

# Chapter 4

## Japanese Buddhism and Women: The Lotus, Amida, and Awakening



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### 1 Introduction

Buddhism's claim to be a universal religion would seem to be severely undermined by its exclusion of certain groups of people from its scheme of salvation. Women, in particular, were treated at one time or another as less than fit vessels for attaining awakening. As is well known, even in the days of Gautama the Buddha, the Buddhist order was not entirely free of misogynist sentiments. Female devotees aspiring to follow the Buddha's teaching often had to overcome discrimination and negative innuendos from their fellow monks and the monastic institutions.

This view of women's "spiritual inferiority" persisted, casting a long shadow over the Buddhism tradition that took root and developed in Japan. Although the idea of *sangha*—the community of believers made up of monks, nuns, and laymen and laywomen—was duly embraced in Japan, and although women played a vital role in patronizing Buddhism, the misogynistic view became prevalent around the fourteenth century, with the changes in socio-economic environments. It was *only* in the last century that the iniquitous treatment of women in Japanese Buddhism came to be critically acknowledged by the ecclesiastical authorities, and important steps for a change are taking place slowly but steadily. Despite the hard-to-eradicate subtle institutional chauvinism and dubious perceptions concerning women's spiritual ability, an increasing number of socially active and articulate Buddhist women are working on improving their image and their social standing in the last decades. What is still needed, however, is the emancipation of androcentric Buddhist ecclesiastical tradition from the yoke of its past.

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## 2 Part I: Preliminary Matters

### 2.1 A Brief Historical Overview

When Buddhism was formally introduced to Japan in the sixth century C.E., female members of the imperial family and aristocracy were among the first to embrace it and became its powerful patrons, overshadowing its misogynistic streak for centuries. One of the earliest records of the imperial ladies' keen interest in the Buddhist teaching is found in *The Chronicles of Japan*, in the chapter on Empress Suiko 推古天皇 (554–628), the aunt of the important patron of Buddhism, Prince Shōtoku 聖徳太子 (572–622). According to this record, the Empress had the Prince give lectures on the *Shōman-gyō* 勝鬘經 (*S. Śrīmālādevīsīmhanāda Sūtra*) for three days in the year 606 (Mitsusada 1983: 302). The significance of the Prince's choice of this *sūtra* is obvious, as its protagonist is the highly enlightened Queen Śrīmālā, who displays her understanding of the Buddha's teaching before the Blessed One. Her penetrating understanding won the Buddha's cry of approval: "Well done!" (Takasaki 1975).

Gradually, however, nunneries that once enjoyed robust state support during the Nara period (710–784) began to disappear in the next few hundred years to the point of near extinction, and nuns were no longer listed in the official government registry.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this change was closely tied to the change of the land distribution system and the accompanying political form. The imperial family and the powerful aristocrats began to amass wealth, which translated into political power, when the economic system based on the private holdings of lucrative estates (*shōen*) spread throughout the country. The disappearance of nunneries, however, did not mean that women abandoned Buddhist practice. While several nunneries barely managed to survive during the Heian period (794–1192), the place of practice for women shifted away from the public sphere into their homes, and their practice became personal and private. Moreover, during this period, wealthy women were as indispensable as before to the Buddhist institutions, as they actively assumed the role of the "patron of Buddhist temples" by generously donating their lands and extending financial support.

The social upheavals that saw the creation of the military Shogunate at Kamakura during what came to be called the Kamakura period (1192–1333) resulted in a serious challenge to the prestige of the courtiers by the rising warrior clans. From the last decades of the Heian period onward, Japan entered a period of continuous armed conflicts, and many aristocratic ladies, having lost their husbands in battles, found themselves in dire need of a support system and often congregated at Buddhist temples that offered them protection. Around this time—towards the end of the

<sup>1</sup> See various research results contained in Ōsumi and Nishiguchi's *Shirizu: josei to bukkuyō* シリーズ 女性と仏教 [*Series: Women and Buddhism*] (Ōsumi and Nishiguchi 1989). Ushiyama's essay "Chūsei no amadera to ama" 「中世の尼寺と尼」 (Ushiyama 1989: 221–270) was translated by Barbara Ruch (Ushiyama 2002: 131–164).

Heian period—Chan practice was introduced to Japan, which brought in an egalitarian outlook.

At around the same time, male Buddhist reformers started to proselytize actively among women. For instance, the monks of the newly formed *Ritsu* (*S. Vinaya*) sect revived the dilapidated nunneries and initiated the ordination of women as nuns (see Meeks 2010, 2003). In their effort to reach out to women and to make their service indispensable, a misogynist rhetoric was adopted that women were burdened with “five hindrances” (*J. goshō* or *itsutsu no sawari* 五障)<sup>2</sup> when it came to attaining Buddhahood and thus they needed the spiritual guidance of the priests. Such an idea spread widely in the fourteenth century, when the shift of political and economic power from courtiers to warriors took place. In this milieu, some women practitioners—many of whom were of the aristocratic class—set out to establish their own convents not only as places of refuge but also places of religious practice.<sup>3</sup> The number of convents increased tremendously by the Muromachi period (1336–1553), when numerous *amadera* dotted the landscape of Kyoto and its vicinity (see Harada 1997). Laywomen, too, actively integrated Buddhist practice into their daily lives throughout the medieval period and well into the Edo period (1603–1867), when the ports were closed off to most Western countries.

During the Meiji period (1868–1912), when Japan rejoined the rest of the world, the practice of barring women from the “sacred realm,” the practice ridiculed by Dōgen, for instance, was abolished in 1872 under the government’s effort to eradicate Japan of old superstitions and outdated customs. After the end of the Second World War in 1945, under the occupation of the Allied powers, Japanese women were granted suffrage and attained equal civil and legal status with men. Women’s social position drastically improved, impacting to a lesser degree that of Buddhist monastic women. A Sōtō nun, KOJIMA Kendō, for instance, in the prevailing atmosphere of the postwar emancipation of women, commissioned a volume that researched the entire history of Buddhist nuns not only in the Sōtō sect but also in Asia at large, and published the tome *Sōtōshū nisō-shi* or *The History of the Nuns in the Sōtō Sect* (Tajima 1955). Today, Buddhist nuns are actively engaged in social work, both in Japan and abroad. It may be paradoxical, but the fact that women were placed outside the mainstream ecclesiastic system for so long afforded them the freedom and needed energy to dedicate themselves to carry out the bodhisattva work—and to be “socially engaged”—largely unhampered by the traditional administrative work of running large temple complexes and monasteries.

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<sup>2</sup>This sentiment was expressed as “women were unable to become Brahmā, Indra, Māra, Cakravartin king, and Buddha,” by the first century B.C.E. in India.

<sup>3</sup>Hosokawa (1999). He has published numerous essays on the activities of the monks of the reformed Ritsu school from the thirteenth century onward (see Matsuo 1996a, 1996b).

## 2.2 *Waka as a Testimonial Source*

What makes the present study of Japanese Buddhist women aesthetically delightful is the fact that many of them were accomplished poets and wrote fine poems. The 31-syllable traditional poetry, called *waka* (and also *tanka*), written by Buddhist women, can be read as a *testimonial of their religiosity* and as the expression of their existential voice.<sup>4</sup> The value of adopting *waka* as a viable textual source will become apparent in the course of this study. Japanese women of the past wrote innumerable *waka*, which are handed down to us in vast numbers of collections. Female religionists and thinkers, with the exception of a handful, did not leave behind written religious tracts or scholarly commentaries, but they did leave many very fine *waka*.

Up until now, *waka* poems have been mainly treated in terms of their literary merit, and thus confined to the genre of literary criticism, or Japanese literature, but I propose that they can be studied as a candid expression of the inner voices and spiritual aspirations of the poets. Philosopher NISHIDA Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945), for instance, observed that the short form of *waka* (or *tanka*) is conducive to expressing one’s innermost feelings. To quote:

To grasp our life-experience by way of the form of short poetry (“*tanka*”) is to grasp it from the very heart of the present moment. It is to view life from the very point of the moment of experience. Certainly, one’s life is a unitary whole [and not fragmented], but when we grasp concrete and vibrant life, to see it from the side of the environment is one thing, and to grasp it at the very tip of vividly pulsating life is another. Depending on from which angle we approach life, life presents itself differently and we live its different significance. (NKZ 13: 131)<sup>5</sup>

Nishida is saying that not only is life-experience captured vividly by *waka* but also that *waka can* encapsulate deep existential reflections.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, adopting poetry as a testimonial document is compatible with the approach which analyzes the self-understanding of the poet concerned. The dimension of self-understanding belongs to the *kairological* moment—taking a hint from the Catalan philosopher Raimon Panikkar. One’s self-understanding unfolds in a “temporal space,” different from a diachronically construed objectified notion of time (Panikkar 1987, 1993). The “kairological moments” are “transhistorical,” in

<sup>4</sup> *Waka* 和歌 (“Japanese poetry”) is a genre of versification, as distinguished from *kanshi* 漢詩, “poems in Chinese,” and generally came to be identified with the thirty-one-syllable short poetic form, or *miso hitomaji* (“thirty-one letters”), which is also called “*tanka*” 短歌 (“short verse”). *Waka* have been the favorite means of literary expression lovingly embraced by all classes of the Japanese people, male and female, from time immemorial. Indeed, KI no Tsurayuki 紀貫之 (872–945), a compiler of the *Kokin-shū* wrote: “Even frogs in fresh water and warblers in the sky make their songs; why not human beings?” (Saeki 1958: 905).

<sup>5</sup> Nishida, “Tanka ni tsuite” 短歌について [“On “*tanka*”] (NKZ 13: 130–132). The essay is translated into English, and contained in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook on Contemporary Japanese Philosophy* (Yusa 2017a: 366–69).

<sup>6</sup> Certainly, *waka* poems were written under diverse conditions. Their contents heavily depended on the motive of the poet and the occasion and the purpose of the poetry composition, and therefore not all *waka* poems express spirituality.

that the event of the spirit is “neither merely past nor exclusively present. It belongs to the order of the heart, to the personal life”; as such it has the “contemporary aspect that transcends both time and space without deactivating the time-space frame” (Panikkar 1993: 122). I see that a “kairological” moment has a dimension which is always “timeless” and “present,” as it captures something of the “timeless” quality present within the human heart.

To focus on the realm of intimate self-understanding—as a method of studying confessional texts—is effective as we can engage the interlocutor (who may be our contemporary or may belong to a different historical time period altogether) *existentially*. The premise here is that profoundly inner spiritual experience has the quality of the “eternal now” (Nishida) or “tempiternity” (Panikkar)—although it takes place in space-time. It is “historical” and “transhistorical” at the same time (Panikkar 1993: 122). Nishida would explain that this kairological understanding is constitutive of one’s “*jikaku*” 自覚 (“self-consciousness”).

In short, my methodology consists in taking poetry (mainly the *waka* poems but not exclusively) as a textual source, with the view that they contain the intimate self-understanding of those women poets.

### 2.3 *Three Major Strands of Salvific Message for Women*

In presenting Japanese Buddhist women’s experience, I arrange my discussion into “three major strands”—that of the message of universal deliverance from suffering advocated by the *Lotus of the Wondrous Dharma Sūtra* (S. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra*, J. *Hokekyō* 法華經) [hereafter abbreviated “*Lotus Sūtra*”], that of the grace of Amida Buddha, and the egalitarian affirmation of “spiritual awakening” that transcends the gender distinction of male and female.

These three major “paths” of salvation for women emerge out of my study of noh texts (medieval Japanese drama), especially those texts that depict woman as the protagonist. I submit that most lay Japanese Buddhists (both female and male) of the past considered their faith along these rather broad lines, rather than in terms of technical doctrines of a specific school. On the noh stage “salvation” of the protagonist is often intimated, variously depicted in terms of the alleviation of agony, the attainment of peace of mind, the release from attachment, a reunion with a loved one, and so on. Interestingly, female protagonists in the noh drama are often the reincarnation of the merciful Bodhisattva Kan’non, or the spirit of plants, which are also guaranteed enlightenment according to the *Lotus Sūtra*. Some plays, although small in number, feature an awakened woman. In this case, the protagonist is usually cast as an old woman, who may interact with a young and beautiful traveling woman of pleasure to demonstrate the illusory nature of the dichotomous way of viewing the world in terms of young and old, beautiful and ugly—such is the transcendent perspective of “detachment” that alludes to the world of *satori* 悟り.

These three strands certainly do not cover the entire scope of Japanese Buddhist experience; nevertheless, they roughly correspond to the Tendai (including Nichiren in terms of the central importance of the *Lotus Sūtra*), Pure Land (including the later development of True Pure Land and Ippen's Ji Sect), and Zen (Rinzai, Sōtō, and Ōbaku lineages) traditions. In actuality, these “strands” are not mutually exclusive, and the demarcating line is not clearly drawn. For instance, Great Saiin Senshi (see Part II, Sect. 3.1, below) was devoted not only to the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* but also cultivated her faith in the rebirth in the Western Paradise of Amida Buddha. While these three strands are intellectually distinguishable, in practice they are intertwined and often overlap.

In the present study, I single out one woman each to represent the first two strands, and two women for the third strand. The first strand is represented by Imperial Princess Senshi 選子内親王 (964–1035); the second by Imperial Princess Shikishi 式子内親王 (1149–1201); and the third by Abbess MUGAI Nyodai 無外如大 (1223–1298) and HIRATSUKA Raichō 平塚らいてう (1886–1971).

This approach by way of “strands” allows us to get closer to the contents of the faith of these women and their practice, instead of going through the venue of official sectarian doctrines to see how women adopted and practiced Buddhism. Moreover, by focusing on their practice, we actually do encounter familiar male Buddhist figures, such as Hōnen and Dōgen, who had guided their female disciples. The focus on women, in fact, opens up a more comprehensive portrayal of Japanese Buddhist practice at large, of which women were a lively part. This approach also reveals how the male-female synergy has enlivened and enriched Japanese Buddhism, just as any other major religious traditions of the world.

### 2.3.1 The Three Major Strands: The Supporting Texts

The first strand, textually supported by the *Lotus Sūtra*, delivers the message of universal salvation, which by definition does not exclude women. The second strand, supported by the *Pure Land Sūtras*, asserts that the original vows of Amida (or Amitābha) Buddha save men and women. The third strand, which goes back to the early Buddhist teaching, upholds “awakening” (J. *satori* 悟り) to be accessible to all practitioners, regardless of their sexes—this idea supported by various Mahāyāna scriptures such as the *Queen Shrimala Sūtra* (J. *Shōman-gyō* 勝鬘經), the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (J. *Yuimakyō* 維摩經), and numerous Chan and Zen texts.

### 2.3.2 Strand A: *The Lotus Sūtra* (*Hokekyō* 法華經)

The “Devadatta” chapter<sup>7</sup> contains the famous story of the daughter of the dragon king who demonstrates her perfect enlightenment before the entire assembly of the Buddha's followers. In Japan this chapter has been traditionally referred to in short-

<sup>7</sup> In the Chinese translation, it is Chap. 12; in the Sanskrit version, it is part of Chap. 11, “Apparition of the Jeweled Stūpa.”

hand as the “daughter of the dragon king,” and became synonymous with the promise that “women can fully attain Buddhahood.”

The story begins with Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī filing his report to the Buddha that “the daughter of the dragon king Sāgara, who is barely eight,” has entered “deep meditation” (S. *dhyāna*), and has arrived at an understanding of the dharma” (Hurvitz 1976: 199). Soon, the dragon girl herself comes to the Buddha’s assembly. Present among them is Śāriputra, the number one disciple of the Buddha. The story unfolds as follows:

At that time, Śāriputra spoke to the dragon girl, saying, “You say that in no long time you shall attain the unexcelled Way. This is hard to believe. What is the reason? A woman’s body is filthy, it is not a Dharma-receptacle. How can you attain unexcelled *bodhi* [awakening]? The Path of the Buddha is remote and vastly deep. . . . *A woman’s body even then has five obstacles. It cannot become first a Brahmā god king, second the god Śakra, third King Māra, fourth a sage-king turning the wheel, fifth a Buddha.*<sup>8</sup> How can the body of a woman speedily achieve Buddhahood?”

At that time the dragon girl had a precious gem, the value of which was the entire thousand-millionfold world, which she held up and gave to the Buddha. The Buddha straightway accepted it. The dragon girl said to Bodhisattva Prajñākūta [i.e., wisdom accumulated] and to the venerable Śāriputra, “I offered a precious gem, and the World-Honored One accepted it. Was this quick or not?”

The venerable Śāriputra answered, saying, “Very quick!”

The girl said, “With your supernatural power you shall see me achieve Buddhahood even more quickly than that!”

