ones as well. At the same time, however, Buddhist elements were themselves formally tabooed in conjunction with imperial ōjō worship, reinforcing associations between Buddhism and death that both were banned from the same ritual sphere. These associations helped to reinforce more widespread, informal taboos on Buddhist practices—especially those such as the nenbutsu, which was closely associated with death on kami festival days and in contexts centered on celebration, fecundity, and this-worldly prosperity. Where aspirations for ōjō encouraged an infiltration of postmortem concerns into the present life, such informal taboos sought to maintain their separation.

But the sphere in which death defilement was tabooed represented only one social, ritual, and cognitive realm, one that interacted with other, sometimes overlapping frames of reference in which pollution concerns were relativized, transcended, or simply never an issue to begin with. The Konjaku tale of Atsuuki, who knocked down his wall so that his neighbor’s corpse could be removed, shows that it was possible, even if infrequent (or only in the author’s imagination), to dismiss pollution concerns without Buddhist ideological support. Most sources relativizing pollution avoidance, however, draw on Buddhist discourses, for example, by recasting such avoidance as metaphors or
“skillful means.” We see this in didactic tales that subsume kami worship within Buddhist ethical or soteriological frameworks, showing the kami as accepting, even praising, the breach of death pollution taboos when compassion requires it, or in the self-definition of the “single-practice” nenbutsu movements of Hōen and Shinran, which depict the kami solely as supporters of the exclusive nenbutsu and thus not requiring special purifications in connection their shrines. How far the abridging of shrine-related taboos legitimized by such rhetoric was carried out in actual practice remains an open question. Another Buddhist discourse invoked to relativize or dismiss pollution concerns was that of “shunning this defiled realm and aspiring to the Pure Land,” in which the distinction between purity and impurity as it pertains to kami worship or other ceremonial behavior is relegated to the “defiled world,” which is to be rejected in favor of aspirations for ōtō. In Buddhist narrative literature, such as settsuwa and ōjōden, this perspective is typically attributed to those individuals, often reclusive monastics but including some lay persons, who have abandoned worldly aspirations, including those of the career monk holding temple appointments or seeking clerical advancement, and desire only the Pure Land.

While career scholar monks or highly placed prelates might attend deathbeds in the capacity of zenchishiki or perform funerary rites for relatives or important patrons, it appears that the monks who specialized in providing such services for lay patrons were often those such as zenshō or bessho hifuri, practicing outside the formal structure of temple offices. What is less clear is whether such figures understood themselves as ideologically committed to rejecting death pollution avoidances in the name of “shunning this defiled world and aspiring to the Pure Land,” or whether they were free to ignore them simply because their activities took place outside the ritual spheres of the court, kami shrines, and major Buddhist temple halls where such avoidances obtained. We should perhaps be careful of reading a deliberate defiance of pollution concerns into situations where such concerns may simply not have mattered. In either case, however, it may well have been the position of such monks outside the official world of government bureaus, court ceremony, shrines, and temples— and thus “liminal” from that world’s perspective—that enabled them to specialize in death-related practices.

The regulations of the Nijūgo zanmai-e, among the earliest sources for deathbed practice in Japan, explicitly mandate that its members must “not shun smells, pollution, or impurity” in attending one another at the end. This stipulation may reflect the fact that the Nijūgo zanmai-e was deliberately reappropriating a very old vinaya tradition surrounding the nursing of sick monks within the monastery, attributed to the historical Buddha himself, and reasserting it in the specific context of deathbed practice aimed at achieving birth in the Pure Land. According to this tradition, the feces, urine, and vomit of the ill and dying symbolize the impurity and defilement of the entire samsaric condition, and the nursing monk demonstrates his compassion and equanimity by caring for the sick without repugnance. This vinaya tradition is paralleled by themes in medieval Japanese hagiography of Buddhist holy figures who display their superior compassion by nursing persons with especially repulsive bodily afflictions and of adepts who demonstrate their spiritual attainments by not producing bodily elimination at the time of death. While bodily wastes were technically considered impurity (fūjō) rather than “pollution” (kegare), a similar logic applied in both cases: it is persons who are in some sense outside the ordinary world—whether the “world” of delusion or the “world” represented by official court life—who are able to transcend them.

When deathbed rites for achieving birth in the Pure Land moved outside the monastery and monks began to attend the deathbed of aristocratic lay patrons, the logics of death as the moment of potential liberation, and death as polluting and dangerous, came into sharp juxtaposition. From a normative Buddhist standpoint, the removal of the dying to a place apart was to separate them from worldly attachments and encourage their last reflections, enacting the spirit of world renunciation at the heart of Buddhist soteriology. At the same time, however, it served to protect their living associates from the dangers of defilement attendant on their illness and death and was continuous with other social practices of relocating the dying for precisely such reasons. Thus the mujōin was both a ritual site and a pollution container. Though rhetorically oppositional, these two meanings attached to the death site in fact became socially interdependent. The strict pollution avoidances mandated in respect to death in elite circles could be maintained precisely because of those monks, such as hifuri and zenshō practicing outside formal temple organizations, whose lack of involvement in official rituals enabled them to specialize in rites for the dead and dying. Such activities in turn provided these monks with a new ritual role and source of economic support and helped lay the foundations, in later centuries, for the monopolizing by the Buddhist clergy of funeral and other death rites at all social levels. As seen especially in the case of noted adepts summoned to attend the deathbed of ranking nobles, who performed exorcisms to quiet the vengeful dead, or who conducted rites for the masses of dead in times of famine, the perceived powers that such monks had acquired through ascetic practice, along with their liminal status “outside” both secular and career monastic worlds, were thought to enable them to mediate and manage the dangers of death pollution. Buddhist monastic engagement in the death rites of lay patrons, far from entailing a denial or transcendence of pollution, required its continued existence as a foil against which to demonstrate their thaumaturgical power, a drama continually reenacted in Buddhist deathbed and funerary rites.
List of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Characters