At that time, in front of the entire assembled multitude and Venerable Śāriputra, *the body of the dragon girl turned into that of a male*, demonstrating to the world that she has become a perfect bodhisattva. Thereupon, she straightway went southward to the world-system called “Immaculate,” sat on a jeweled bodhi tree, achieved enlightenment, and became a Buddha. Now being endowed with thirty-two marks and eighty beautiful features, she set forth the teaching for all living beings, by filling all ten directions with radiant light. (Hurvitz 1976: 199–201; emphasis added)<sup>9</sup>

### 2.3.3 Strand B: The “Amida Sūtras” (*Daimuryōjukyō* 無量寿経, *Kanmuryōjukyō* 觀無量寿経, and *Amidakyō* 阿弥陀経)<sup>10</sup>

The *Pure Land Sūtra* or the *Sūtra of Eternal Life* (S. *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*, J. *Daimuryōjukyō*) guarantees women their rebirth in the Western Paradise of Sukhāvātī, or the Land of Happiness. It is the paradise of Buddha Amitābha

<sup>8</sup>This is the list of “five obstacles” women were burdened with.

<sup>9</sup>See Sakamoto Yukio 坂本幸男 and Iwamoto Yutaka 岩本裕 (Sakamoto and Iwamoto 1976).

<sup>10</sup>See Nakajima, Hayakawa, Kino (1964). Hōnen singled out *The Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra* (J. *Daimuryōjukyō* 大無量寿経), *The Sūtra of the Meditation on Amida Buddha* (J. *Kanmuryōjukyō* 觀無量寿経), and *The Amida Sūtra* (J. *Amidakyō* 阿弥陀経, or *The Smaller Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*) as the “three principal sūtras of the Pure Land teaching.” Ever since, these three *sūtras* became the standard texts to represent the Pure Land thought in Japan (see Hōnen 1971: 24).



(J. Amida Buddha). Buddha Amitābha (meaning “Infinite Light”; also known as Amitāyus, “Eternal Life”) in his previous life had been a bodhisattva Dharmākara, who practiced under Lokeśvara-rāja. After practicing for five kalpas of deep meditation, he arose from his meditation and went to Lokeśvara-rāja to express his determination to establish his own paradise to receive anyone who would meditate on him or call upon him with these words: “I take refuge in Amida Buddha” (J. *namu amida butsu* 南無阿彌陀仏). At that time Dharmākara took 48 vows, declaring that if any of these 48 conditions were not met, he would not become a Buddha (Suzuki 1973: 42). The eighteenth vow, considered the most essential and known as the “original vow” (J. *hongan* 本願), pledges:

If, upon my obtaining Buddhahood, all beings in the ten quarters should not sincerely and earnestly desire to be born in my land, and if they should not be born there by their mere thought of me, or invocation of my name up to ten times—except those who have committed the five grave offences and those who are abusive of the true dharma—may I not attain the Highest Enlightenment. (Suzuki 1973: 42; adapted)

Bodhisattva Dharmākara also made a separate vow to ensure the salvation of women in his thirty-fifth vow:

If, upon my obtaining Buddhahood, *women* in all the immeasurable and inconceivable Buddha-worlds in the ten quarters should not, after hearing my Name, be filled with joy and trust and awaken their thoughts to enlightenment and loathe their being women, and *if in another birth they should again assume the female body*, may I not attain the Highest Enlightenment. (Suzuki 1973: 42; emphasis added)

These two vows formed the cornerstone for women who came to embrace the Pure Land teaching.

### 2.3.4 Strand C: The Early Buddhist Scriptures and Its Mahāyāna Development

The message of spiritual egalitarianism goes back to the Buddha’s teaching. The early Buddhist scriptures speak of the irrelevance of the sexes when it comes to attaining highest awakening.

Compiled in the *Tripitaka*, the first passage is the account of the acceptance of Mahāpājapatī, Śākyamuni Buddha’s foster mother, to the Buddhist Order, and the establishment of the Order of Nuns:

The Buddha, the Blessed One, was staying among the Sakkas at Kapilavasthu in the Banyan Park. The Mahāpājapatī the Gotami approached and greeted him and, standing at a respectful distance, spoke thus to him:

Lord, let women retire from household life to the homeless one, under the Dharma and Discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata.

Be careful, Gotami, of retiring from household into homelessness in this Dharma and Discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata.



[The Buddha repeated these exact words of refusal three times in response to the repeated plea of Mahāpājapātī.]

Then the Blessed One set out for Vesālī, and Mahāpājapātī, too, having had her hair cut off and donned a saffron robe, set out for Vesālī with several Sakka women. Arriving at the Gabled Hall, she stood outside the porch, her feet swollen, her limbs covered with dust, and her face tear-stained. The venerable Ānanda saw her, and hearing from her the reason for her distress, told her to wait a moment while he asked the Lord for the retirement of women from home into homelessness. But the Lord answered him as he had answered Mahāpājapātī. So Ānanda thought to himself: “Suppose that I should now ask the Lord by some other method?” and he spoke thus to the Blessed One:

Are women competent, the Blessed One, if they retire from household life to the houseless one, under the Dharma and Discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, to attain to the fruit of conversion, to attain to the fruit of once-returning, to attain to the fruit of never-returning, to attain to arhatship?

Women are competent, Ānanda.

If so, Lord—and, Lord, Mahāpājapātī the Gotami was of great service: she was the Lord’s aunt, foster-mother, nurse, giver of milk, for when the Lord’s mother passed away she suckled him—it were well, Lord, that women should obtain the going forth from home into homelessness.

If, Ānanda, Mahāpājapātī the Gotami accepts these eight important rules, that may be ordination for her. (Warren (1977: 441–445; Conze et al. 1964, 1975: 23–24; adapted)

Echoing the same view of women’s spiritual competence, the following passage in the *Samyutta-nikāya* (1.5.6) reads:

I call the dharma the coachman,  
and right understanding the predecessors.

*Be it woman or man* who rides such chariot

Approaches *nirvāna* on account of this vehicle. (Nakamura 1986: 74)<sup>11</sup>

The verses composed by the first generation of Buddhist nuns are compiled into the *Therīgāthā*. In the following verse, nun Somā overcomes Māra, the tempter:

(Māra speaks): “The realm, which is hard to fathom, and which only the sages can attain, is impossible for women to attain, when women have very little wisdom enough to count with two fingers.”

(Nun Somā responds): “When the mind is very calm and wisdom dawns forth, for her who observes the truth correctly, how could her being a woman constitute hindrance? The delight of sensual pleasure is thoroughly abandoned, and dark ignorance (*avidyā*) is sun-dered into pieces. Know this. You are defeated!” (Nakamura 1982: 20–21)

The assurance of female spiritual equality was given further philosophical foundation by the early Mahāyānists, who developed the understanding of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all things (including the sexual distinctions), and the doctrine of

<sup>11</sup> For another translation see Horner (1930: 104).

*tathāgatagarbha* or the Buddha Nature that is inherent in all sentient beings. These ideas rendered the difference of male and female immaterial. This egalitarian view runs through major Mahāyāna sūtras. Japanese Zen (and Chinese Chan) texts, for instance, belong to this strand of egalitarianism that maintains that the ability for spiritual awakening is independent of the sexes.

### 3 Part II: Case Studies

#### 3.1 *The First Strand: The Lotus Sūtra and Women*

##### 3.1.1 *Daisaiin of Kamo, Princess Senshi*

Princess Nobuko<sup>12</sup> or Senshi 選子 (964–1035), was the youngest daughter of Emperor Murakami 村上天皇 (926–967) and his principal consort FUJIWARA no Yasuiko or Anshi 藤原安子 (927–964).<sup>13</sup> The mother died soon after she gave birth to Senshi. In 975, when she was 12 years old, she was chosen by divination to occupy the sacred office of *Saiin* 齋院, a Shintō office filled by an unmarried imperial princess, who offered proper worship to the deity Wakeikazuchi of Kamo Shrine in Kyoto. What set her apart from the rest of the *Saiin* was the fact that she remained in the office for the next 57 years—during the reigns of five successive emperors: En'yū 円融天皇 (reigned 969–984), Kazan 花山天皇 (r. 984–86), Ichijō 一条天皇 (r. 986–1011), Sanjō 三条天皇 (r. 1011–16), and Goichijō 後一条天皇 (r. 1016–1036). It was a remarkable exception to the rule that a new *Saiin* princess was to be chosen each time a new emperor ascended the throne. Thus, Senshi came to be known as the “Great Saiin,” or *Daisaiin* 大齋院.

##### 3.1.2 *The Sacred Office of Saiin*

The office of *Saiin* 齋院 at Kamo, just like its older sister-office of *Saigū* 齋宮 at Ise, had its root in the ancient Shintō worldview, in which the political affairs were to be dealt with in close connection with the proper worship of *kami* 神 deities. In time, the religious act of worship was entrusted to the emperor’s unmarried *female* family member, whose assistance in religious matters was indispensable for the

<sup>12</sup>“Nobuko” was probably the proper pronunciation of her name, but because the personal names of high-ranking ladies and imperial princesses during ancient and medieval periods were never uttered out of deference, often her name is conventionally pronounced in the “*on*-reading” (Sino-Japanese pronunciation) as “Senshi.”

<sup>13</sup>Yasuiko was the daughter of FUJIWARA Morosuke, and gave birth to two princes both of whom became emperor (Reizei and En'yū), as well as four daughters, most of whom served either as *Saigū* or *Saiin*. Yasuiko died 5 days after she gave birth to Princess Nobuko.

emperor to execute his political authority.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned above, Princess Senshi was chosen as the sixteenth *Saiin*, when the previous *Saiin* stepped down, most likely due to her health reasons. Princess Senshi began serving the office during the reign of her older brother, who was enthroned as Emperor En'yū.

A careful reader may ask if a Shintō priestess was allowed to embrace the Buddhist faith. According to the code governing the office of *Saigū* and *Saiin*, those princesses were required to avoid any contact with Buddhism while serving the office and could not practice it, as the sacred office stood for the unstained Shinto identity. For instance, *Saiin* and *Saigū* priestesses were required to observe certain taboo words.<sup>15</sup> Besides the observance of the taboo words, they performed daily worship as well as officiated at important seasonal Shinto rituals, which were perceived to insure peace and prosperity throughout the emperor's domain.

Princess Senshi's situation was exceptional in every respect. To begin with, her appointment as *Saiin* was extended beyond the normally prescribed terms of the office because it appeared that there was no reason to replace her (and, besides, it was her brother, and not the father, who stepped down from the imperial throne). It is fully possible that it was due to this irregularity of her appointment that she may have reasoned it permissible privately to embrace Buddhism. Commanding great respect from her extended imperial relatives and court ministers as the "Great *Saiin*," she enjoyed unparalleled prestige. It is not hard to imagine that no one prevented her from practicing Buddhism, as long as it did not interfere with her execution of her public duty. She did not hide her Buddhist faith either and publicly demonstrated her commitment to the *bodhisattva path*, which did not escape the attention of the compiler of the historical narrative account, *The Great Mirror* (J. *Ōkagami* 大鏡) (1065), which reads:

The sacred princesses *Saigū* and *Saiin* of the olden days used to avoid things related to Buddhism, be it the worship of Buddha or the study of Buddhist *sūtras*. But this particular

<sup>14</sup> *Saigū* and *Saiin* are now-forgotten Shintō institutions of the sacred office of high priestess that originated in ancient Japan and existed up through the early medieval period. The *Saigū* princess at Ise worshipped the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, the ancestor deity of the imperial family, while the *Saiin* princess worshipped the deity Wakeikazuchi at Kamo Shrine. These imperial high priestesses, chosen by divination, performed their religious duties. The perception of those days was that the unity of the sacred realm of *kami* and the "secular" world of human affairs were vital. *Saigū* and *Saiin* princesses, once they stepped down from the office, were no longer bound by any of the regulations and allowed to marry, and their hands were often sought by the reigning emperor or other high-ranking courtiers (see Ellwood 1967: 35–60 and Yusa 2012). An extensive source of the *saigū* and *saiin* office is found in Asai (1985).

<sup>15</sup> The high priestess was forbidden to utter two kinds of words as "taboo words" (J. *imikotoba* 忌み言葉); the first group of words comprised tears, illness, death, and blood—things associated with "pollution" according to the Shintō mind-set; and the second group of words were related to Buddhism. The Buddha was referred to as "*nakago*" ("middle one"), the Buddhist *sūtras* as "*somekami*" ("dyed paper"), Buddhist monks as "*kaminaga*" ("long-haired ones"), and nuns as "*mekaminaga*" (female long-haired ones). The ancients believed in the power of words (J. *kotodama*), which may be behind this practice of observing the taboo words.

Princess worshipped Buddha's teaching, and she never missed her early morning chants and *sūtra* recitation. On the occasion of the annual Buddhist ceremony held at this temple Unrin'in, she sent her gift, without fail. People used to wonder: "How can she be aware of the Buddhist ceremonies particular to this temple, while she was chosen to serve the *kami* when she was still a child?"

In one year, on the day of the Kamo Festival, the Princess avowed to the people who had gathered at the Ichijō Avenue to see the procession, by declaring: "Indeed, all of you, together with me, shall attain Buddhahood" (*sanagara tomo ni hotoke to naramu*). Wasn't that extraordinary? It did not diminish the splendor and elegance of her demeanor, however, nor did it dampen the festival procedures, that began with the pre-festival ablutions at Kamo River, and lasted for three days. (Ishikawa 1989: 134–135)

### 3.1.3 Great Saiin's Waka Collection of the Quest for Enlightenment

In 1012 the Great *Saiin*, now about 50 years old, compiled her collection of *waka*-poetry as part of her ardent Buddhist devotion. She entitled this collection "*Hosshin waka-shū*" 発心和歌集, or the "*Waka* Collection Inspired by the Quest for Enlightenment."<sup>16</sup> "*Hosshin*" corresponds to Sanskrit "*bodhicitta*"—"the aspiration for enlightenment." The Japanese word "*bodai*" is the Sanskrit "*bodhi*," which is adopted here as the abbreviation of *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*, or the "supreme enlightenment."

#### (a) The Preface

The Preface to the collection reveals Senshi's full consciousness of what it means to practice Buddhism for her—a female born into the imperial lineage in the land far away from India. It begins thus:

For some time I have been devoting my thoughts to the Buddha and my passion to his precious teaching in order to attain enlightenment (*bodai* 菩提).

Śākyamuni Buddha imparted to us the teaching of *The Lotus Sūtra* of the One Vehicle; therein he sang in verse (*gāthās*) the praise of the Buddhas of the past. *He demonstrated the merit of composition of poetry as lofty and congenial an act with Buddhist practice.* Sanskrit verses, however, are in the tongue of the Indian people, separated from us by deserts. Likewise, verses of praise in Chinese are from China, and the customs of each place greatly differ from those of Japan.

I, a disciple of the Buddha, was born in Japan *in the female body*. Instead of acquiring the "manners of how the dwellers of the foreign city walk" (as an old Chinese saying has it), I have thoroughly internalized the hues and sensitivity of my native land. Accordingly, I have studied the *waka* poetry, the tradition of which goes back to god Susano'o, and learnt how to express the meaning in poetry. I also studied the *waka* composed by the hungry beggar (and presented to Prince Shōtoku) to learn about the descriptive power of poetry. (Senshi 1985: 292; emphasis added)

<sup>16</sup>My sources here are the *Hosshin waka-shū* (Kamens 1990: 141–149) and the *Shinpen kokka taikan* (Nakano 1994, 26: 292–294). In the following, the translation of this collection into English is my own.

Let us take a moment to examine Daisaiin's understanding of the *waka* as the chosen means of expressing the Buddhist faith. First, she is proposing that *waka* is an excellent means of expressing deeply spiritual devotion, equivalent in function to Sanskrit *gāthās* and Chinese verse. Next, she refers to two classical examples of *waka* poetry, one attributed to the mythic wind god Susano'o, and the other by an anonymous legendary beggar, who received the attention of Prince Shōtoku (that is, the Prince of Ikaruga). In the Shintō mythology, God Susano'o is the brother of the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu, who is the ancestor of the imperial family. Daisaiin is making a conscious allusion to this connection between herself, as Amaterasu's descendant, and the composition of *waka* poetry, which, moreover, has been considered a sacred activity directly handed down from the time of the "generation of gods." (Ishihara 1983: 74–75)<sup>17</sup>

The second poem mentioned by Daisaiin is attributed to an anonymous poet, who praised the wisdom of Prince Shōtoku, whose unwavering patronage was essential for Buddhism to take root and prosper in Japan. For Daisaiin, Prince Shōtoku's legendary wisdom and role as a Buddhist prince must have been something to emulate with pride.

Let us return to the Preface by Daisaiin:

I open my collection with the dedicatory verses accompanying the "Four Great Vows" and Samantabhadra's "Ten Great Vows." This collection contains fifty-five *waka* in total. I name it "*Hosshin waka-shū*" or "The Poetry Collection of *Bodhi-citta*." The reason for selecting this title is to sow in everyone's heart the seed of desire to be reborn in the next life in a pure land, on one of the nine ranks of the lotus pedestal.

Is the act of pouring resources to build a temple hall or pagoda the only way for someone like me to attain rebirth in the paradise? I think the message of the Buddha's vow to save all beings is clear. Is receiving a tonsure to become a nun, renouncing this world, and retreating into the mountain forest to sing a loud praise of the virtues of the Buddha the only way to attain Buddhist salvation? I am not certain if relinquishing the art of poetizing would lead me to the gate of the meditation on the "Sound A."<sup>18</sup>

My dearest wish is that if there are those who read or hear my poems, may they take up their Buddhist practice and join me in upholding Prabhūtaratna Buddha's vow.<sup>19</sup> If there are those who criticize or sneer at my poems, may they still have the opportunity to practice with me the act of courageous humility of Sadāparibhūta Bodhisattva.<sup>20</sup> My heart is so

<sup>17</sup>The origin of the 31-syllable *waka* poetry is ascribed to the wind god Susano'o (see Chamberlain 1981: 75).

<sup>18</sup>What is referred to here is the Shingon practice of the meditation on the sound "A," or *ajikan*. The sound "a" is considered the "mother of all sounds" and contrasted with "hum" which is the last of the syllabic system (cf. "aum"). Kūkai found special significance in the correspondence between the sound and reality, and expounded on it in his meditation.

<sup>19</sup>According to Sakamoto and Iwamoto, the Buddha Prabhūtaratna is the Buddha associated with the *stūpa* worship, as his ashes and bones after his death were divided and given to ten tribes, each of which built a *stūpa* to venerate the Buddha (see Sakamoto and Iwamoto 1976, 2: 168).

<sup>20</sup>According to Sakamoto and Iwamoto, Sadāparibhūta is the Bodhisattva who, dedicated to the dissemination of the Buddha's teaching, went about everywhere, telling whomever he encountered "I have profound respect for you." He withstood ridicule, sneer, and even persecution coming from

wholly devoted to the “three treasures”<sup>21</sup> so much so that I am prepared to renounce everything else.

The sound of the autumn wind that whispers through the tree branches is the voice that murmurs the coming of the old age. Merely to lament over the sunset behind the shady mountains is but to hold onto one’s selfish desire for the prolongation of one’s life on earth.

Moved to tears by ardent devotion, I contemplate the marvelous teaching of the Buddha.

The compilation of this collection is completed  
in the eighth month of the ninth year of Kankō 寛弘 (1012 C.E.). (Senshi 1985: 292)

This is the end of the Preface. There is no mistake about Daisaiin’s ardent devotion.

### (b) The Opening Section

The main body of the poetry collection is made up of fifty-five *waka*, each poem accompanies a selected passage extracted from the Buddhist scriptures in the original Chinese. The scope of this collection would be somewhat comparable to composing a short poem for each book of the Bible, accompanied by a representative passage quoted from each book.

The initial section of the collection opens with the “Four Great Vows” 四弘誓願 (J. *shigu seigan*), the most important prayer for all practitioners of the bodhisattva-path. The first vow is: “However innumerable sentient beings there may be, I vow to save them all” (J. *shujō muhen seigan do* 衆生無辺誓願度). This is the declaration of commitment to Buddhist practice, the primary concern of which is the salvation of all beings. Her accompanying *waka* refers to the Tendai teaching of the “One Vehicle,” and the paramount importance of the *Lotus Sūtra* as the carrier of the message of universal salvation. The poem reads:

May anyone whosoever rides this raft of the Buddha’s teaching  
arrive at the other shore!

(*tare to naku/ hitotsu no nori no/ ikada ni te/  
kanata no kishi ni/ tsuku yoshi mo ga na*—poem #1).

The second vow, “However rampant are the delusions, I vow to eradicate them all” (“*Bon’nō muhen seigan dan*” 煩惱無辺誓願斷), is the determination to dissolve all delusory attachments. Her *waka* accompanying this vow reads:

There are countless delusions,  
but the closest ones to me are the five detriments.

(*kazōbeki/ hō mo nakeredo/ mi ni chikaki  
mazu wa itsutsu no/ sawari nari keru*—poem #2).

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those who tried to humiliate him (see Sakamoto and Iwamoto 1976, 3: 133). Among the Japanese Buddhists, Nichiren emulated the act of this “never disparaging bodhisattva.”

<sup>21</sup> They stand for “the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha,” and mean “Buddhism.”

Here, by “five detriments” (J. *itsutsu no sawari*), she is referring to the “five hindrances” or “obstacles” (J. *goshō*) ascribed to women, which we saw earlier (see Sect. 2.3.2, above). To be born into a female body may be a cause of “delusory thoughts” (J. *bon'nō*), but she vows to annihilate any obstacle associated with being born in a female body. For the third vow, “Inexhaustible is the Buddhist teaching but I vow to understand it” (J. *hōmon mujin seigan chi* 法門無尽誓願知), she expresses her resolution to penetrate into the depth of Buddhist teaching. Her *waka* reads:

How I wish to attain ‘awakening’ (*satoru koto*),  
even if I hear it is a narrow gate to enter.

(*ikanishite/ tsukushite shiran/ satoru koto*  
*iru koto kataki/ mon to kike domo*—poem #3).

For the fourth vow, “May I bear witness to the supreme enlightenment” (“*Mujō bodai seigan shō*” 無上菩提誓願証),<sup>22</sup> she alludes to the Pure Land teaching:

I wish to be reborn on the highest rung of the lotus pedestal  
that blooms in nine ranks!

(*kokono shina/ sakahiraku naru hachisuha no*  
*ue no ue naru mi tomo naraba ya*—poem #4).

The textual source of this teaching of “nine ranks” is in the *The Sūtra on the Meditation of Immeasurable Life* (J. *Kanmuryōjūkyō* 觀無量壽經) (T 12.365).<sup>23</sup> We see that the faith in Amida Buddha was part and parcel of Daisaiin’s faith.

From this brief introduction to Daisaiin’s poems, we already observe that her *waka* poems are far from dry scholarly expositions and pedantic hermeneutical exercise on the Buddhist texts. On the contrary, they express her fervent religious yearning, and as such they are highly existential.

Next, Daisaiin turns to the *Heart Sūtra* (J. *Han’nya shingyō* 般若心經), which to this day occupies the central place in Buddhist practice in Japan. The recitation of this short *sūtra* may have been part of her daily devotion. She quotes the famous line, “*Shiki soku ze kū, kū soku ze shiki, jū-sō-gyō-shiki yakubu nyoze*” (“Form is empty, empty is form; the same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness”) (Conze et al. 1978: 54). Her accompanying poem reads:

Numerous teachings have been preached through the ages,  
but *this* is indeed the pristine *heart* of the teaching.

<sup>22</sup>This fourth vow is slightly differently from the one chanted in the Zen tradition, indicating that Daisaiin adhered to the Tendai teaching.

<sup>23</sup>There exists no Sanskrit or Tibetan text of this *sūtra*. This *sūtra* is commonly referred to as “*Kangyō*” 觀經. In this *sūtra*, the Buddha instructs Vaidehī, the wife of King Bimbisāra, how to meditate on the paradise, on the physical features of Amida Buddha, on his assistant Bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara (J. Kan’on 觀音 or Kanzeon 觀世音) and Mahāsthāmaprāpta (J. Daiseishi 大勢至), and so forth, in order to be reborn in Amida Buddha’s Paradise. It describes the nine “ranks” of humanity, classified according to the spiritual aptitude, maturity, and firmness of their faith.



(yoyo o hete/ tokikuru nori wa/ ookaredo/  
kore zo makoto no/ kokoro nari keru—poem #5).

Here, the emphatic “this” (J. *kore zo*) is said to refer not only to the *Heart Sūtra* but also to the Buddha’s message in the *Lotus Sūtra*, namely, the universal salvation of all sentient beings.

Next, she gives tribute to each of the “Ten Vows of Samantabhadra” (J. *Fugen jūgan* 普賢十願),<sup>24</sup> which were dear to the Buddhists of the Heian period. Her accompanying poems (poems #6–15) speak of her introspection and exertion at practice. I cite only one poem here, which accompanies the seventh vow of Samantabhadra—“I vow to bring forth the presence of the Buddhas in this world.”

The lovely moon that everyone looks up,  
may it shine peacefully,  
without being covered up by the cloud.

(mina hito no/ hikari o aogu/ sora no tsuki/  
nodokani terase/ kumogakure sede—poem #12).

The expression “*kumogakure*”—the moon hidden by the cloud—is a very common poetic locution, but here it works well, suggesting the brightness of the moon, the symbol of “enlightenment” which adds limpidity to her devotion.

Daisaiin next turns to scriptures either well-known or lesser-known—the *Sūtra of a Woman Changing Her Body to Attain Buddhahood* (J. *Ten’nyo jōbutsukyō* 転女成仏経),<sup>25</sup> the *Wish-Granting Wheel Sūtra* (J. *Nyoirinkyō* 如意輪経), the *Amida Sūtra* (S. *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*, J. *Amidakyō* 阿弥陀経), the *On the Guiding Principle* (J. *Rishubun* 理趣分),<sup>26</sup> the *Benevolent Kings Sūtra* (J. *Nin’nōkyō* 仁王経)<sup>27</sup> in two volumes, the *Sūtra on Baishajyaguru’s Vows* (J. *Hongan Yakushikyō* 本願薬師経),<sup>28</sup> and the *Sūtra of Long Life* (J. *Jumyōkyō* 寿命経 or *Issai Nyorai kongō*

<sup>24</sup>Appearing in the last concluding section of the *Huayan sūtra*, these ten vows were taken by Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, the protector and the supporter of those who engage in arduous religious practice. These vows are: (1) May I honor and worship all the Buddhas, (2) May I praise the Buddha, the Tathāgata, (3) May I generously perform religious giving, (4) May I confess and repent all my evil doings, (5) May I rejoice the merit of charity, (6) May I beseech the teaching, (7) May I earnestly bear witness to the Buddha’s presence in this world, (8) May I faithfully study the Buddha’s teaching, (9) May I always serve sentient beings, and (10) May I give back any merit that I accrue to the rest of the world (see Nakamura 2003: 170).

<sup>25</sup>Also known as “*Bussetsu tenyoshinkyō*” 佛説転女身経 (T 14.564.915–921), this *sūtra* was among the scriptures the Heian aristocrats tended to include at the time of the memorial service for their deceased female relatives. The first mention of this *sūtra* appears to be in the year 884 (see Nishiguchi 1987: 106–107). Apparently, this *sūtra* fell into oblivion by the fourteenth century.

<sup>26</sup>This is the 578th section of *The 600 Volume Great Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*. (T 7.220) (see Ishihara 1983: 107). I acknowledge Ian Astley for his help in finding the original text.

<sup>27</sup>The *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Sūtra of the Golden Light* (J. *Konkōmyōkyō*) and the *Nin’nōkyō* were considered the three Buddhist *sūtras* that had the power to “protect the country” (J. *gokoku sanbukyō* 護国三部経) (Ishihara 1983: 107).

<sup>28</sup>This *sūtra* was widely popular during the latter half of the Heian period as the *sūtra* that brought about happiness and wealth to this world by eradicating suffering (see Ishihara 1983: 108).

*daranikyō* 一切如来金剛陀羅尼經). What is of interest here is not so much the messages of these *sūtras* themselves as Daisaiin's poems, which contain precious information concerning her religious life.

The *Sūtra of a Woman Changing Her Body to Attain Buddhahood* (*Ten'nyo jōbutsukyō*), though a minor *sutra*, was not to be bypassed especially by women, because of its subject matter. It narrates the story of a female fetus turning into male in the mother's womb, as it intently listens to the Buddha's sermon. Some interpret that the *sūtra* celebrates the female body as the carrier of all humanity. Some interpret that the underlying presupposition of this *sūtra* is the empty nature of sexes that guarantees women their attainment of perfect awakening. The passage Daisaiin quotes from the *sūtra*, however, is actually not found in the original, suggesting that she knew *about* this *sūtra* but never read it (Ishihara 1983: 110). This bespeaks the status of this *sūtra*, which was recited in the service performed for women (but not read and studied). Her *waka* has the play on the word "turn":

Upon encountering the teaching specifically preached for women, I rejoice;  
I 'turn' to it and listen to the story of a female body 'turning' into male.

(*toriwakite/ tokareshi nori ni/ ainureba/  
mi mo kaetsu beku/ kikuzo ureshiki*—poem #16).

Her poem "On the Guiding Principle" (the *Rishubun*) frankly describes her paradoxical position of officially being a high Shintō priestess while privately a practitioner of the Bodhisattva-path. It reads:

Every morning when the sun rises, I offer my prayer to the Shintō god,  
but no one knows that my heart is set on the west.

(*izuru hi no/ ashita goto ni wa/ hito shirezū/  
nishi ni kokoro wa/ iru to naranan*—poem #19).

Here, "every morning when the sun rises" refers to the *Saiin's* daily worship of the deity of Kamo Shrine, and "the west" is the direction of Amida Buddha's paradise, on which her heart is "set"—a kin-word associated with the fact that the sun "sets" in the west. In this poem the themes of the devotion to Amida Buddha's paradise, the merit of spreading the Buddhist teaching to bring about peace to the land, and the reaffirmation of women being able to attain rebirth in the Buddhist paradise are all seamlessly interwoven with her observance of the daily Shinto prayer at dawn.

In the poem accompanying the *Sūtra of Long Life* (*J. Jumyōkyō*), she reveals her self-understanding that her devotion to Buddhist teaching is directed to the benefit of all sentient beings. She adds, somewhat whimsically, the lifespan of such a devoted person must not be cut too short. Indeed, Daisaiin lived to the age of 72, when the average life expectancy of those days was under 50. Her poem reads:

I uphold the teaching for the sake of all sentient beings—  
I wonder if it allows me to live a little while longer.

(yosobito no/ tame ni tamoteru/ nori yue ni/  
kazunaranu mi ni/ hodo wa henu ran—poem #23).

The expression, “for the sake of all sentient beings” or “for the sake of other people” (*yosobito no tame ni*), captures the essence of bodhisattva practice. Apparently, the recitation of the *Sūtra of Long Life* was believed to bring happiness to all beings.

### (c) *The Lotus Sūtra*

The *waka* collection reaches its height in this portion dedicated to the 28 chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which was considered “the King of the *Sūtras*.” Because of its preeminent status, it was often accompanied by the *Sūtra of Inexhaustible Significance* (J. *Muryōgikyō* 無量義經), otherwise known as the “Opening *Sūtra*” (J. *Kaikyō* 開經), and the *Sūtra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra* (J. [*Kan*] *Fugenkyō* 觀普賢經), known as the “Closing *Sūtra*” (J. *kekkyō* 結經).<sup>29</sup> Her collection follows this convention. Here below, only several select chapters will be treated, which best illustrate Daisaiin’s spirituality.

For the opening chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* she composed a surprisingly light-hearted poem, which says that her early morning Shintō prayer obliges her to sleep through the night. It reads:

I know that there are those who solely devote themselves  
to the Buddha’s teaching without sleeping at night;  
how deplorable it is that I spend my nights in dreams!

(*nuru yo naku/ nori o motomeshi/ hito mo aru o/  
yume no naka nite/ sugosu mi zo uki—poem #25*).

Her poems dedicated to the *Lotus Sūtra* are often imbued with exquisite sensitivity for the beauty of nature. For instance, for Chap. 2, “On the Expedient Means,”<sup>30</sup> she selects the passage which reads that even a single flowering branch dedicated to a statue (or a painted image) of the Buddha is meritorious, and that just as the fragrance of the flowers wafts in the air, the person who performs such a devotional act forms a “spiritual kinship” (J. *kechien* 結緣) with the Buddha (Sakamoto and Iwamoto 1976, 1: 116). Her poem reads:

The scent of the flowers I offer in my devotion to the Buddha is my guide—  
may it lead me to encounter innumerable Buddhas intimately.

(*hitotabi no/ hana no kaori o/ shirube nite/  
musu no hotoke ni/ aimizarama ya—poem # 26*).

<sup>29</sup>These three are referred to as the “threefold *Lotus Sūtra*” (J. *Hokke sanbukyō* 法華三部經). Emulating examples of the Great Saiin and others, a practice emerged to compose *waka* poetry to the group of five *sūtras* (*The Amida Sūtra* and *The Heart Sūtra* together with the threefold *Lotus Sūtra*) and came to be known as the “poems dedicated to the *Lotus Sūtra* in full” (J. *Hoke gukyōka* 法華具經歌).

<sup>30</sup>These English titles are taken from Hurvitz (1976).

The poem accompanying Chap. 17, “Discrimination of Merits,” talks about the imagery of a bird, which probably is an allusion to “non-attachment,” echoing the passage in the *Great Meditation Text* (J. *Makashikan*)—“a bird flies in the sky but leaves no trace.”<sup>31</sup> Her poem reads:

When the blossoms scatter all around me, I am momentarily bewildered—  
are they the birds flying down from the heavens?

(*iroiro no/ hana chirikureba/ kumoi yori/  
tobikau tori to/ mie magai ken*—poem #41).