Agui hiiri 安居院聖
ajari 阿雑梨
Amida 阿弥陀
Amida-mine 阿弥陀峰
Anshi 安子
Ashō-bō (see Inzei)
Atsuta shrine 熱田神宮
Asuma kagami 吾妻鏡
Bennen (see Enni)
bessho 別所
besho hiiri 別所聖
bodaisho 菩提所
Bunpōki 文保記
Butsugon 仏厳
Byōdōin 平等院
byōsha hinin 病者非人
Chiijwa Itaru 千々和到
Chinzei 禅寺
Chōrakuji 長楽寺
Chōshakai 長秋記
chūgū 中宮
Chūren-bō 中連房
Chūōki 中右記
Daidenhōn 大伝法院
Daigokuden 大極殿
Daijōsai 大聖寺
Daode jing 道德經
Daoshi 道世
Daoxuan 道宣
Derivaku 像顕
Dokyō 道鏡
dōsō 堂僧
edo 職土
Eiga monogatari 栄華物語
Eijitsu 歌集
Eison 敬尊
Eison(Wajō nenpu) 敬尊和尚年譜
Engi shiki 廻喜式
Enjuin 廻壽院
Emmyōji 円明寺
Enni (Bennen) 円爾(弁円)
enmichi 線日
Enryakuji 廻鶴寺
Enryakuji kinsei shiki nijunio 廻鶴寺
禁制式ニジニジョ
Fanwong jing 梵網経
Fayuan zhulin 法苑珠林
Fujii Hisato 藤井久任
Fujiiwa no Akimitsu 藤原親光
Fujiiwa no Chikasuke 藤原親輔
Fujiiwa no Fumitoshī 藤原文利
Fujiiwa no Koremasa 藤原吉昌
Fujiiwa no Michinaga 藤原道長
Fujiiwa no Munetada 藤原宗昌
Fujiiwa no Nagakyo 藤原永清
Fujiiwa no Sadakata 藤原貞高
Fujiiwa no Sanesuke 藤原宗重
Fujiiwa no Seishi 藤原親子
Fujiiwa no Tadamichi 藤原宗信
Fujiiwa no Tekka 藤原定家
Fujiiwa no Tzucane 藤原親寛
Fujiiwa no Torimichi 藤原順通
Fujiiwa no Torinaga 藤原順長
Fujiiwa no Yoshihiko 藤原光通
Fujiiwa no Yukinari 藤原行成
Fujiiwa Yoshiaki 藤原義昌
fuji 不浄
fujikan 不浄観
Funaoaka 船問
Funaoaka Makoto 船問誠
gaki 魚鬼
gakuryo 学儒
gakutsu 学頭
Gassui gosho 月水御書
Gansai 順西
Genkō shakusho 元亨家書
Genshin 源信
Gessen (see Shinkai)
gogoro 御願寺
Go-Ichijō 後一条
Gokuraku 極楽
Gon 控記
gosetsha 後世者
Go-shirakawa 後白河
Goshū-ōden 後白河生天
Guanfō sanmeihai jing 龍仏三昧海
Gyōgi (Paekche prince) 廻岐
Gyōken 行賢
Gyōki 行基
Gyokyo 玉葉
Hachijō-princess 八条院の院宮
Hachijō-kawara 八条河原
Hachimman 八幡
Hachiman gudōkun 八幡愚童記
hakadera 廻寺
Hankyū 廻久
Hasedera 長谷寺
Hasace Pumaki 長谷雄文彰
Hei 丙
Heian-kyō 平安京
hiden’in 悼田院
Hei shrine 日吉社、日吉神社
Hiei, Mt. 比叡山
Higahishima 東山
Hijiri 圓山
hinin 非人
hōhen 方便
Hōjōji 法成寺
Hōjō Tokiyori 北条時頼
Hokka genki 法華験記
Hokke senbō 法華懐法
Honen 法然
hongaku hōmon 本覚法門
honji sutaka 本地垂跡
Honjō-bō (see Tankyō)
Horikawa 堂川
Hoshōji 槃勝寺
Hosshōshū 発心集
Hyōhanki 兵範記
Ichigo tairyō himitsu shū 一期大要秘
Idaka 飯高
Ikemichō 池見満隆
ini 忍
Ingen 院範
Inzei (Ashō-bō) 印西(阿証房)
Ippen 一遍
Ippen hiiri-e 一遍聖絵
Ippyaku shijū gokai mōndō 一百四
十五箇条問答
Ise shrine 伊勢神宮
Ishiyama-ōō 石山僧都
isō 医僧
Izanagi 伊邪那岐
Izanami 伊邪那美
jigoku saishū 地獄草紙
jikyuisha 持験者
jing 神祇
jing futai 神祇不祭
jing saishū 神祇配祀
jingū 神宮
jinrin 神人
jishō 寺社
jūdo 清土
Jodo Shinsha 清土真宗
Jōgan shiki 賢鏡式
Jōkan-bō 常観房
Jōmyōji 浄妙寺
Josō 定秀
Kakubun 规縄
Kakujō 规兼
Kakushō 规勝
kami 神
The Dying Breath: Deathbed Rites and Death Pollution in Early Medieval Japan

nenbotsu zanmai 念仏三昧
Nensai 念仏
Nihon 本邦
Nihon yokoku rakukai 日本往生極楽記
Ryuji sanai haku 頼波書
Ryuji sanai haku 頼波書
Ryösho (Nen'）良種（念阿)
Ryögen 良源
Ryögu 龍谷
Ryugyö Hoin 龍曉法印
Saichö 武尊
Sanbõin Nyôki 産宝院院記
Sangyo jôden 三外在宗
Sannô 山王
Senjûhô 遠集抄
Senkaku 宣築
Sesshô kindan 殺生禁斷
Setsuwa 解説
seyakun 施薬院
Shakunyô 茹妙
Shasekishû 沙石集
Shasô 社僧
Shie 死衡
Shiô hyaku sentza 私寰百字集
Shimotsuke no Atsuyuki 下毛野敷行
Shimotsuchimichi Shigetake 下道重武
Shinsû (or Shin) 真宗
shinshitsu kôkai 神仏隔離
Shinkai (Gessen) 珊海 (月船)
Shinhura Taku 新村拓
Shinrôn 聖聴
Shinshô (see Eison)
Shirakawa 白河
Shirakawa gocho 白河御所
Shôichi Kokushi 宋一國師
shôji (yôji) 承仕
shôjin 精進
shokue 触霊
shokue bansho 触霊番書
shôrin 上人
Shôren-bô 悟蓮房
Shôshin honkai shû 諸神本極集
Shûtoku, Empress 称徳天皇
Shûshu guji jujû tuoluon jing 守護
國界主陀羅尼経
Chapter Eight

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Dai Nihon kokiroku (DNK). Edited by Tokyo Daigaku Shiryō Hensanjo. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1952-.
Dai Nihon shiryō. Edited by Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku Bungakubu Shiryō Hensangakari. Tokyo: Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku, 1901-.


**Secondary Sources**


The Dying Breath: Deathbed Rites and Death Pollution in Early Medieval Japan


Notes

Unless otherwise noted, all Japanese sources were published in Tokyo.


4. Kim, for example, uses this distinction to frame her discussion. See “A History of Filth,” 1-2, for definitions of these terms. The word shokusei itself occurs in Heian sources.


6. This assumption has not been limited to modern scholarship. In 1027, the courtier Fujiwara no Sanesuke recorded in his diary a remark by the Chancellor, Fujiwara no Yorimichī, that “in India people do not shun pollution,” to which he, Sanesuke, had replied that “pollution is a concern in Japan; in China they do not shun it” (Dai Nihon kokiroku [hereafter DNK], ed. Tōkyō Daigaku Shirōgyō Hensanjo [Iwanami Shoten, 1952-], Manji 4, 8/25, Shōyūki 8/22).


8. Ōkada Shigekiyo, Kodai no imi: Nihonjin no kosō shinkō (Kokusho Kankōkai, 1982), 409-16 (the shift in meaning of shōjin appears on 414), and Taira Masayuki, “Sesshō kindan no rekishi teki tenkai,” in Nihon shakai no shiteki kōdo: Kodai chüsei, ed. Ōyama Kyōhei (Kyōto Taikan Kinenkai, 149-71 (Kyōto: Shibunkaku Shuppan, 1997).

The Dying Breath: Deathbed Rites and Death Pollution in Early Medieval Japan


19. Eikyū 4, 3/15, DNK, Denryaku 4:234. This was not a rare occurrence: the bodies of commoners, often disposed of simply by placing in an open field, were sometimes gnawed by dogs who would then drag body parts onto the property of noble residences. See Katsuda Itaru, Shishikatchi no chūsei (Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 2003), especially 1-20 for discussion, and 252-64 for a list of diary entries concerning such incidents.


23. Chōyūki, Chōshō 1, 2/17, 19, 20 (ST 14:285-86); also see the discussion in Nishiguchi, Onna no chikara, 28.


26. See Teeven and Rambelli, eds. Buddhas and Kami in Japan, 22-23; Okada Shigekiyo, Kodai no imi, 417-29; and Nishiguchi, Onna no chikara, 29-34.