In her poem for Chap. 19, “The Merits of the Dharma-Preacher,” Daisaiin mentions her daily morning toilette, which is an occasion for her to reflect on the passage of time, as her reflection in a mirror tells her how everything passes with time:

How ashamed I am to see what is reflected in the clear mirror—  
for the mirror clouds no image.

(*kumori naki/ kagami no uchi zo/ hazukashiki/  
kagami no kage no/ kumori nakereba*—poem #43).

The hand-polished mirror was an object of luxury in those days. Besides, a “mirror” is rich in symbolism both in the Shintō and Buddhist traditions. Daisaiin’s reference to a mirror can be interpreted to refer to both traditions—the mirror in Shintō is associated with the sacred object that brought the Sun Goddess Amaterasu out of the heavenly cave; the mirror eventually came to be identified with Amaterasu herself and stands for such qualities as “purity,” “truth,” and “honesty.” The mirror in the Buddhist tradition refers to the original nature of consciousness that reflects reality undistorted but stores nothing, and hence stands for high degree of awareness.

For the fifth chapter of the *Sūtra* “Medicinal Herbs,” in which the Buddha’s compassion is likened to the rain that nurtures shrubs and trees of all sizes alike, her poem delicately combines her appreciation of the beauty of nature and the Buddha’s compassion:

Although the color of the flowers blooming on the branch I offer to the Buddha  
appear to be the same,  
The scent of the flowers on the branch pointing to the west  
seems to increase its strength slightly more!

(*hitotsu iro ni/ waga mi utsuredo/ hana no iro mo/  
nishini sasu e ya/ nioi masu ran*—poem #29).

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<sup>31</sup>According to the *Makashikan*, “Birds fly in the air but do not dwell in the air. Even though birds do not dwell in the sky, humans still look for their traces in the sky” (Sekiguchi 1966, 1: 296).

This poem, containing such words as “*hana*” (flower), “*iro*” (color), and “*waga mi*” (my physical existence), readily brings to my mind the famous poem by Lady Ono no Komachi:

The color of the flower has faded indeed,  
reflecting the appearance of my life—  
as if a long rain has fallen on me.

(*hana no iro wa/ utsuri ni keru na/ itazura ni  
waga mi yo ni furu/ nagame seshima ni*). (see Saeki 1958: 124)

The contrast between the two poems, however, is striking. While Daisaiin’s poem expresses her devotion to Buddhist practice and her spiritual longing for rebirth in Amida Buddha’s paradise, the poem by Ono no Komachi is a simple, though elegant, poem of gentle self-lament permeated with the sense of melancholy.

For Chap. 10 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Daisaiin depicts the serene beauty of her abode. This resonates with the observation made by Lady Murasaki below:

In the deep night, when the sky is clear and my heart is calm,  
The predawn moon grows brighter still.

(*sora sumite/ kokoro nodokeki/ sayonaka ni  
ariake no tsuki no/ hikari o zo masu—poem #34*).

Daisaiin occasionally hints at the darker night of the soul, but she is assured by the compassionate teaching of the Buddha, which sheds bright light even in the darkest night. Had she not encountered the Buddha’s teaching, she would have been lost in a dark abyss. Her poem reads:

If the bright light of the moon had not shone,  
I would still be walking on the dark path all alone.

(*sayaka naru/ tsuki no hikari no/ terasazu wa,  
kuraki michi o ya/ hitori yukamashi—poem #45*).

The two important chapters in the *Lotus Sūtra* that directly address women’s attainment of enlightenment are Chap. 12, “Devadatta,” and Chap. 24, “The Bodhisattva Fine Sound.” While the former chapter features the daughter of the Naga king whose body burns into male as she attains enlightenment (see Sect. 2.3.2, above), in the latter Myōon Bodhisattva changes his male body into female—in both cases making the point that the distinction between male and female is only tentative and nothing to do with each person’s ability to attain Buddhahood. Daisaiin’s poem for the “Devadatta” chapter reads as follows:

Because there is the precedence that even the obstructions present no obstacles,  
it leads me to hope that there is no cloud that separates me from enlightenment.

(*sawari ni mo/ sawaranu tameshi/ ari kereba,  
hedatsuru kumo mo/ araji to zo omou—poem #36*).

“*Sawari*” 障 here is the allusion to the “five obstacles” (J. *goshō* 五障), mentioned earlier (also see poem #2, above). For Chap. 24, “Bodhisattva of Fine Sound,” this is her poem:

Oh, Bodhisattva Fine Sound,  
you are the only one who willingly takes on the despised female body,  
for the sake of bringing the Buddha’s teaching to women!

(*kakubakari/itou ukimi of kimi nomizo*  
*nori no tame ni to/narikawari keru*—poem #48).

#### (d) The Closing Section

In the concluding section of the collection, Daisaiin first turns to the *Nirvana Sūtra* (J. *Nehan-gyō* 涅槃經), which contains the last sermon of the Śākyamuni Buddha followed by his passing. After that she concludes her collection with the “prayer to redirect the fruit of religious merits to the benefit of the world” (J. *ekōmon* 回向文) taken from Chap. 7 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, “The Parable of the Magic City”: “May the merits accumulated by the good deeds of the bodhisattvas be given back to all sentient beings so that they will all attain Buddhahood” (願以此功德、普及於一切、我等與衆生、皆共成仏道) (Sakamoto and Iwamoto 1976, 2: 52). The following is her poem of the prayer and hope:

Whatever the exertion it may be required of me,  
I wish that everyone—those whom I know and do not know—  
be reborn on the lotus pedestal as my companions.

(*ikani shite/shiru mo shiranu mo/ yono hito of*  
*hasu no ue no/ tomo to nashiten*—poem #55).

### 3.1.4 Shintō and Buddhist Spiritualities in Daisaiin’s Faith

As we saw above, Daisaiin considered her public social responsibilities of being the high Shintō priestess (*Saiin*) not in conflict with her personal pursuit of the bodhisattva-path. In fact, it appears that her consciousness of being the *Saiin* allowed her to expand her awareness to embrace the aspiration of “saving all sentient beings.” In her the Shintō sensibility and Buddhist spirituality appear to have mutually deepened her contemplation and religious practice. Her daily sunrise Shintō prayer for the well-being of the people and the prosperity of the land was, after all, not inimical to the bodhisattva-path. The Shintō observance of ritual cleanliness could easily translate into Buddhist practice of eradicating delusory thoughts and ego-bound defiled mental attitudes. We may conclude then that the life of pure disinterested selfless devotion to a Shintō god was *conducive*, at least in her case, to leading a contemplative life. *Genuine spirituality does not have to be exclusive*, and it can transcend the “labels” of Shintō, Buddhist, etc. A quiet life of relative seclusion from the world of daily affairs heightened her sense of seasonal beauty of natural surroundings as well as her appreciation of the “impermanence” of all things.

Leading a celibate life in relative seclusion in reasonable comfort must have been also conducive to living the life of “spiritual retreat.” It must be mentioned here that not all the *Saiin* and *Saigū* princesses were cut out for this spiritual lifestyle, and some were, in fact, dismissed from the office for breaking the codes of behavior.

This explains to a great extent why for the majority of *Saigū* and *Saiin* princesses of Daisaiin’s days there was no problem to embrace Buddhism, especially after they stepped down from the Shintō office. In that sense Daisaiin’s case, although exceptional, is nothing unusual.

Daisaiin was a contemporary of such great female authors as Lady MURASAKI Shikibu 紫式部 and Lady SEI Shōnagon 清少納言. In fact, legend has it that Murasaki wrote her epic novel *The Tale of Genji* around 1008 in response to the request made by Daisaiin for a new read for her diversion. Lady Murasaki described the atmosphere of Daisaiin’s mansion located in the northern outskirts of Kyoto, thus:

The palace of the *Saiin* impresses me to be a place of refined elegance... .

Whenever I make an occasional visit there to view the beautiful moonlit night or the marvelous dawn skies, to appreciate cherry blossoms, or the song of the cuckoos, the *Saiin* Princess seems to be fully content with her elegant lifestyle, and the place gives out the otherworldly aura shrouded in the mystique of something holy. (Nakano 1994: 194)

### 3.1.5 The Period of *Mappō*: The Spiritual Milieu in Daisaiin’s Days

Daisaiin’s devotional poems contained in her *Hosshin waka-shū* serve as a window into the complex facets of Japanese Buddhist practices of the turn of the first millennium C.E. It was the time permeated with fervent religious devotion. Daisaiin died in 1035—only less than two decades prior to 1052 C.E., when the “last period of the Buddha’s teaching” (J. *mappō* 末法) was supposed to commence. People of all walks of life anxiously anticipated changes to come about with the period of degeneration of the Buddhist dharma. (This vague anxiety and fear were not something unique to Japan; Joachim of Fiore, ca. 1132–1202, for instance, built his theology on the prevailing sentiment of his time that the apocalyptic period was approaching.)

In this milieu, the Tendai monk Genshin 源信 (942–1017) composed the *Essentials of Salvation* (J. *Ōjōyōshū*), and published it in 985, and in 986, which was the year Princess Senshi was born, he established the *nenbutsu* group at Yokawa, a remote corner of the monastic compound on Mount Hiei, in order to practice the devotion to Amida Buddha. The lay co-founder of this group, YOSHISHIGE no Yasutane 慶滋保胤 (935–1002), a renowned poet, soon renounced poetry as giving reins to the “fictitious power of imagination” and became a monk. Even the most formidable political figure of the day, Prime Minister and Chancellor FUJIWARA no Michinaga 藤原道長 (966–1027) spent his last years totally devoted to his Buddhist practice, warmly embracing the *Lotus Sūtra*. His devotion was so outstanding that he came to be compared to such revered figures as Prince Shōtoku and Master Kōbō 弘法大師 (or Kūkai 空海, 774–835) (Matsumura and Yamanaka



1964, 1: 448). Daisaiin was familiar with all these figures.<sup>32</sup> For instance, Michinaga was enormously gratified by Daisaiin blessing his two grandchildren (both of whom later became emperor), during the Kamo festival procession of 1010, blessings she conferred from within her oxen-drawn carriage. A poetry exchange of gratitude and further blessings followed this occasion between Michinaga and Daisaiin (Matsumura and Yamanaka 1964, 1: 294).

Daisaiin's poetry collection indeed eloquently captures the prevalent spiritual milieu of her time. Her Buddhist practice was in keeping with the instructions developed by the Tendai monastics on Mount Hiei. She chose the message of the *Lotus Sūtra* over the Shingon rituals that were also performed at the emperor's court. We only need to recall her mention of the Shingon practice of the meditation on the "Sound A" in her Preface to her poetry collection.

### 3.1.6 Daisaiin and the Imperial Ladies

Imperial ladies and women of high-birth were among the important Buddhist patrons during the turn of the first millennium; not only the reigning emperors but also imperial consorts hosted the most celebrated event called the *Hokke hakkō* 法華八講, which was a four-day-long celebration of the *Lotus Sūtra*, that included the recitation and exposition of each chapter by the eminent monks.<sup>33</sup> *Hokke hakkō* was an elaborate event, and to host it was extremely costly, but it came with great prestige. (SEI Shōnagon in her *Pillow Book* observed that an invitation to one of these events was received with great satisfaction by the guests). For instance, Empress Dowager Senshi 詮子 (962–1001/1002), the elder sister of FUJIWARA no Michinaga and the principal wife of Emperor En'yū, hosted a *Hokke Hakkō* in 991 (probably in memory of her deceased husband). On that occasion she extended her invitation to Daisaiin. The latter, however, could not accept the invitation on account of her being the *Saiin*. This is where the social and personal spheres collided. Expressing her regrets, Daisaiin composed the following *waka* and sent it along with a gift of a small carved tortoise to the Empress Dowager:

Being the tortoise living in Mitarashi River<sup>34</sup>  
 I am piling up evil karmic deeds.  
 How am I to encounter the floating log of the precious teaching?

<sup>32</sup> Genshin, for instance, was invited to the court of Emperor En'yū in 974, where he engaged in a debate with a priest from Tōdaiji in Nara. The princess Senshi was then 11 years old. The news of this event must have reached her ears, even if she was not present at the debate.

<sup>33</sup> The 28 chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra*, together with the "opening" and "closing" *sūtras*, were divided into eight segments (with varying length of two to four chapters), and every day renowned monks and priests, all invited by the host, went over two segments, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon session, covering the entire chapters of the *Sūtra* over the period of four days.

<sup>34</sup> This is the river that runs through the Upper-Kamo Shrine precinct, where the *Saiin* performed her annual ritual ablutions.

(*gō tsukusu/ imtarashigawa no/ kame nareba  
nori no ukigi ni/ awanu narikeri*). (Ishihara 1983: 260)<sup>35</sup>

Here, the words “floating log” and the “tortoise” refer to the Indian Buddhist parable of a blind turtle swimming in the vast ocean, and when it pulls out its neck from under the water, it finds itself poking through the hole of a floating log—meaning how rare and precious it is to be born a human being and rarer still is it to encounter the Buddha’s teaching (Nakamura 1982: 95).<sup>36</sup>

In 1026, when the Empress Dowager Akiko 彰子 (or Shōshi, 988–1074), the eldest daughter of FUJIWARA no Michinaga and the principle consort of the late Emperor Ichijō, became Cloistered Imperial Lady Jōtōmon’in 上東門院 on receiving a full Buddhist ordination as a nun, Daisaiin sent this poem to her:

Even *you* have entered the path of truth.  
I alone am lost, forlorn, in the long dark night.

(*kimi sura mo/ makoto no michi ni/ irinu nari/  
hitori ya nagaki/ yami ni madowamu*). (Ishihara 1983: 261)<sup>37</sup>

These exchanges of poems reveal that Daisaiin maintained close contact with these imperial ladies. It is perhaps through them that Daisaiin was able to obtain various Buddhist *Sūtras*, sermons and writings of famous monks, and other related materials on Buddhism.<sup>38</sup> An old story has it that Daisaiin had in her possession a three-foot tall statue of Amida Buddha, and that she offered her daily recitation of the passages from the *Lotus Sūtra* seated before this statue (Takahashi 2001, 1: 47). In those days, courtiers and ladies were well versed in the *Lotus Sūtra*, and some court ladies could even recite the entire *sūtra* by heart!

Although the *Saiin*’s mansion at Murasakino was set apart from the outside world, it was by no means sealed off, and there were frequent comings and goings. Daisaiin’s poem shows that even an itinerant monk was invited to come into the mansion, when she heard him passing outside her place one early pre-dawn morning, chanting aloud the name of Amida Buddha. She told her lady-in-waiting to ask him to come in so that she could hand him the poem she jotted down impromptu. The poem reads:

Hearing the chanting voice of “*Amida-butsu*,”  
I awoke from my slumber.  
I saw the setting moon hanging low in the western sky!

<sup>35</sup>This poem is compiled in the imperially commissioned *waka* collection, *Shūiwaka-shū* (ca. 1005).

<sup>36</sup>This parable dates back to the early days of Buddhism, the time of the *Tēriḡātā* (see Nakamura 1982: 95).

<sup>37</sup>This poem was compiled in the imperially commissioned *Goshūi waka-shū*. Concerning the ordination of Empress Shōshi and the issues surrounding the female ordinations of that time, see Meeks (2006).

<sup>38</sup>It is fully possible that a year before she was chosen as the Saiin priestess, Princess Senshi may have heard about Genshin’s splendid performance as a debater, which took place at the court of Emperor En’yū in 974. Genshin later authored the *Essentials of Salvation*.

*(Amidabutsu to/ tonauru koe ni/ yume samete/  
nishi e katabuku/ tsuki o koso mire).* (Ishihara 1983: 262)<sup>39</sup>

The moon was the symbol of the Buddha's teaching or enlightenment, as mentioned earlier, and the direction of the "west" is, of course, that of Amida Buddha's paradise. The mention of the itinerant "holy man" (J. *hijiri* 聖) is of interest, as many greatly gifted monks deliberately left the prestigious monastic center of Mount Hiei in those days in order to distance themselves from the political influences of the imperial court.

## 3.2 The Second Strand: The Grace of Amida Buddha

### 3.2.1 Saiin Princess Shikishi's Pure Land Faith

Imperial Princess Shikishi 式子, (1149–1201), or Noriko, sometimes called Shokushi, was the third daughter of Emperor Goshirakawa 後白河天皇 (1127–1192), who skillfully maneuvered to keep his political power intact at the critical period of domestic turbulence marked by the fierce military conflicts between the Taira (or the Heike clan) and the Minamoto (or the Genji clan). These military conflicts ushered in the establishment of military government in Kamakura in 1192, headed by MINAMOTO no Yoritomo (1147–1199), which put an end to the Heian Period. Princess Shikishi, like Daisaiin Senshi, was chosen as *Saiin*, and served the office for 11 years, 1159–1169.