27. On Ise’s linguistic taboos, see for example Kōtai jingū gishiki chō, GR, no. 1, 1:3b, and also Bock, Engi-shiki, 152-53. Lady Nijo records that, on a pilgrimage to Ise in 1291, having taken Buddhist vows and being dressed in her nun’s habit, she was permitted to enter the outer shrine precincts through the second torii, only as far as the garden, and at the inner shrine, she had to worship at a distance, from the upper bank of the Minosu River (Towazugatari; trans. Karen Brazell, The Confessions of Lady Nyōjō [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973], 211, 214).


30. Okada Shigekiyo has argued that the tabooing of Buddhism, along with death pollution and other forms of defilement, was one means by which the imperial cult was deliberately constructed as a “native” ritual system legitimizing imperial rule, in contrast to Buddhism, a religion of foreign origins (Kodai no imi, 427-29). Takatori Masao has suggested that taboos against Buddhist monastic involvement in court politics, which had culminated in the monk Dōkyō’s
unprecedented rise to power during the reign of Empress Shōtoku (r. 764-70) (see Shintō no seisirisu, esp. chaps. 2 and 3). Bernhard Scheid suggests that a “division of labor” in court ritual activity and a deliberate attempt to stigmatize Buddhism by associating it with death may both have played a role in the banning of Buddhist elements from courtly kami rites. See his “Overcoming Taboos on Death: The Limited Possibilities of Discourse on the Afterlife in Shinto,” in Practicing the Afterlife: Perspectives from Japan, ed. Susanne Formanek and William R. LaFleur, 205-30 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2004), 207-9.

31. Takatori, Shintō no seisirisu, 248-49.

32. On Buddhism’s increasing domination of death rites among the Heian aristocracy, see Mitsuhisa Tadashi, Hetan fidat no shinkō to shūkyō girei (Zoku Gunso Ruijū Kansetsukai, 2000), 597-668.


34. Zoku hongō ōjōden 37, ZNBS 1:250-51.


39. Takatori, Shintō no seisirisu, 18-23. In a similar vein, see also Taira, Nihon chūsei no shakai to bukkyō, 65-67.

40. Jingūjī were Buddhist temples built near shrine precincts for the explicit purpose of domesticate the kami enshrined there and leading them to Buddhist enlightenment. Miyadera were temples administered by Buddhist “shrine monks” (shasō), often assisted by subordinate kami priests; at such temples, the main object of worship was a kami. Jisha incorporated kami shrines into Buddhist temple complexes, the kami being seen as protectors of the Dharma and the monastery. Individual variations on these types were numerous. See for example Teeuwen and Rambelli, eds., Buddhism and Kami in Japan, 9-15, 26-28, and Allan G. Grapard, “Religious Practices,” in The Cambridge History of Japan, vol. 2: Heian Japan, ed. Donald H. Shively and William McCullough, 517-75 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 520-31.

41. See in particular Teeuwen and Rambelli, eds., Buddhism and Kami in Japan, 15-21.

42. This phrase appears in Deode jing 4, where it refers to the Way. Heian Japanese may also have derived the term from Mohashiguen 6, T no. 1911, 46:80416.


44. Shasekiša I:4, NKBT 85:67-68; Morrell, Sand and Pebbles, 81-82.


47. Ippen hōjiri e 6, Ippen Shōnin zenshū, ed. Tachibana Shūndō and Ōmata Shigeki (Shinjūsha, 1989), 49-50. Ohashi Shunno has suggested that these deaths were not considered polluting because the kami of the Mishima shrine was the clan deity of the Kawano family, to which Ippen belonged (Ippen: Sono kodō to shisō [Hyōronsha, 1971], 108-09). Chijiwa Itaru in turn argues that this is unconvinced (“Shigusa to sahō: Shi to ōjō o meguite,” in Nihon no shakai shi 8: Seikatsu kankaku to shakai, ed. Asao Naohiro et al., 139-68 [Iwanami Shoten, 1987], 143).

48. Shunmura Taku, for example, suggests that these stories may explain why physicians were able to violate pollution taboos and other avoidances in treating illness without coming to be regarded as defiled themselves (Shi to byō to kongo no shakai [Hōsei Daigaku Shuppan, 1989], 53-55).

49. Dying on the fifteenth day of the month was considered an indication of ōjō, as the fifteenth was Amida Buddha’s enniichi, a day of the month held to be especially auspicious for forming a karmic connection with a particular buddha or bodhisattva.


55. Koyama Satoko argues that many medieval Japanese thought that pollution would obstruct their ōjō (“Mappō no yori ni okeru kegaro to sono kōkufu: Dōki shōsō no seisirisu,” in Chūsei bukyō no tenkai to sono kibun, ed. Imai Masaharu, 256-80 [Daizō Shuppan, 2002], esp. 263-69).


57. Ikemi Chōryū, Chūsei no seisin seikatsu: Shi to kōkai (Kyoto: Jinkun Shoin, 1985), 39-43.


59. Kumano kyōōsha, cited in Ikemi, Chūsei no seisin seikatsu, 41-42.

60. Ikemi, Chūsei no seisin seikatsu, 41-42.

61. GR no. 484, 27:313b.

62. Ippaku shiō gokaijō mondō, no. 36, HSZ, 654. See also no. 15 (650).
Chapter Eight

63. This comment occurs in a distinctively Ritsu version of the story, discussed above, of a monk who incurs death pollution en route to a shrine. While journeying on pilgrimage to the Ise shrine, the Ritsu monk Kakujō stops to perform a funeral for a traveler who has died on the road, because “not refusing [such requests] is a constant of the Way.” In this version of the story, Kakujō does not even consider abandoning his pilgrimage. When he reaches the vicinity of the shrine precincts, he is reproached by an old man (presumably, a divine manifestation) and responds by saying, “In [the case of one who upholds] the pure precepts, there is no defilement” (seijōkai ni oen nashi). A white-robed boy then mysteriously appears and announces that henceforth, any monks arriving from Enmyōji, Kakujō’s temple, shall be deemed free of pollution (Sanbōin kyāk, Dai Nihon shiryo, ed. Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku Bungakubu Shiryō Hensangakari [Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku, 1901-], part 6, no. 24, 868). See also the discussion of this episode in Matsuo Kenji, Chūsei no toshi to hinin (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1998), 122-24. Matsuo argues that Ritsu monks considered their precept observance a “barrier” that protected them from defilement.

64. Knocking down a portion of a wall in order to remove a body from the household was not uncommon among Heian aristocrats; the idea was that the dead should not make their final departure through a gateway used in ordinary life. This seems to have been part of their final funerary customs aimed at marking the off the treatment of the dead from that of the living and ensuring that the dead person’s spirit would not return. The problem here was that Atsuyuki had this done when the dead person was not a member of his family, thereby polluting his household. See Katsuda, Shihsatachi no chūsei, 91-93.


67. On the Nijūgo zama-nai-e, see for example Richard Bowring, “Preparing for the Pure Land in Late Tenth-Century Japan,” Japanese Religious Studies 253-4 (1998): 221-57; Robert F. Rhodes, “Seeking the Pure Land in Heian Japan: The Practices of the Monks of the Nijūgo Zama-nai-e,” The Eastern Buddhist (n.s.) 33/1 (2000): 56-79; and Sarah Johanna Horton, “The Role of Genshin and Religious Associations in the Middle-Heian Spread of Pure Land Buddhism (Japan),” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2001). 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” (nijūgo zama-nai), contemplations aimed at escaping the twenty-five realms of samsaric existence.

68. Genshin quotes the Sifenli shanfan byue xingshi chao, a commentary on the Dharmacuptaka vinaya by Daoxuan (596-667) (T no. 1804, 40:144a12-21), while the Kishō hachikajō, the first set of regulations for the Nijūgo zama-nai-e, draws on the scriptural anthology Fuyuan zhulin by Daoxuan’s close associate Daoshi (T. 2122, 53:987a9-16). The accounts of deathbed practices at Jetavana in the two Chinese works are very close; Daoxuan refers to his source as a “Chinese tradition” (Zhongguo benzhuo), while Daoshi terms his a “Diagram of the Jetavana monastery in the western region” (Xiyou Zhuhuan tu). See Koichi Shinohara, “The Moment of Death in Daoxuan’s Vinaya Commentary,” in The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations, ed. Bryan J. Cuevas and Jacqueline I. Stone, 105-33 (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 130n6.

69. A critical edition of the Nijūgo zama-nai-e regulations, the 986 Kishō hachikajō attributed to Yoshishige no Yasutane and the 988 Yokawa Shuryōgon’i Nijūgo zama-nai kishō attributed to Genshin, have been published in Koyama Shōjun, “Tōdaijī Chūshinō shojo ’Yokawa Shuryōgon’in Nijūgo zama-nai Eshin Yasutane rinji yōgi’ no saikentō: Sōshobon no goshōku ni yoru mondaien,” Bukkyōgaku kenkyū 53 (1997): 56-95. See Kishō hachikajō, article 5, 90, for the quoted passage.

70. Kishō hachikajō, article 8, article 7, in Koyama, “Tōdaijī Chūshinō shojo ’Yokawa Shuryōgon’in Nijūgo zama-nai Eshin Yasutane rinji yōgi’ no saikentō,” 93, 91.

71. For example, on Mt. Kōya, see Matsunaga Yuken, “Kōyasan no Nijūgo zama shiki ni tsuite,” Mikkyō kenkyū 3 (1928): 9-29, and for more general instances, Tamamuro Taijō, Sōshiki bukkō (Daihōrinkaku, 1963), 116. From the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, such groups became increasingly oriented to the performance of funerary rites and served lay patrons as well as monks. See also n. 74 below.


73. Chūshin, Gen’ei 2, 12/4, St. 16:184; Chiyakō, Hōan 1, 9/19, St. 12:253. A list of individuals mentioned in Heian- and Kamakura-period sources who are said to have died holding the three-colored cords appears in Tsuji Zennosuke, Nihon bukkōyōshi, 10 vols. (Iwanami Shoten, 1944-55), 1:631-35.