Shikishi is best known as a superbly gifted poet, and as many as 42 of her poems were included in the imperially commissioned poetry collection, *Shinkokin waka-shū* (1205). Her fame as a poet even gave rise to a noh play titled *Teika*, in which FUJIWARA no Teika 藤原定家 (1162–1241), the arbiter of poetry and one of the six compilers of the *Shinkokin waka-shū*, is depicted as the unrequited lover who sought Princess Shikishi's attention. The medieval mind made a romantic association between the two outstanding poets in this noh play, but this is merely a fiction. Shikishi had FUJIWARA no Shunzei 藤原俊成 (1114–1204), Teika's father, as her poetry teacher, and it was Shunzei who recommended Teika to the position of chief steward of the Princess's household. Teika not only took care of the princess's estates but also moved in the same poetry circle led by Shunzei, so their paths naturally crossed.

What is lesser known is that Shikishi embraced Buddhism sometime in the 1180s, and received the precepts, probably from Hōnen, the founding figure of the Japanese Pure Land Sect. In 1191, she received the full ordination, with the Buddhist name of Shōnyobō 承如房.<sup>40</sup> To be fully ordained meant in her case that she led a

<sup>39</sup>This poem, compiled in the collection *Kin'yō waka-shū*, is prefaced as: "On an August night, when the moon was bright, I heard a "holy itinerant monk" (J. *hijiri*) calling out the name of Amida; I had him come into the mansion, and asked one of my ladies-in-waiting to hand this poem to him."

<sup>40</sup>The identity of Shōnyobō was not known until Kishi (1955) discovered her as the Imperial Princess Shikishi.

life dedicated to religious practice without leaving her mansion, which was a bequest of her father, the former Emperor Goshirakawa.

### 3.2.2 Princess Shikishi: The Poet of Love and Nature

Shikishi was chosen by divination to serve the office of *Saiin* in October 1159, one year after the enthronement of Emperor Nijō (r. 1158–1165). (In 1158, Shikishi's elder sister had been chosen as *Saigū*). This enthronement of the new emperor was politically calculated by her father, Goshiraka, who abdicated the throne to maintain his influence as the Former Emperor. Though the political situation was highly volatile, the lives of the imperial ladies and princesses seem to have been relatively untouched by it. Nevertheless, the air of dynamic change in the outside world reflected on the general mood of the *waka* poetry of this period.

Shikishi's *waka* poems are no exception. Moreover, they are surprisingly fresh and timeless in tone and imagery, especially when she describes nature's beauty. Her poems that recall her days of *Saiin* especially reverberate with the sound of deep valleys and forests, which formed the backdrop of the Shintō rituals in which she took part. In comparison with the days of Daisaiin (in office, 975–1031), by the time Shikishi became *Saiin* (in office, 1159–1169), the protocol and rituals of the Office of *Saiin* appear to be much more regulated and fixed. For instance, the practice of the annual observation of a “hierophany,” or “the manifestation of god” (J. *miare* みあれ or 御阿礼) was instituted sometime after Daisaiin's time. *Miare*, still observed to this day in a symbolic manner, is a ritual in which the *Saiin* spent a night in the open field midway between the Sacred Hill (called “Kōyama” 神山, literally “god's hill”) and Kamigamo Shrine. The deity Wakeikazuchi is believed to descend onto this sacred hill from heaven and spend the night together with the *Saiin* princess. Her poem, prefaced as “at Kandachi 神館,”<sup>41</sup> refers to this “*miare*” ritual. Her recollection evocatively invites the reader to the dew-laden field:

How can I forget? The *malva* leaves tied together with the grass,  
to rest my head on it to slumber in the open field—and the dew laden dawn!

(*wasure me ya/ aoi o kusa ni/ hikimusubi/  
karine no nobe no/ tsuyu no akebono*—Poem #23).<sup>42</sup>

In another poem, composed in 1200, a year before her death, and prefaced with these words: “the time when I once was the sacred high priestess (*itsuki*),” she vividly recalls her youthful memory of having spent a night in the open field:

A cuckoos' cry above my pillow  
in the sacred hill of a night's journey.

<sup>41</sup> *Kandachi* was a temporary “abode” erected on the sacred spot, where once a year, a few days prior to the Kamo Festival, the *Saiin* princess stayed overnight. The deity would come to her in her sleep.

<sup>42</sup> Princess Shikishi's poems are numbered, more or less in a chronological order of the composition, although the exact dates of many poems remain within the realm of conjecture (see Oda 1995). This poem is compiled in the *Shinkokin waka collection* (see Sasaki 1997: no. 182).

I shall never forget the sky—  
A bird softly spoke to me in the dead of the night.

*(hototogisu/ sono kamiyama no/ tabimakura/  
ho no kataraiishi/ sora zo wasurenu—Poem #322).* (Oda 1995: 469–470)<sup>43</sup>

She stepped down from the office of *Saiin* on July 26, 1169, on account of her poor health (she was about 20 years old then). The poem, prefaced by this occasion, reveals her sadness in leaving the sacred office:

When the new sacred priestess of Kamo assumed the office, I proceeded to Karasaki, where I performed my last ablutions as the departing *Saiin*. The following day, I received an inquiry from an imperial princess,<sup>44</sup> who resided in Sōrinji in Higashiyama, and who sent me her kind words concerning my last day as *Saiin*. In response, I composed this poem:

Ah, the sacred stream of Mitarashi!  
I felt as if I no longer saw my reflection on the water  
As I performed my ablutions at the beach of Shiga  
My sleeves were drenched with the lake water and my tears.

*(Mitarashi ya/ kage tae hatsuru/ kokochi shite/  
Shiga no uraji ni/ sode zo nureni shi—Poem #307).* (Oda 1995: 447–448)<sup>45</sup>

A marked characteristic of Princess Shikishi's poetry is her directly entering into an intimate relationship with surrounding nature. She often speaks to the moon, birds, tree branches, grass, blossoms, and so on as a "thou." The following poem is a good example. It was composed in 1199, the year when she began to feel ill and had the premonition of her approaching death. In this poem she is speaking to a plum tree in the garden next to the eaves, by assuming the perspective of the time when she would no longer be alive:

Even if "today" becomes the "olden days,"  
I am gazing at you, oh, plum tree next to the eaves!  
You shall never forget me.

*(nagame tsuru/ kyō wa mukashi ni/ narinu to mo/  
nokiba no ume wa/ ware o wasuru na—Poem #209).* (Oda 1995: 288–289)

### 3.2.3 Princess Shikishi's Buddhist Poems

Her poems dating from mid-1180 addresses Buddhist themes, indicating that the former *Saiin* was by then seriously devoted to Buddhist practice. The following *waka* refers to one of the ten vows of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, pledging that he would never abandon any soul at the time of death. The Princess's *waka* reads:

<sup>43</sup>The passage is compiled in *Shinkokin waka-shū*, no. 1486.

<sup>44</sup>This is identified as the daughter of Emperor Toba, Shōshi, or Nobuko (1145–1208).

<sup>45</sup>It is in the *Senzai waka-shū* (published in 1188); this poetry collection was compiled by Fujiwara no Shunzei.

Even on the eve when a soul departs from the land of its birth,  
the moonlight accompanies and sends it off—or so I understand.

(*furusato o/ hitori wakaruru/ yūbe ni mo/  
okuru wa tsuki no/ kage to koso kike*—Poem #308). (Oda 1995: 449–450)

We may recall that the “Ten Vows of Samantabhadra” were favorite themes of verification among the Heian nobility, as Daisaiin included them in her poetry collection (see Daisaiin’s Poem #12, above).

There is no written record of Princess Shikishi’s first encounter with Hōnen, but it is estimated that it must have been sometime in the 1180s, when the latter’s reputation began to spread among the court nobility as an outstanding charismatic religious figure. Hōnen’s name surfaces for the first time in 1181 in the diary, “Leaves of Jewel” (J. *Gyokuyō* 玉葉), kept by Prime Minister and later Regent KUJŌ Kanezane 九条兼実 (1149–1207), when Hōnen served as the spiritual teacher for the Chief Councilor of State, Lord FUJIWARA no Kunitsuna 藤原邦綱, who passed away on February 23, 1181 (Takahashi 1990, 5: 40). Lord Kunitsuna was a disciple of Hōnen, and Kanezane noted that he died peacefully. Kanezane belonged to the most powerful branch of the Fujiwaras and was very well connected. In his capacity of Prime Minister he handled the affairs of the state that involved the divination to select *Saigū* and *Saiin*. In 1189, Kanezane invited Hōnen to his mansion and asked him to expound on the *nenbutsu* practice. Eventually, Kanezane’s entire family—his wife Lady Kujō, and their daughter Ninshi—all embraced Hōnen as their spiritual teacher and received the precepts. Princess Shikishi probably came to hear about Hōnen when she was staying with her aunt Lady Hachijō (1137–1211), the beloved daughter of the late Emperor Toba; she was given the title of the Cloistered Lady in 1161, as the “godmother,” *junbo*, of Emperor Nijō. Lady Hachijō received constant visits from Lord Kanezane, and it is very probable that the name of Hōnen came up in their conversation. It appears that Shikishi received the formal Buddhist precepts and was fully ordained (*shukke*) under Hōnen, as mentioned earlier. We can approximate the year of her ordination, because FUJIWARA no Teika kept a diary, *Meigetsuki*, in which we read that when Cloistered Emperor Goshirakawa saw his daughter at a formal gathering in 1191—a year before his death—she showed up wearing a robe of subdued hue,<sup>46</sup> a sign that she had renounced this world. This was met with disapprobation by the Cloistered Emperor, who wanted his daughter to enjoy her secular prestige (Imakawa 1977, 1: 347).<sup>47</sup> Hōnen’s epistle addressed to Princess Shikishi mentions that by the time she received her full ordination, her faith had been firmly established in her Pure Land faith (Hōnen 1971: 198).

The following *waka*, composed in June 1193, speaks of Shikishi’s Pure Land faith. It is among the several poems of condolence composed for her teacher of

<sup>46</sup>Although the Japanese word for this is “*shukke*” 出家 (“renunciation of this world”), it appears that it makes better sense to understand it more as a serious lay-practitioner than a “nun.”

<sup>47</sup>FUJIWARA no Teika reminisced about Princess Shikishi, how she had to move out of the mansion of Lady Hachijō under the suspicion of having cursed her, and when she took the Buddhist precepts, how her father reacted to it (see Nishiki 1991: 361).

*waka*, FUJIWARA no Shunzei, upon the death of his beloved wife of 50 years. Echoing Hōnen's teaching that the loving souls will be reborn on the same lotus pedestal in Amida Buddha's Pure Land, she consoles the octogenarian teacher and friend in her poem:

May you have many more years to live and wake up in the same bed you shared with your wife.

Wait for the day when you will grace, like dew, a lotus pedestal together with your beloved.

(*ikutose mo/ wakare no toko ni/ okifushite  
naji hachisu no/ tsuyu o machi miyo*—Poem #403). (Oda 1995: 563–564)<sup>48</sup>

Any attachment, romantic or otherwise, constitutes a source of suffering, according to the Buddhist teaching, and yet in her deep trust of Amida Buddha's compassion, she rests assured that passionate attachments may be forgiven. Another poem, composed in the last year of her life, praises the message of the *Amida Sūtra* (*Amidakyō*) and the Amida Buddha's boundless compassion that receives all faithful into his paradise:

Though heavy it may be my sins formed on me like dew,  
No soul is allowed to fall.

(*tsuyu no mi ni/ musuberu tsumi wa/ omokutomo/  
morasaji mono o/ hana no utena ni*—Poem #351).

### 3.2.4 Shingon Buddhism and the Imperial Court

Princess Shikishi had a family connection to Shingon Buddhism. Her younger brother Prince Shukaku 守覚 (1150–1202) became a monk in 1160, and in 1169 (the same year she retired from the office of *Saiin*), became the sixth Abbot of the Imperially founded Nin'na Temple 仁和寺 in Kyoto, affiliated with the Shingon school. Shikishi's older sister Akiko was given the honorary title of the “mother of the emperor” of Prince Tokihito, the future Emperor Antoku, (r. 1180–83) and, in 1187, she was elevated to the rank of Cloistered Imperial Lady, *nyoin*, with the title *Inpumon'in*. She received a formal lay-initiation into the Shingon practice of “eighteen paths” in 1192 from Abbot Shukaku at Nin'naji. Shikishi herself was also elevated to the highest rank allowed to the imperial princesses and received a less formal lay-initiation in 1194—this time not from Abbot Shukaku but from his half-brother, Prince-Priest Dōhō 道法 (1166–1214). It is conjectured that the different treatment of Shikishi and her older sister may be due to the former's having already been ordained by Hōnen, and that a full-fledged initiation was deemed inappropriate to be administered at Nin'naji. Be that as it may, Dōhō was the disciple of Shukaku and eventually succeeded him as the seventh Abbot of Nin'naji. Although Princess Shikishi was thus initiated into the Shingon practice, it appears that it had little impact on her religious life. In the very last months of her life, priests from Nin'naji

<sup>48</sup>This poem was originally compiled in FUJIWARA no Shunzei's personal *waka* collection, *Chōshūsō* 『長秋草』 (1193), no. 187 (see Takayanagi 2008).



possibly tried to persuade her to switch her practice to Shingon from Pure Land, but in vain.

### 3.2.5 Hōnen's Letter to Princess Shikishi

Hōnen wrote a long letter to “Lady Shōnyobō,” “*Shōnyobō e tsukawasu ofumi*” (Hōnen 1971: 194–201), in response to the lady, who was very frail and did not expect to have too long to live. Hōnen begins this letter by apologizing for his long silence but also notes that “just recently I was thinking about how you may be getting on with your *nenbutsu* practice.” Hōnen had just began his concentrated *nenbutsu* practice period, known as “*betsuji nenbutsu*” 別時念仏, which required him to retreat from the outside world. His initial reaction was to interrupt his practice and visit the ailing imperial lady, but in the end he reasoned that in view of the radical impermanence of life, his earnest prayer for her would do more for her attainment of rebirth in the Pure Land than his earthly visit (Hōnen 1971: 194).

The remarkable thing about this letter is that Hōnen writes about his central conviction that one's rebirth in Amida's paradise is not determined by one's good deeds or acts, but it is solely due to the power of the Buddha's vows. It therefore follows that one does not necessarily have to have a teacher-priest at one's deathbed as the guide, but instead one must take Amida Buddha as the sole teacher-guide. Such a bold affirmation of faith was intended to reassure Shikishi from any doubts or fear. Hōnen promised her salvation on the merit of her unwavering faith alone, not to mention her accumulated daily practice of *nenbutsu*.

We learn from this letter that in the last weeks of Shikishi's life, “those around her” tried to sow doubts in her mind concerning her rebirth in the Pure Land. Considering such an act as interfering with her attainment of rebirth in the Pure Land, Hōnen writes:

Please do not be swayed by the words of even the wisest and most learned priests who, no doubt, deserve our respect. They may be truly accomplished in the matter of Buddhist doctrines, but their understanding (*satori* サトリ) of salvation is different from ours, and they adhere to a different type of religious practice from ours. Their words would present nothing but obstacles in your attaining rebirth in paradise, and they may actually take you further away from the direct contact with the presence of the Buddha. In that sense I would even say that they preach a harmful teaching. Please do not listen to what ordinary human beings (*bonpu* 凡夫) say, and solely trust the power of Amitābha Buddha's vow. (Hōnen 1971: 197)

Concerned for the Princess's last days and his not being able to be present at the moment of her passing, Hōnen goes on:

The merit of your accumulated daily practice of *nenbutsu* is more than enough for you to attain rebirth in the Pure Land, without a priest at your deathbed to guide you. Remain steadfast in unwavering faith till the end.

Even if there are people around you who tell you things contrary to your faith and sow doubts in your mind, you are not to waver. Instead, please have your ladies-in-waiting chant the *nenbutsu* so that you can hear it constantly and strengthen your concentration. Please discard the idea of having some ordinary mortal at your bedside as a guide to the Pure Land, but look to Amitābha Buddha as your true guide, and put utter faith in Him....

Close your eyes, put your palms together, calm your mind and meditate on your rebirth in the Pure Land. Think only of Amitābha Buddha and pray: “I beseech you, oh, Lord Amitābha Buddha, the compassionate one. I chant the *nenbutsu*, as your Vow is absolute. Please come to me at the time of my death, and lead me to your paradise.” And recite the *nenbutsu*. This is the supreme preparation you can make in meeting your own death. Remain strong.

Although I have decided to continue with my present seclusion, I do not go through this practice of continuous invocation of *nenbutsu* for my sake. Now that I know what you are going through, I shall invoke every single *nenbutsu* for your sake. May my concentrated prayer will assist you (*ekō* 廻向) to attain rebirth in the Pure Land. Even if I am not at your bedside, I am firmly resolved to lead you to perfect rebirth. If this intention of mine is pure and sincere, how can it fail to sustain you? I implore you please to place utter trust in my words. (Hōnen 1971: 198–199)

After Shikishi’s passing on January 25, 1201, her ladies-in-waiting remained in her mansion for one full year to remember her. The plum tree in the garden to which the princess called out never to forget her may have softened these ladies’s sorrow and consoled them from time to time.