74. Katsuda, Chūsei no shihsatachi, 178-86. Katsuda suggests that such groups may have been precursors to the village organizations that conducted funerals as a communal affair in Japan’s early modern period.


76. Quoted in Daoxuan’s Vinaya commentary at T. 40:144a16-14 and cited in Ōjō yōshū, NST 6:206. See also n. 68 above. Trans. from Dobbins, “Genshin’s Deathbed Nembutsu Ritual,” slightly modified.

77. Ichigo taiyō himitsu shū, KDZ 2: 1199, 1200.

78. “Shigusa to sahite,” 157-61.

79. Katsuda notes that, from around the eleventh century, the bodies of the aristocratic dead were sometimes placed temporarily in structures called tamadono or tamaya in the hills outside the capital, occasionally within temple precincts, for later cremation or interment (Shihsatachi no chūsei, 131-35).


Nihon shoki 24, second year in the reign of Kōgyoku (643), 9/17, NKB 68, ed. Sakamoto Tarō et al. (Iwanami Shoten 1965), 248, 249.


Takatori, Shintō no seirisu, 243-48.

On Heian funerary, burial, and cremation practices, see Tanaka Hisao, “Heian jidai no kikou ni no seisei: Toku ni jūjisseki o chūshin to shite” (1967), repr. in his Sosen seisin no kenkyū (Kōbunbō, 1978), 3-26; Suitō Makoto, Chūsei no sōse, bōsete: Sekidō o sōrei suru koto (Yoshikawa Kōbun, 1991), esp. 1-55; Shimatani Takamori, Nihonjin no sōgi (Kiinokuniya Shoten, 1992), 167-87; and Katsuda, Shishatachi no chūsei, esp. 150-76 and 186-212.

Chūyōki, Jōtoku 1, 3/5-6, ST 10:29-30. See also Katsuda, Shishatachi no chūsei, 56-57.

Hori Yutaka, “Shi no kumazashi: Shitai, shukke, tadahito,” Nihonsh尼 kenkyū 438 (1999): 3-41, esp. 14-16; Katsuda, Shishatachi no chūsei, 102-5. Hori suggests that the retirement of aging nobles to temples or villas outside city limits, such as Michinaga retiring to Hōjōji, or Yorimichi to the Byōdō-in, also reflected attitudes to exclude death from the capital (15).


Katsuda, Shishatachi no chūsei, 5.

Murakami Tennō gyoki, Kōbō 1 (964), 4/29, ST 1:166.

Gonki, Kanko 8 (1011), 6/22, ST 5:162.

Gonki, Chōoku 4 (998), 10/18, ST 4:50.

Gonki, Chōoku 4 (1002), 10/16, ST 5:274-75. According to the tale collection Kojidan, in 1084, when his beloved consort Kensi lay dying, the emperor Shirakawa, refused to leave her side and clung to her body after she had died. Admonished by his minister Minamoto no Toshihira that “the ruler has never before had contact with the dead” and urged to leave immediately, Shirakawa retorted, “Such a precedent begins from now” (Shintei zōō kōkokushi taiseki [hereafter KT], ed. Kuroki Katsumi and the Kokushi Taiken Kenshitsu, represented by Maruyama Jirō, 66 vols. [Yoshikawa Kōbun, 1929-66]). Kojidan, however, was not compiled until the early thirteenth century, and so the historicity of this episode is open to question.

Gonki, Kanko 8, 6/22, ST 5:162-63.

Gyokuyō, Yowa 1 (1181), 12/4, and Bunji 4 (1188), 2/19, 20, 2:540, 3:499-500.

Kenin 4 (1204), 2/27, in Inamura Eleichi, ed., Kanchi Meigetsuki, 8 vols. (Matsue, Shimane Prefecture: Matsue Imai Shoten, 2002), 2:162. See also headnote 7 on the same page. I am indebted to Asuka Sango for this reference.


Shūji ōjōden 1:17, ZNB 1:305-6. Here, it is the prospect of a relatively fresh and rotting corpse that is seen as polluting. Human bones—cremated or bleached, with no remaining moisture—were not necessarily regarded as defiling and were in fact interred on Mt. Kōya in the latter Heian period in considerable numbers, ad sanctos, in the vicinity of the tomb of the founding master Kūkai, as well as at other monasteries. See Nishiguchi, Oma no chikara, 88-97, and “Where the Bones Go,” 428-35, as well as Yamamoto, Kegare to oharae, 20-22.


Shūji ōjōden 11:17, ZNB 1:337.

Nihon Zenshū no seirisu (Yoshikawa Kōbun, 1987), 90-94.

Katsuda, Shishatachi no chūsei, 166-68.

Shūji ōjōden 11:32, ZNB 1:348-49.


Shūji ōjōden 11:26, ZNB 1:345-46. The detail of Shigetake spreading the mat suggests the mat on which corpses left in empty fields were sometimes placed (see Katsuda, Shishatachi no chūsei, 28-29).