### 3.2.6 Hōnen and Women’s Salvation

Through this brief study on Princess Shikishi’s religious life, Hōnen emerges as an impressive religious figure who had devoted followers, high and low in their social standings. Aside from his epistle to Princess Shikishi, several of his letters addressed to women (whether they were his disciples or not), explaining the tenets of the Pure Land faith, survive. One such a letter is his response to an inquiry into the merit of the Pure Land teaching by the eminent historical figure HŌJŌ Masako 北条政子 (1157–1225), who was MINAMOTO no Yoritomo’s widow and established the Hōjō regency.<sup>49</sup> Also extant is a letter addressed to Lady Kujō 九条殿北政所, the wife of Kujō Kanezane, mentioned above.<sup>50</sup> There is also a letter addressed to a female disciple who was of the non-aristocratic rank. In all these communications, addressed both to male and female followers, his teaching is consistently free of any misogyny, and there is no specific instructions tailored to female followers. It is safe to assume that discrimination based on the sexes was absent from his religious teaching. Hōnen simply describes why the path of devotion to Amida Buddha and the practice of *nenbutsu* are the surest way to attain rebirth in the Western Paradise. Sometimes he even goes into detailed explanations of technical terms used in the Pure Land scriptures—even to lay followers. His eagerness to communicate his understanding permeates all these letters, and the shortest written statement known as the “One Page Testament” (*Ichimai kishōmon* 一枚起請文) is no exception. This testament was a sort of “will” he composed two days before his death upon the

<sup>49</sup> See Hōnen’s “*Kamakura no nihon bikuni ni sinzuru ohenji*” 「鎌倉の二品比丘尼に進ずる御返事」 [“My Reply to the Lady-nun with the Second Court Rank in Kamakura”] (Hōnen 1971: 188–193).

<sup>50</sup> See Hōnen’s “*Kujō-dono no kitanomandokoro e shinzuru ohenji*” 「九条殿の北政所へ進ずる御返事」 [“My Response to Lady Kujō”] (Hōnen 1971: 193–194).

solicitation of his close disciples. The document is dated January 23, the second year of Kenryaku 建曆 (1212), and signed “Genkū” 源空, which was Hōnen’s dharma name given at the time of his ordination in his teens. Therein he reiterates his conviction that even the most learned scholarly monk must possess the simplicity of the illiterate ordinary folks, in order to devote himself to the practice of *nenbutsu*:

All of you who has faith in the *nenbutsu* practice—even if you are truly learned in the Buddhist scriptures and have the command of the latest Buddhist scholarship—should not flaunt your learning but just devote yourselves to the single-minded *nenbutsu* practice just like the illiterate ordinary men and women who take the Buddhist vow.<sup>51</sup>

Recent scholarly findings reveal that the discriminatory passages associated with Hōnen turn out to be later interpolations by his disciples, dating about 100 years after the master’s death.<sup>52</sup> These later interpolations include such pejorative statements, found in his *Commentary on the Sukhavatīvyūha Sūtra* (J. *Muryōjukyō-shaku* 無量寿経釈), as<sup>53</sup>:

Even though women possess two legs, there are hills, which they are prohibited to climb, and there are Buddha’s groves into which they are not allowed to enter. (Hōnen 1971: 55–56)

Careful reading of these blatantly misogynist passages reveals that the place names associated with these “forbidden precincts for women” came into being several decades after Hōnen’s death. (For instance, the Daigoji temple compounds actually had several temples run by nuns, where noble women took refuge during Hōnen’s days).

Modern scholars argue that the reason these misleading interpolations were inserted by Hōnen’s disciples was that they wished to establish their new sectarian identity. As a result, they resorted to the strategy to label women as spiritually inferior and being handicapped by the “five hindrances and three-fold submission” (“*goshō sanshō*”), thus requiring special assistance by monks and priests for their salvation. As mentioned in the Introduction, this was the rhetoric often employed by the Buddhist evangelists of medieval Japan, as they vied to gain women followers to enlarge their fold. Critical assessment of the traditional perception concerning women in Buddhism has been corrected by the new findings.<sup>54</sup>

Certainly this present study of Daisaiin and Princess Shikishi reveals very little institutionalized sexism existent in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In fact, some

<sup>51</sup> Genkū 源空 was the Buddhist name Hōnen received at the time he went up to Mount Hiei at age 13, in 1145 (Hōnen 1971: 163–164).

<sup>52</sup> A good source for this is “*Hōnen no nenbutsu to josei, nyōnin kyōkatan no seiritsu*” 「法然の念仏と女性、女人教化譚の成立」 [*Hōnen’s Nenbutsu Practice and Women: the Establishment of the Religious Stories to Guide Women*] (Imabori 1971: 67–107).

<sup>53</sup> For the full text of Hōnen’s text, “*Muryōjukyō-shaku*,” 無量寿経釈, see *Hōnen Ippen* (Hōnen 1971: 55–56).

<sup>54</sup> Notably, KASAHARA Kazuo, a highly respected scholar, fell to this prejudicial view that had long been taken for granted. He accepted the misogynist statement found in Hōnen’s texts without raising any question (Kasahara 1975: 145–147).

priests went to the other extreme to praise woman as the mother of all the Buddhas. An intriguing entry is found in KIJŌ Kanezane's diary, in which the Prime Minister noted the occasion of a "*senbō*" 懺法.<sup>55</sup> *Senbō* was a Buddhist gathering that became widespread among the courtiers; it included the activity of copying the chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra* with the aim of cleansing one's accumulated mental defilements. It was often followed by a formal sermon delivered by a renowned priest. On this particular day on November 28, 1182, the *senbō* that took place at the imperial court was attended by some twenty men and women. Kanezane's diary reads:

The day of *senbō*. At the 10th hour of the day [i.e., 5–7 p.m.], the master-priest Reverend Chōken arrived. The service began. His sermon was eloquent and noble in spirit. All those who gathered there wiped their tears. We indeed have a precious preacher in this person of Chōken; he is truly to be treasured. In his sermon he referred to a passage from a commentary on the scripture that said: "All women are mothers of the Buddhas of the past, present, and future. In this regard, men are not the true fathers of the Buddhas. It is because when at the time of a Buddha's coming into this world, he temporarily takes the womb of a mother. It is true that inside the father's body, there is no union of *yin* and *yang*, let alone the fact of conception.... We receive our body not from the father but from the mother. In this respect, women are superior to men—such was the gist of his sermon. I must say that we do not often hear this kind of perspective, and it struck me to be novel and precious a point that merits our reflection. (Takahashi 1990, 5: 150)

From this rather quaint document, we could imagine that pejorative statements concerning women would have been against the prevailing sensibility of the day, especially coming from the mouth of so widely respected a Buddhist teacher-preacher as Hōnen.

### 3.3 *The Third Strand: Awakening*

#### 3.3.1 Zen Master Abbess Mugai and the Pioneer Feminist Raichō

Zen practice, introduced to Japan around 1200, spread quickly in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It represents for the purpose of this study the third major strand—that of the spiritual awakening or *satori*—that directly endorses the principle of universal accessibility of awakening regardless of the sexes.

In the thirteenth century, Japanese Buddhist monks, looking for a new type of practice, went to China and received their training there in Chan meditation, and brought back a fresh practice from the continent. What contributed to the transmission of Chan from China to Japan was also the political turmoil that accompanied the fall of the Song Dynasty and the establishment of the Yuan Dynasty. This occa-

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<sup>55</sup>Chōken 澄憲 (1126–1203), the son of FUJIWARA no Shinzei, made his name in 1174 with his efficacious prayer. He became a celebrated priest, whose presence was sought after by the court nobles. He excelled in preaching and became the founder of a special preaching style known as *Tendai shōdō* 天台唱導.

sioned eminent Chan masters to move to Japan, starting around 1250, especially upon the invitation of the successive Hōjō Regents, who desired to make Kamakura the seat of a new spiritual center. Women took advantage of this atmosphere of renovation and dynamic spiritual energy, and pursued zazen practice at major Zen temples, where they were warmly received by the masters, both Chinese and Japanese. In this way, Japanese female students were now able to attain “*satori*,” the awakening to the “real self.”

### 3.3.2 Zen Master–Abbess Mugai Nyodai

MUGAI Nyodai 無外如大 (1221–1298) was among the first generation of female Zen masters, if not the very first, who founded their own convents. The usual conjecture of Nyodai to be related to a warrior-class family is most likely based on misinformation (Yanbe 1998: 1–11). Although she is conventionally identified as “Adachi Chiyono,” critical scholarship points out that this conjecture turns out to be incongruous, indicating that possibly a biography of another woman (who is actually from the Adachi Family) got mixed up with Nyodai’s.<sup>56</sup> It is not even certain if her given name was “Chiyono.” In any case, sometime in her forties, she began her practice under Zen Master Shōichi 聖一 (or En’ni Ben’en 円爾弁円, 1202–1280). En’ni had gone to China, 1235–41, to study Chan teaching under Master Wuzhun Shifan 無準師範 (J. Bujun Shibān, 1178–1249). Upon his return to Japan, his reputation as an accomplished Zen master spread quickly among the nobles and the members of the imperial family, and he received their patronage and devotion. For some time he was appointed abbot to major temples, both in Kyoto and Kamakura, before he finally settled at Tōfukuji as its founding Abbot in 1255.

According to the extant letter known as “Nun Mugai Nyogai’s letter in *kana*” (“*Ama Mugai Nyodai kana-fumi*”), dated October 17, 1265, which she signed using her Buddhist name, “Nun Nyodai,” we learn that she had already been ordained by then and deeply engaged in her pursuit of the way (see Tachi 2008: 144). Therein, Nyodai mentions the principle teaching of “*kū*” (*śūnyatā*, emptiness) as something familiar to her, and expresses her determination to “get to the heart of the Buddha’s direct transmission” (*jika ni busseki daiden no okugi o kiwamu to omou*). From this letter, we learn that she is aware that she has yet to penetrate the core of Zen teaching and that she is convinced that the path to the breakthrough lies in meditation practice that is “beyond the ordinary study of Buddhist sūtras and commentaries” (*kyōron shosetsu no shinri o sutete*).<sup>57</sup>

The following is an episode which most likely concerns Nyodai and which touches on the conflict for women to practice meditation in a monastic setting with

<sup>56</sup> Such a conjecture as “Mugai Nyodai was born a daughter of the Adachi family closely related to the Hōjō regency of the Kamakura Shogunate” has had its day, but now it is critically questioned.

<sup>57</sup> The original letter is kept at the Miho Museum, and the image is accessible online at <http://www.miho.or.jp/booth/html/imgbig/00001030.htm>. The decoding of her handwriting is also online: <http://www.miho.or.jp/booth/html/doccon/00000525htm>. Both links were accessed on June 1, 2017.

fellow monks. In this story, despite En'ni's entreaty, the monks at Tōfukuji refused to practice with a nun, saying they could not concentrate on their *zazen* when a beautiful nun was among them. Thereupon she took up a burning coal and pushed it onto her face; the monks agreed to practice with her only after her face was thus disfigured. Whether this actually took place or not is a moot point as this story belongs to the genre of Zen stories and anecdotes in which beautiful women took such drastic measures to prove their sincerity and be allowed to practice.<sup>58</sup>

The next document that concerns Nyodai is about the donation of land by the Titular Empress of Kitayama (1196–1302) to “Abbess Nyodai” for the purpose of building a temple to render proper religious service to the deceased Emperor and pray for the peace and prosperity of the surviving imperial family members.<sup>59</sup> The emperor mentioned here is Emperor Gosaga (r. 1242–46), who died in 1272, and whose principal wife was Lady Kitayama's eldest daughter Kisshi (or Yoshiko, 1225–1292), who bore Emperor Gosaga two future emperors, Kameyama and Gofukakusa. During his lifetime, Emperor Gosaga had received the bodhisattva precepts from En'ni in 1257 (Furuta 1980: 302). Also, his second son, KŌHŌ Ken'nichi 高峰顕日 (1241–1316), was trained under En'ni and MUGAKU Sogen (see below), and eventually became a highly distinguished Zen master himself. Thus, Emperor Gosaga's immediate family members had multiple connections with Master En'ni. Nyodai, who must have had some connection with the Titular Empress of Kitayama, underwent a rigorous training under En'ni as well, as we touched on above. Nyodai, as a fully ordained nun, must have been in an ideal position to act on Lady Kitayama's request. She built the temple Keiaiji 景愛寺 at “Itsutsuji-Ōmiya” in Kyoto the following year (1278) on the donated land and became its founding Abbess. Thereafter, Nyodai came to be known as the “Abbess of Keiaiji.” Keiaiji later came under the protection of the Ashikaga Shogunate and was ranked as one of the five nunneries in Kyoto, or “*Kyoto amadera gozan.*”

In 1285, Abbess Nyodai traveled to Kamakura in order to further her practice under Mugaku Sogen 無学祖元 (C. Wuxue Zuyuan, 1226–1286), who arrived in Japan in 1279, fleeing Song China from the swords of invading Mongol soldiers.<sup>60</sup> He was invited by HŌJŌ Tokimune 北条時宗 (1251–1284), the Regent. Settling at Kenchōji at first, Sogen moved to Engakuji in 1282 as its founder (*kaizan* 開山). Nyodai's name is mentioned a few times in the “Words of National Master Bukkō” (J. *Bukkō Kokushi goroku* 佛光國師語録) (T 82.2549) that chronicled Mugaku's words and activities. By this time, the Abbess of Keiaiji had over two decades of Zen practice. Thus, it was not surprising that she quickly distinguished herself

<sup>58</sup> Barbara Ruch suggests that women's beauty must have been a source of trouble not only for the monastics but also for the male academics, east and west, since olden days (Ruch 2002: lxx–lxviii). Christine de Pizan (ca. 1363–1431) has a charming episode in *The Book of the City of the Ladies* that concerns Novella, the daughter of a learned doctor in Bologna (see de Pizan 1982: 154).

<sup>59</sup> The “document of land donation from Rihō” (J. *Rihō kishin jō* 理宝寄進状) mentions Shijō Teishi 四条貞子 (or the Titular Empress of Kitayama) (Yanbe 1993: 9, 13).

<sup>60</sup> He was bestowed the posthumous honorific title of the National Teacher Bukkō 仏光 (literally, “Buddha-Light”).

among the nuns and monks practicing under Sogen. She was given the dharma name “Mugai” 無外 by Master Mugaku, who took one character “Mu” 無 from his own name. Actually his name Mugaku, or Wuxue, had been bestowed on him by his Chinese master, WUZHUN Shifan or Bujun Shibān, under whom En’ni studied. Thus Nyodai trained within the same dharma lineage that extended from China to Japan.

By all accounts, Master Sogen was a benevolent teacher, encouraging everyone who came to him to practice zazen. His *Goroku* contains many names of laywomen as well as nuns who were among his students. According to the *Goroku*, Nyodai requested Master Sogen to test her understanding of Zen teaching. Thereupon he presented the Abbess with the kōan “Ōryō’s three barriers”—“What is the difference between your own hands and those of the Buddha’s? What is the difference between your own legs and those of donkeys? Each of us human beings are prepossessed with our own ideas; but with the original pure mind of precognitive activities, we can see through these conditions.” The Abbess of Keiaiji responded to each of these three points without hesitation, which demonstrated to the master her mature understanding of Zen teaching. Sogen acknowledged her awakening and bestowed on her the distinction of being one of his “dharma heirs” (J. *hassu* 法嗣) (T 82.2549.0220b26).<sup>61</sup> Mugai Nyodai’s name was entered into the official record of dharma lineage, which is exceptionally rare in the generally “androcentric” Zen monastic tradition of Japan.<sup>62</sup> On this memorable occasion of the formal recognition of her awakening, Nyodai composed the following *waka*:

The moon reflecting on the water could have been lost in ignorance  
Just like myself, a floating cloud, reflecting on the water.

(*shirade koso/ mayoi kitsuramu/ mizu no tsuki/  
ukaberu kumo no/ mi no tagui tomo*)<sup>63</sup>

Master Sogen seems to have had unconditional trust in Nyodai’s ability as an awakened woman and a gifted temple administrator. She appears to have been a woman of her own means. He appointed her in August 1286, shortly before his death on September 3, to build a temple to continue his teaching after his death (T 82.2549.249a24–26). In the following year she founded the temple Shōmyakutō’in 正脈塔院 (or Shōmyaku’in, today’s Shin’nyoji 真如寺) in Kyoto, probably on the property that was at her disposal, to continue the legacy of Master Sogen’s teaching and to venerate his relics. When Nyodai died in 1296, KŌHŌ Ken’ichi had the

<sup>61</sup>The specific passage depicting Mugai Nyodai’s transaction with Master Mugaku is quoted in “Mugai Nyodai no sōken jūin” (Yanbe 1993: 5, 13).

<sup>62</sup>In the initial phase of the Japanese Sōtō lineage chart, some nuns’ names appear in the dharma lineage chart, but that practice was discontinued, probably not for the lack of awakened female disciples but because of the “institutionalization” of Zen monastic organizations at large.

<sup>63</sup>Translation mine. For the photo of this poem see *Amamonzeki jūin no sekai* 『尼寺門跡寺院の世界』 [*Amamonzeki: A Hidden Heritage, Treasures of the Japanese Imperial Convents*] (Fister and Bethé 2009: 58). The original copy, in her own flowing hand, is kept at the temple Daishōji 大聖寺 in Kyoto.



Shōmyakutō' in temple renovated and appointed his dharma heir MUSŌ Soseki 夢窓疎石 (1275–1351)<sup>64</sup> as its abbot (see Musō 2010: 30).<sup>65</sup> From all these transactions, we have a glimpse of Mugai Nyodai as a capable nun of independent economic means. Her wooden image (*zazō* 坐像) is today treasured at Hōjiin Monzeki 宝慈院門跡 (an imperial convent) in Kyoto (see Ruch 2002: xliii–lxiii).

### 3.3.3 Female Zen Practitioners Confounded with Mugai Nyodai

Nyodai died in 1296, as mentioned above. Given the dates of Master Daitō (1282–1337), the following episode associated with her cannot have been about her. It is a risqué exchange of what is supposed to have taken place between a nun called Mujaku 無着<sup>66</sup> (who was confounded with Mugai) and the National Teacher Daitō 大燈国師 (SHŪHŌ Myōchō 宗峰妙超). One day Master Daitō passed by her over the Gojō Bridge in Kyoto and recognized the nun. Thereupon he called out to her: “Hey, I wonder why you are wearing a robe, when your name is ‘*mujaku*’ [meaning “not-wearing clothes”].” Upon hearing these words, the nun undid the sash and began to undress (Nishiyama 2009: 61).<sup>67</sup> This story has one point to ponder, namely, Nyodai may have also been called “Mujaku” at some point.

Also, a popular *waka* is associated with Nyodai, although it was composed by another woman whose name was Chiyono—a Chiyono of Mino province, who practiced Zen. The poem reads:

No matter how you look at it,  
when the bottom of the bucket falls away,  
it will not hold water nor will it keep the reflection of the moon.

(*tonikaku ni/ takumishi oke no/ soko nukete/  
mizu tamaraneba/ tsuki mo yadorazu*). (Nishiyama 2009: 56, 61; adapted)

The humor of this poem was so endearing that Master Hakuin 白隠 (1685–1768) drew a picture of a girl holding a wooden bucket the bottom of which was falling out, and inscribed this verse in the top left margin (see Nishiyama 2009: 56).

<sup>64</sup>He was a ninth-generation descendent of Emperor Uda (see Musō 2010: 3). This may explain his accepting the imperial princesses among his disciples.

<sup>65</sup>At the time of this appointment, Mugaku Sogen was designated as the temple's honorary founder and Musō was named as its second abbot. In 1342 Musō renamed Shōmyaku'an as Man'nenzan Shin'nyoji, taking the “temple name” (J. *sangō* 山号) of “Man'nenzan” in memory of master Mugaku (see Nishiyama 2009: 60). “Man'nenzan” 万年山, meaning the “ten thousand years old mountain,” was taken after the “*sangō*” of Mugaku's temple in Kamakura, Man'nenzan Shōzokuin 万年山正統院, which was the name of his master Wuzhun's “Wannienshan” 万年山 in Jingshan China.

<sup>66</sup>YANBE Hiroki hypothesizes that this nun Mujaku was a younger relative of Mugai Nyodai, and this possibly explains the confusion in the biographical information of these two women (Yanbe 1998: 1–11).

<sup>67</sup>This seems to be the kind of Zen exchanges D. T. Suzuki referred to as “risqué *mondō*” (Suzuki 1974: 46).

SUZUKI Daisetz, too, quoted this *waka* on a postcard to NISHIDA Kitarō, which he sent on a sultry August day with the following note: “The poet’s name is Chiyono, of some province I used to know but now I’ve forgotten. It is a female. If my memory is correct, she is from the Ashikaga period. I have no reference book at hand to check the facts” (Suzuki 2003: 631). The “Ashikaga” period is another name for “Muromachi” period (1338–1573). If Suzuki’s source is correct, Chiyono of Mino Province lived during the Muromachi period—at least a century after Abbess Nyodai.

### 3.3.4 Musō Soseki and Women Zen Practitioners

MUSŌ Soseki, succeeding the will of his teacher KŌHŌ Ken’ichi, continued the tradition of training female Zen students, and ordained, among them, several imperial princesses, some of whom became abbesses of their own convents.<sup>68</sup> The lineage of Mugaku-Mugai-Kōhō-Musō and Musō’s dharma heir SHUN’OKU Myōha 春屋妙葩 (1311–1388) appears to be important in terms of the female lineages of Zen practitioners in the fourteenth century. Much research needs to be conducted in this area, which is beyond the scope of this present essay. Imperial women trained under these masters themselves became master-teachers, and they greatly contributed to the flourishing of Buddhism, including the establishment of imperial convents (*amamonzeki* 尼門跡) in Kyoto.<sup>69</sup>

### 3.3.5 Chan and Japanese Female Zen Practitioners

During the Kamakura period, a considerable number of female students practiced Zen under Japanese and Chinese Chan masters, as mentioned earlier. It appears Chan masters received female students without putting up barriers, as we have already seen in the case of MUGAKU Sogen. Among other notable Chan masters who either settled in Japan or stayed several years in Japan were such eminent masters as RANKEI Dōryū (C. Lanxi Daolong) 蘭溪道隆 (1213–1278), the founder of Kenchōji in Kamakura, and GOTTAN Funei (C. Wuan Puning) 兀庵普寧 (1197–1276). Also Japanese masters who were trained in China, including such eminent figures as En’ni, Dōgen, and Kangan Giin 寒巖義尹 (1217–1300), continued this ethos and welcomed female students.<sup>70</sup> This raises a question as to the impact of the

<sup>68</sup> Abbess Musetsu Yu 無説喩 (d. 1363?) of Honkō’in Monzeki 本光院門跡, Abbess Karin Egon 華林惠巖 (d. 1386?) of Hōkyōji Monzeki 宝鏡寺門跡, and Abbess Chisen Shintsū 智泉聖通 (1309–1388) of Donkein Monzeki 曇華院門跡 were all ordained by Musō (see Fister and Bethe 2009: 67–82). “Monzeki” means “imperial convent,” where the imperial princesses lived and practiced Buddhism as nuns.

<sup>69</sup> The most informative publication on this point is *Amamonzeki, A Hidden Heritage* (Fister and Bethe 2009).

<sup>70</sup> KANGAN Giin, a son of Emperor Juntoku, had a considerable number of dedicated female followers in Kyūshū, where he established major temples.

Chan tradition on the training of Japanese female aspirants. Furthermore, Japanese monks who studied under those Japanese masters, that is, those who had been trained in China and brought back the continental practice, also inherited this egalitarian outlook. SHŪHŌ Myōchō, who later received the posthumous title Daitō Kokushi, mentioned above, for instance, was trained under NANPO Shōmyō or Jōmyō 南浦紹明 (1235–1308), who had studied in Song China, 1259–1267. Daitō Kokushi not only founded Daitokuji but also a nunnery called Myōkakuji 妙覺寺 in the vicinity of Daitokuji in 1331. This nunnery, however, disappeared from the temple record altogether by the early Edo period (see Takenuki 1993: 51–66).<sup>71</sup>

These Chan and early Zen masters, being cross-culturally informed, did not pay special attention to the idea of the “five hindrances, threefold submission” (*J. goshō sanshō* 五障三従)<sup>72</sup> which was slowly becoming a cliché among their contemporary proselytizing monks of other Buddhist sects such as the Vinaya (*J. Ritsu*) and Pure Land (*J. Jōdo*). Was there a specific cultural environment in China that acknowledged female monastics? It seems that in China of that time, women of prominent families had the choice of choosing a life in a convent as an alternative to marriage, and this may have contributed to the respectability of women in the Buddhist monastic system. A further study will no doubt yield a fuller answer to this question.

### 3.3.6 Dōgen on Women’s Spiritual Capacity

Dōgen’s 道元 (1200–1253) egalitarian understanding of women’s spiritual ability makes clearer sense in this context of the early Zen openness towards female practitioners. He studied in China, 1223–1227, under Master Rujing (*J. Nyojō*) 如淨 (1163–1228) at Tiantongshan (*J. Tendōzan*) 天童山, and during his practice he had occasions to witness firsthand how women practiced Chan meditation and how their attainment of awakening was publicly acknowledged by the monastic community at large, as well as by the Chinese imperial court.

In his *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏, on the chapter “*Raihai tokuzui*” 礼拝得髓 (“Paying Obeisance and Obtaining the Marrow of Teaching”), composed in 1240, Dōgen describes the Chinese customs which he witnessed:

Nuns pursue their zazen practice and once they attain awakening, the imperial court issues a decree to appoint her to a position of abbess in a nunnery. At the time of her installation she gives her dharma talk, at the master’s temple, where she had been practicing. At this ceremony her master as well as all the fellow monks are present and listen to her discourse, standing. After that, those monks engage in the exchange of questions and answers with the newly appointed abbess.

<sup>71</sup>An eminent monk establishing a nunnery was not unusual in those days. For instance, in 1223, predating Daitō Kokushi by over 100 years, a renowned master of the Shingi Kegon School, Myōe 明恵, founded Zenmyōji 善妙寺 for his female followers (see Matsuo 1996b: 109).

<sup>72</sup>The “threefold submission” refers to the traditional custom in which a girl obeyed her father when young, then her husband when married, and in her old age she obeyed her eldest son.

Dōgen's experience abroad also gave him the distance to look critically at Japanese practice, especially the custom of designating certain hills and mountains as the "sacred realm" (J. *kekkaï* 結界), into which women were forbidden to enter. He writes:

There is a laughable custom unique to Japan. Namely, they artificially draw boundaries around certain areas and call it sacred area or the hall of religious practice (*dōjō* 道場), into which nuns and women are forbidden to enter (*kekkaï*). This custom has been practiced for centuries now, and yet no one dares to question its validity.... Moreover, actually, those who dwell within the "sacred realm" freely break the ten precepts and commit weighty sins. Is it not the case, then, that those grave sinners actually disdain those who commit no sin, and that is why they prefer to live within the artificially marked realm? ...Those fellows are compounding their sins. Such a devilish realm (*makai* 魔界) ought to be abolished (Dōgen 1973, 1: 131–133).

On the misogynistic treatment of women, he has the following to say:

I ask, what is so precious about being born a man? Space (*kokū* 虚空, Skt. *ākāśha*) is space, four elements are four elements, and five *skandhas* are five *skandhas*. The distinction between men and women is also thus. Both genders attain awakening. In every respect, the attainment of awakening is what matters utmost. Do not make an issue of whether the person enlightened is male or female (*danjo o ronjuru koto nakare* 男女を論ずることなかれ). This is the remarkable law of Buddhism (*kore butsudō gokumyō no hōsoku nari* 此れ仏道極妙の法則なり). (Dōgen 1973, 1: 117)

Dōgen's point is clear that an act of shunning women from the essential framework of salvation is a flagrant violation of the bodhisattva vow. He does not mince his words on this point:

What faults do women have? What virtues do men possess?... Say, you vow not to look at women, and yet you chant: "Sentient beings are numerous, I vow to save them all." Are you perchance not excluding women from the category of "sentient beings"? If you are, you are not a bodhisattva; and you are not exercising the Buddha's compassion. The idea of not looking at women is but words of holy drunkards who follow the smaller vehicle. (Dōgen 1973, 1: 126)

Also in his "*Raihai tokuzui*," which was most likely a sermon delivered to the congregation comprised of male and female disciples as well as important female patrons, Dōgen mentions two enlightened Chinese Chan nuns, MOSHAN Liaoran 末山了然 (J. Matsuyama Ryōnen), the dharma heir of Gao'an Dayu 高安大愚 (J. Kōan Daigu, n.d.), and Miaoxin 妙信 (J. Myōshin), an accomplished disciple of Yangshan Huiji 仰山慧寂 (J. Kyōzan Ejaku, 807–883). His point is that these women who attained profound awakening demonstrated that being female has nothing to do with attaining solid awakening.

Dōgen established a full-scale Zen monastery deep in a mountain in 1244, to which he gave the name "Eiheiji" two years later. Female disciples were among the monastic members; their names are mentioned in the *Eiheï kōroku* 永平広録, the record of Dōgen's sermons and his writings.<sup>73</sup> Based on this document, the modern Sōtō nuns maintain that the first nun trained under Dōgen was Ryōnen 了然. She

<sup>73</sup> For Dōgen and his female disciples see M. Yusa (2018).

was quite elderly by the time she took up her practice under Dōgen, but her practice was rigorous, and her awakening profound. When she died, Dōgen in lamentation composed two Chinese verses. One of them reads:

Steel-solid was your understanding of what is meant by “there is no holiness in the vast universe.”

To test your awakening was like putting snowflakes on top of a red-hot burning stove!

I cannot refrain from asking—whither have you gone?

What sort of moon are you gazing at from under the deep azure waves? (Dōgen 1988, 4: 262–263)

Also found in the *Eihei kōroku* are Dōgen’s sermons delivered upon the request of nuns. A nun Eshin 恵信 wished to honor her deceased father (Dōgen 1988, 3: 104–105). Nun Egi 懷義 wished to celebrate the anniversary of the death of her mother (Dōgen 1988, 3: 162–265). Egi earlier had been a member of the Daruma Sect before joining Dōgen’s monastic community. She became indispensable to Dōgen as she took care of him towards the end of his life when he began to ail; she was among those to whom Dōgen entrusted the future of the operation of the monastic community (Tajima 1955: 164–167).

Dōgen’s successor, KEIZAN Jōkin 瑩山紹瑾 (1268–1325), similarly had many nuns practicing under him, no doubt carrying on his master’s will.<sup>74</sup> Harder times fell on the practicing nuns of the Sōtō sect, however, as the memory of the founder receded in the distance. However, Dōgen’s fundamental conviction that the attainment of enlightenment did not discriminate “the male, the female, the rich, and the poor” (Dōgen 1973, 8: 257) remained a bright light in their hearts.

### 3.3.7 Hiratsuka Raichō–Zen and Feminism

We jump several centuries to conclude this present study of Japanese women Buddhists. I want to include the pioneer feminist HIRATSUKA Raichō 平塚らいてう in this discussion to show the dynamic power of Zen teaching that contributed to forming the women’s liberation movement in modern Japan. Known by her pen-name of Raichō (meaning ptarmigan, snow grouse, or thunderbird), she grew up as HIRATSUKA Haru 平塚明 (1886–1971). She was part of the women’s liberation movement that got started in the last years of the Meiji period (1868–1912). In her early twenties, before she came to be actively involved in the cause for women’s liberation, she seriously practiced zazen for several years. Through it she came to “grasp” the source of life, the spiritual home beyond the reality of the ego, and it was this awakening, according to her, that sustained her for the rest of her life. Even after she stopped her formal Zen practice, whenever she encountered difficulties, she would just “sit” in zazen meditation, which would refresh her body, mind, and spirit and give her the renewed energy to go on. Her life activities closely paralleled the radically changing social and economic conditions of modern Japan from the

<sup>74</sup>For an extensive study of today’s Sōtō nuns in English, see Paula Arai’s *Women Living Zen: Japanese Sōtō Buddhist Nuns* (Arai 1999).

Taishō (1912–1926) to the Shōwa (1926–1989) periods (see Yusa 2011: 1116, 1121–1126).

When she was growing up, Japan was in transition from a traditional society to a modern nation, and young people were typically consumed by religious and spiritual questions which concerned their self-identity. In addition, her father allowed her to receive higher education, and she attended Japan Women's College in Tokyo (she was in the third graduating class). In short, she imbibed the liberal atmosphere of the vibrant Meiji spirituality. It was in her last year of college that she came upon a copy of the *Zenkai ichiran* 禅海一瀾 (*A Wave in the Sea of Zen*, 1862) by IMAKITA Kōsen 今北洪川 (1816–1892),<sup>75</sup> a renowned Zen master (*rōshi* 老師) and the first Chief Abbot (*kanchō* 管長) of Engakuji in Kamakura. She began her Zen practice under SHAKU Sōkatsu 釈宗活 (1870–1954), a dharma heir of SHAKU Sōen 釈宗演 (1860–1919).<sup>76</sup>

What distinguishes Raichō from the Buddhist women of the previous centuries is that she wrote in prose (although she did compose poetry, too), touching on many social issues. Her autobiography contains straightforward accounts of her Zen practice and her “breakthrough” experience called “*kenshō*.” She tells us how the first audience with Master Sōkatsu went, what it was like to practice Zen that involved such activities as *zazen* 坐禪 (“meditation”), *kōan* 公案 (a question to work on, which each student is given by the *rōshi*), *sanzen* 參禪 (a private interview with the *rōshi*), and “*sesshin*” 接心 (an intensive *zazen* and *sanzen* practice extended into one week), and how her initial breakthrough known as “*kenshō*” 見性 (coming to grasp the true nature of the self) took place (Hiratsuka 2006: 83–96).

For instance, we have a rather rare account of how a typical private interview with a Zen master would go:

A *zazen* session usually lasted from forty-five to sixty minutes, the time it took for one incense stick to burn out. Between the *zazen* periods, we met with Rōshi on a one-to-one basis (called “*dokusan*” 独参 or “*sanzen*,” “private interview”). We were not allowed to reveal what took place during the *sanzen*, or which *kōan* we had been given. During the *sanzen*, we were to report to Rōshi any insight we might have gained about the *kōan*, but more often than not, as soon as we entered the room, we would be told to work harder and be dismissed with a shake of the hand bell. Indeed, it was said that Rōshi could tell how much progress we had made by the mere sound of the gong we would make when our own turn comes around, the fall of our footsteps, the way we opened the sliding doors and bowed. (Hiratsuka 2006: 85)

Raichō's initial breakthrough came several months into her practice, during the monthly *sesshin* in July 1906. She vividly recalls those heightened moments:

As was the custom, we raised our hands in prayer and recited the Four Vows 四弘誓願文 together before Rōshi's talk: “Sentient beings are numerous; I vow to save them all. The

<sup>75</sup> He trained many outstanding lay Zen Buddhists, including HŌJŌ Tokiyuki, NISHIDA Kitarō's mentor.

<sup>76</sup> D. T. Suzuki practiced under SHAKU Sōen after the death of IMAKITA Kōsen. SHAKU Sōen inherited Kōsen's emphasis on training lay Zen students. He also went to the U.S. to speak about Zen at the Parliament of the World Religions (September 10–27, 1893) held in Chicago. His earlier study in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) afforded him a global perspective on Buddhism.

deluding passions are inexhaustible; I vow to sever them. The Buddha's teaching is profound; I vow to study it. The Buddha's path is supreme; I vow to realize it."

We next recited Hakuin Zenji's *Chant in Praise of Zazen* (*Zazen wasan* 坐禅和讃): "Sentient beings are intrinsically Buddha. It is just as it is with ice and water. Apart from water, there is no ice. Apart from sentient beings, there is no Buddha...." We came to the last lines: "At this moment, what is there more for you to seek, with nirvana itself manifest before you? This very place, this is the Lotus Land; this very body, this is Buddha." Then, just as I was about to place my hands on my lap, tears as large as hailstones came pouring down my face. Whenever I cry, I do so in private, choking back the tears. But now, I was crying shamelessly in front of everyone. I could not believe it. These were not tears of sadness, not tears of grateful reverence for Hakuin's words. No, I was crying because *I had broken free of my finite self and reached a state of pure awareness*. My whole being had exploded in a flood of tears. I had never experienced this wondrous, strange state before. (Hiratsuka 2006: 92–93 emphasis added)

The realm of deeper consciousness was ready to burst open. This marked the beginning of her true understanding of Zen teaching. She recalls the decisive moment when she underwent the birth of a "new self." A wave of understanding shot through her, when the master was expounding on *The Record of Linji* (*Rinzai-roku* 臨濟錄):

Even now I can hear Rōshi's clear, strong voice: "Upon this lump of reddish flesh sits a True Man with no rank 無位真人. Constantly he goes in and out of the gates of your face. If there is anyone here who does not know this for a fact, look, look!" His voice pierced me like a jolt of electricity, and in that instant I said to myself, "I understand!" Later I heard talks by many Zen masters, but none as compelling as the talk by Rōshi that day. (Hiratsuka 2006: 93)

This initial breakthrough is known as "*kenshō*" in the Zen tradition. Her account continues:

I had finally attained *kenshō*. I was confirmed by Rōshi and given the dharma name Ekun 慧薰. My *kenshō* was not a so-called *tongo* 頓悟 [a sudden awakening]. It had come after more than six months of intense sitting and amounted to a gradual awakening that culminated in a 180-degree turn, a spiritual revolution, an upheaval of the greatest magnitude. *I had been reborn. I was a new being*. My first birth had been of the flesh, unwilling and outside of my awareness. *My second birth was of my true self, born from my efforts to look into the deepest level of my consciousness*. I had searched and searched and at last found the entrance to the Great Way of the True Life. (Hiratsuka 2006: 93, emphasis added)

Every practitioner has a different *kenshō* experience; in her case it came with a great sense of joy and freedom that liberated her to a way of being that she had never known before. She recalls:

Unable to contain my joy, ...I was oblivious to fatigue; I felt disembodied. The Zen texts had not deceived me when they had declared, "mind and body are one," or "the mind and body fall away." And when Shākyamuni declared, "Above the heavens and below the heavens I am the only honored one," he was not exaggerating but speaking from the truth of experience. What is God? What am I? How is a human being related to God? and the question of one and the many—these philosophical questions that I had wrestled with had been resolved in one flash. I felt emptied and indescribably exhilarated.

A great change came over me. *I found myself eager to explore the intricate web of human relationships*, an aspect of life I had ignored until then.... Never again, in all my days, did I live on such a heightened plane of spiritual awareness or feel so vibrantly alive.



My mind was crystal clear, limitlessly expanding. My body was marvelously light, as though it did not exist. I never tired. I walked all day and stayed up until one or two in the morning. Life was full of pleasure, beauty, and joy. I overflowed with psychic energy. (Hiratsuka 2006: 93–94)

This newly found energy led her to take reckless actions, leading to an incident in which she ran off with a married man, who was an aspiring writer and espoused the strange idea from reading a novel by G. D'Annunzio that young women were most beautiful at the moment of their death. He wanted to go through with his experiment of killing her out of love, in order to depict her last moments. Half-incredulous and half-in a playful spirit, she set out to a snow-covered mountain with him. Fortunately, the man had neither the courage nor the willpower to go through with his plan. The local policemen were mobilized to look for them and got them safely into custody. This incident caused a great media sensation, and Raichō faced the consequences of her own action. With her resilient spirit, she took the cause of her own disgrace and suffering to be of her own making, which meant that she could also be the master of her own self to weather the storm. She felt the need to resume her serious Zen practice to regain her spiritual height. Therefore she took part in the year-end *sesshin* at Kaiseiji 海清寺 in Nishinomiya. There her *kenshō* was recognized, for the second time, by NAKAHARA Nantenbō 中原南天棒 (1839–1925), a renowned Zen master.<sup>77</sup>

Raichō's mother recognized that the prospect of a decent marriage for her daughter was now out of the question. The money saved up for her dowry was later used to publish the journal *Seitō* 青鞞,<sup>78</sup> which was the first journal in Japan “of the women, by the women, for the women”—paraphrasing Yosano Akiko's endorsement of this journal.<sup>79</sup> For the inaugural issue of 1911, Raichō was inspired to pen the celebrated manifesto, which began with these lines:

In the beginning, woman was truly the sun. An authentic person.

Now she is the moon, a wan and sickly moon, depending on another, reflecting another's brilliance.

*Seitō* herewith announces its birth.

Created by the brains and hands of Japanese women today, it raises its cry like a newborn child. (Hiratsuka 2006: 157)

<sup>77</sup>“Nanten” is a tree called “nandin.” He carved a staff out of a nandin tree and carried it around as his tool of teaching. His religious name is Zenchū 全中. When Raichō proved her understanding, he gave her the Buddhist name of Zenmyō 全明, taking a character from his name, Zen 全, combining it with her name “Haru” 明. Nantenbō advocated a rigorous Zen training and maintained that one should practice under masters of different lineages to strengthen the awakening experience. Raichō passed his strict standard by attaining her second *kenshō* under him (see Hiratsuka 2006: 129–131).

<sup>78</sup>“*Seitō*” means “bluestockings.” Raichō adopted this name for the journal to preempt male ridicule and criticisms, just as a group of literary-minded society ladies of the eighteenth century London called their literary circle “Bluestocking” as a good joke.

<sup>79</sup>Yosano was already a well-established poet by this time, and her endorsement had much impact on the promotion of this journal (YAZ 14: 390).

At the conclusion of this manifesto, she signed it with her pen-name, Raichō. She explains the reason for choosing this pen-name as follows:

My acquaintance with the thunderbird, or snow grouse, went back to the time I lived near the northern Alps in Nagano.... I was charmed by the picture of the adult bird with its round and sturdy-looking silhouette, its air of calm repose. I was also intrigued by the fact that it lived at an altitude of 3,000 meters, subsisting on alpine vegetation, and turned pure white in the winter. I was further attracted by the fact that the bird had been indigenous to Japan since the Ice Age. So I did not choose the pen-name entirely by chance. (Hiratsuka 2006: 166)

Being an independently-minded young woman, Raichō began to formulate her philosophical outlook on life, in close connection with her actual *concrete* experiences of daily life. Instead of merely accepting the abstract idea of gender equality, she began to explore her *embodied* reality of being a woman as a sexed being. In this venture she was guided by the Swedish feminist philosopher Ellen Key (1848–1926), whose book *Love and Marriage* became available in English around that time. Through Key’s writings, Raichō came to learn to appreciate Western approaches to women’s psychology, as well as the positive evaluation of romantic love and marriage. She embraced the sexed body as a fundamental component of her philosophical reflection. Being a woman is not an abstract idea but a *concrete* embodied reality. This realization was unshakable, because she fell in love with a younger artist, with whom she began the experiment of cohabitation outside the framework of conventional legal marriage. Soon she discovered she was pregnant. In living the life of a woman in love, she attained a new awakening: “I came to see the need to *liberate women not only as human persons but also as sexed women*.” This was a totally new philosophical problem for me (Hiratsuka 2011b: 1125).<sup>80</sup> The corollary of this conviction is that man, too, has to be “liberated as the sexed body.” For Raichō, thus, romantic love opened up the multi-dimensional reality of love. She reflected on this experience and wrote:

[L]ove rooted in self-affirmation and self-development turned out as gateway to the love of others, to the other side of life. In no time, the whole panorama of love of the other unfolded in front of me, first through the love I bore my lover, and then through my love for my child. I ended up experiencing all sorts of contradictions in my life, but I can no longer dismiss them as merely “life’s contradictions.” I have rather come to think of them as gateways that open out onto a wider, larger, and deeper life. And the real harmonization of these two orientations [of self- and other-love] may well be the subtle and ultimate flavor of life itself. (Hiratsuka 2011a: 1125–1126)<sup>81</sup>

Raichō’s life and thought is a fine example of how Zen awakening *can be* directly tied to addressing the issues of concrete life and how it may introduce the dimension of authentic subjectivity (J. *shutaisei* 主体性) into social activities. Authentic sub-

<sup>80</sup> Raichō wrote “*Kojin to shite no seikatsu to sei to shiteno seikatsu tonno aida no sōtō ni tsuite*” 「個人としての生活と性としての生活の間の争闘について」 [“The Conflict of Life as an ‘Individual’ and as a ‘Gender’”] in 1915.

<sup>81</sup> Raichō wrote “*Haha to shite no ichinenkan*” 「母としての一年間」 [“A Year as a Mother”], in 1917.

jectivity is what Zen calls one's "original face." Raichō turned her attention to the dire need for women to be liberated. In so doing, she demonstrated how ideas coming from other sources (in her case, from Ellen Key) could support her Zen awakening and deepen her philosophical reflection. Her lifelong engagement in social activism, including the women's suffrage movement in pre-Second World War Japan and the anti-nuclear movement in the post-Second World War period all sprang from the core of her *being*, which she clearly came to grasp through her Zen practice in her early twenties. Her Zen awakening remained for life the source that kept her mentally supple, spiritually "ecumenical," and existentially "poetic."

## 4 Conclusion

Discriminations raised against women obliged them to examine not only their faith and motives but also the message of spiritual liberation delivered by Buddhism. Japanese women traditionally relied on the Mahāyāna *sūtras* that supported their bodhisattva practice, or that promised their rebirth in the Pure Land, or assured "awakening" (J. *satori*). These scriptures conveyed the message of the immateriality of the distinction between male and female.

Obviously, any academic study on such a broad topic as "women in Japanese Buddhism" must be limited in scope, but I trust that the present case study of remarkable Japanese women, presented in three strands of *The "Lotus (Sūtra)," "Amida (Buddha),"* and "Awakening (experience)" has demonstrated rich and colorful realities of women's spiritual lives.

In concluding this study, let me mention a couple of socially engaged Buddhist nuns in our time. Following the earthquake and tsunami catastrophe that shook up Japan on March 2011, voices of protest were heard from various corners of Japan. Seto'uchi Jakuchō 瀬戸内寂聴 (b. 1922), a popular novelist who became a Tendai nun, for instance, has been a vocal protestor against the reopening of nuclear reactors and carried out a hunger strike despite her frail health. In fact, when this disaster struck the northeastern region of Japan, she was actually lying in a hospital bed, suffering from a narrowing of the spinal canal and could not stand on her legs. Horrified by the incredible scenes televised on the screen in her hospital room, she was called to action. She asked herself: "What am I doing here on a hospital bed? I must do something for the people; I must be with them." Her courage accomplished the near impossible. She regained a limited mobility and was able to stand on her feet again. She soon visited the disaster-struck areas. In less than a month after the disaster, on the day of the Buddha's birthday—April 8, 2011—her temple organized a charity bazaar. At that time she gave an interview to a biweekly women's magazine, in which she said:

In Tendai Buddhism, we have the motto, *mōko rita* 忘己利他, “Forget yourself; benefit others.” This is found in Master Dengyō (i.e., Saichō)’s “Rules of Conduct for the Monks” (*Sange gakushōshiki* 山家学生式).

It means, “Leave behind the thoughts of your personal gain and happiness, and exert yourself for the sake of others and for their happiness.” ...

We are born as human beings, which ultimately obliges us to engage in the activity going beyond the pursuit of one’s own happiness. We need to be grateful for the fact that we are actually being sustained by countless karmic connections (*en* 縁) to exist at all. We must do our best, each of us, to make just one more soul happy. This is the purpose of life.

The act of caring and praying for the victims of the recent earthquake disaster is indeed a small work that each individual performs, and limited in scope. But when these thoughts of individuals are brought together, they gain an enormous momentum and energy that spurs social change. (Seto’uchi 2011: 14–15)

Finally, I must mention another notable nun, who is widely respected in today’s Japan—Aoyama Shundō 青山俊董 (b. 1933), a Zen master, who is the abbess of the Sōtō Zen Training Nunnery.<sup>82</sup> Her teaching goes beyond the monastic “wall,” and her presence is eagerly sought after by the spiritually hungry modern souls. Her books enjoy remarkable longevity as well.<sup>83</sup> There are younger nuns, such as MARUYAMA Kōgai 丸山劫外 (born in 1946), who have been contributing to the study of Buddhist women and nuns. Feminist scholarship, too, has been rewriting the chapters on Japanese women and Buddhism.

By way of conclusion I reiterate my observation that the misogynist notion that women were being “barred” from attaining buddhahood paradoxically served for women to examine their hearts and minds more *existentially* and more deeply than otherwise. Also, being placed on the margin of established Buddhist ecclesiastical organizations for a long time, women were able to concentrate on the *substance* of their faith and bodhisattva practice, so that they may carry out their act of care and compassion more readily and spontaneously. One wonders what it might have been like had women been wholly excluded from participating in the Japanese Buddhist tradition. It would have painted a bleak picture of *avidyā* (*nagaki yami*), a thought which Daisaiin Senshi warded off, lest she be dismayed—1000 years ago.

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### *Abbreviations*

NKZ *Nishida kitarō zenshū* 『西田幾多郎全集』 [*Collected Works of Nishida Kitarō*]. 20 vols. Edited by Shimomura Toratarō 下村寅太郎, et al. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1978–80 & 1989.

<sup>82</sup>On this particular training center as well as the cultural and social contributions of the Sōtō nuns, see Paula Arai’s *Women Living Zen: Japanese Sōtō Buddhist Nuns* (Arai 1999).

<sup>83</sup>Her sermons and essays are compiled, and a few have been translated into English. See for instance, *Zen Seeds: Reflections of a Female Priest* (Aoyama 1990).

- SDZ *Suzuki daisetsu zenshū* 『鈴木大拙全集』 [*Collected Works of Daisetsu Suzuki*]. 32 vols. Second edition. Edited by Shin'ichi Hisamatsu 久松真一, Susumu Yamaguchi 山口益, and Shōkin Furata 古田紹欽. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1980–83.
- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經. 100 vols. Edited by Junjirō Takakusu 高楠順次郎 and Kaigyoku Watanabe 渡邊海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–34.
- YAZ *Teihon yosano akiko zenshū* 定本与謝野晶子全集 [*Collected works of Yosano Akiko*]. 20 vols. Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1979–1981.

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