According to a variant account, it was the wife, not the husband, who had died (Hyōhanki, Ninpei 4 [1154], 4/1, ST 18:248). In that version, the husband is identified as a shōgi (also read jōgi) or aeronaut, one who performed daily tasks in temple halls such as cleaning and readying incense, flowers, and ritual implements.

Takai, Kyūjū 1, 4/2, ST 24:116-17. See also the discussion in Niuonana Tetsuichi, Keibishiti: Chūsei no kagare to kerryoku (Heibonsha, 1986), 39-40.


Konyaku monogatari shī 5, 26/20, SNKB 37:82-83.

Shinmura, Shi to byō to kango no shakaishiki, 128-39.


Konyaku monogatari shī 5, 31:30, SNKB 37:504-505. The narrator comments that people criticized the governor of Owari for his neglect when they heard the story, suggesting that outing the sick was not considered acceptable in the case of relatives. An edict of Konin 3 (813) prohibits abandoning menials who are ill to starve by the roadside (Ryūjū sandōryaku 19, cited in Shinmura, Shi to byō to kango no shakaishiki, 131). See also the reference to this practice in Zoku Nihon koki, Shōwa 2 (835), 12/3 (KT 3:44). A later, 1261 Kamakura Bakufu ordinance forbids the abandoning of sick persons by the roadside (Kamakura ibun, no. 8628, 12:65).

“Chūsei zenki no byōsha to kyūsei,” 88, 90.
116. Chijiwa’s argument in his “Shigusa to sahō” for the mujōin as sacred space is directed in part against Fujisawa’s understanding of the mujōin as a “death container.”
119. Kōkamon’in’s death is recorded in Gyokōyō, Yōwa 1 (1181), entries for 12/1-4, 2:539-40. The following year, Tankyō also led a memorial service for Kōkamon’in; on that occasion, Kanzezane referred to him as her zenchishiki (Gyokōyō, Juei 1 [1182], 11/18, 2:581). Tankyō’s attendance at Goshirakawa’s deathbed is noted at Kenkyō 3, 3/13, 3:798.
121. Kōya sanjōden 13, ZNBS 1:700. See also “Kaietsu,” 758, in the same volume.
123. Kaya rui, ZGR, no. 214, 8B:743a.
124. Hosshinshū 2, Höjiki, Hosshinshū, 24. Höjiki
125. In some cases, the two roles seem to have converged. In the Hyōhōkai reference given in n. 107 above, the person who removes the corpse is referred to, not as a kiyome, but as a kazawara hosshi (“monk of the riverbank”). Riverbanks were areas associated with outcaste groups and the disposal of defilements, while the appellation kiyome suggests that this person was either a monk or had assumed a monk’s appearance. On the other hand, some hinin are known to have taken care of indigent dying persons by the riverbank, a function associated with monks who acted as zenchishiki. These hinin received the dead person’s clothing as payment, just as monks who nursed their dying fellows until the end were sometimes allowed to receive the dead monk’s robes or other possessions in return for their services (Shimura, Shi to byō to kongō no shakai, 196-97).

129. Koyama Satoko argues that such preparations were intended on the part of the dying to avert death pollution, in the belief that defilement might obstruct the Buddha’s welcoming descent (“Mappō no yo ni okeru kegare to sono kokufuku”; see n. 55 above). Alternatively, it seems possible that bathing and cleaning the room may have simply represented the sort of ritual purification that would precede any major Buddhist rite and were not necessarily connected to pollution concerns.
130. Sifunō sanban butsue xingshi chao, T. 40:144a20-21; cited in Ojō nōshū, NST 6:206. The phrase “and he is not held responsible for any transgression” is not included in Genshin’s citing of this passage.
131. Sifunō T. 1428, 22:861b21-21; summarized in Daowu’s Sifunō sanban butsue xingshi chao, 40:143a26-22; trans. from Shinohara, “The Moment of Death in Daowu’s Vinaya Commentary,” 108, slightly modified. Shinohara notes that the frame story of the Buddha visiting a sick monk as an occasion for giving instruction about treatment of the sick and dying occurs in a number of āgamas and is assimilated by Daowu to the specific context of deathbed ritual.
136. Konjaku monogatarishū 3, 12:29 mentions a lay monk who “performs ablutions each time after urinating or defecating” while engaged in copying the Lotus Sūtra, suggesting that this practice may have been a part of copying a sūtra “according to proper method” (nyōdo) (SNKBT 35:156-57). Some exceptionally devout Pure Land practitioners evidently made it a practice not to relieve themselves while facing west (for example the monk Hanyō in Zoku honchō jōken 20, ZNBS 1:241-42, or the nun Shakumyō in Hokke genki III:99, ZNBS 1:180). On the other hand, Nichiren (1222-82) writes, “In the case of feces and urine, though these are substances produced by the body, so long as one observes cleanly habits, there are no special prohibitions (iin) to be observed concerning them” (Gassai gosho, Shōwa teihon Nichiren shōin ibun, ed. Riishō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo [Minobu-cho, Yamanashi Prefecture: Minobusen Kuoni, 1952-59; rev. 1988], 1:291; Letters of Nichiren, ed. Philip B. Yampolsky, trans. Burton Watson and others [New York: Columbia University Press, 1996], 255-56).
137. Kishō hachikai, article 4 (Koyama, “Tōdaiji Chūshin sho ʹYokawa Shuryōgonʹ ni Nijūgo zannai Shin Yatsutane rinjū gyōjī no saikenton,” 88). This statement is taken directly from the Fayan shūhin of Daoshi, who cites it from the no longer extant Ōyō Shihōshi ni. See n. 68 above.

139. Hokke genki II:66, ZNBS 1:134.

140. For the different versions of this story, see chap. 1 in Abe Yasurō, Yaya no kōgo: Chūsei no sei to seianu mono, 17-64 (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 1998).

141. Janet Goodwin makes a similar observation with regard to the Ritsu monks who ministered to lepers and hinin (Alms and Yogabonds, 125-26).

142. Gregory Schopen suggests that Buddhist monasteries may possibly have provided care for the sick and dying, as brahmanical groups, for reasons of pollution, did not engage in such activities. See “The Good Monk and His Money in a Buddhist Monasticism of ‘the Mahāyāna Period’” (2000), repr. in Schopen’s Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004), 7-8.


146. Enryakuji kiroshi shūin'in, in Tendai kōyō, DNBZ 42:4-5. See articles 11-12.

147. Shinmura Taku, Nihon iryō shakata shiki no kenkyū: Kodai, chūsei no minshū seikatsu to iryō (Hōsei Daigaku Shuppankyoku, 1985), 347-51, 365-68. Monks had engaged in the treatment of illness outside the monastery, primarily as ritualists, since at least the eighth century.

148. Ōgō yōshū, NST 6:12.


152. Shi to byō to kanyō shakai shi, 209-11.


156. Tōfuku daishasse Hōshō Zenji Jōjō-bō gyōji, ZGR 9A:371b-372b. Enni himself wished to die as Shinkai later would, having produced his death poem before the assembly, but his disciples, fearing he was too weak to do so, disobeyed his commands that they carry him into the main hall. Sugawara Shōei suggests that Enni’s linear descendants, conscious that their patriarch’s last wishes had been violated, were especially sensitive about how their successive abbots died (“Kamakura jidai no yuige ni tsuite: Enni ni itaru rinji sahō no keifu,” in Kamakura jidai bunka denpan no kenkyū, ed. Osumi Kazuo, 75-114 [Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1993], 102-5.

157. “Shigusa to sahō,” 150-53. Chijiwa also argues that disposal measures taken after decomposition could set in may have failed to support representations of particular demons as ōjō, rather than ordinary death. For example, the regulations of the Nijūgō zannmai attributed to Gosho specify that monks should be buried within three days of death (Yokawa Shuryōgen’in Nijūgō zannmai kishō, article 16, in Koyama, “Tōdaiji Chishōin shōze (Yokawa Shuryōgen’in Nijūgō zannmai Eshin Yasutane gyōji no saikentō,” 82); this requirement was designed, Chijiwa suggests, so that Society members would not see the “marks of impurity” in the bodies of their fellow practitioners. However, he makes a stretch here in linking this regulation to the Bunpōki’s pronouncement that death pollution should be considered to begin from the time that the stench of decay is detected. Judging from the Bunpōki, this standard applies only in the case of a previously undiscovered corpse; otherwise, as indicated in the second epigraph to this essay, death pollution begins from the last breath.

158. Sange yōden 28, ZNBS 1:676-77.


163. Shiō yōden II:23, ZNBS 1:343. Translation from Frederic J. Kotas, “Yōden: Accounts of Rebirth in the Pure Land” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1987), 477-88, slightly modified. The text here has “I have completely forgotten the defilements of human beings,” but since the characters for “forget” (wasi-re) and “avoid” or “shun” (i-mi) are very similar, it seems likely that this may have been a transcription error for “shunned,” which would better fit the context.


166. Sange yōden 17, ZNBS 1:674-75.


168. I know of no reference to the body of a female ōjōin being visited in this way. This gendered nature of veneration of the corpse may have reflected wider patterns of social practice. For example, a courtier’s diary entry recording the funeral of the retired emperor Shirakawa in 1129 notes that the coffin was open for viewing as is done in the case of men, while for women, it is closed (Chōshōki, Daijirō 4, 7/15, ST 16:297. I am indebted to Mimi Yiengprudsakorn for this reference). In literature and in the visual arts, however, the female corpse becomes the topos for the “contemplation of impurity” (fujo), as seen, for example, in paintings of the “nine stages of decay” (sasashō). An extensive treatment of this theme may be found in François Lachaud, La jeune fille et la mort: Misogynie ascétique et représentations macabres du corps féminin dans le bouddhisme japonais (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études Japonaises, 2006).

169. Shishihatachi no chūsei, 126-27.

170. Takatori, for example, notes that neither folklorists nor anthropologists have yet adequately explained the coexistence of death pollution taboos with the practice,
extremely widespread in premodern Japan, of burying family members near the house (Shintō no seiritsu, 170-83).
Heroes and Saints
The Moment of Death in Cross-cultural Perspectives

Edited by
Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING