

# 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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priests went to the other extreme to praise woman as the mother of all the Buddhas. An intriguing entry is found in KUJŌ 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-

<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/00000525.htm>. 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 jiin” (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 jiin 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 be conducted in this area, which is beyond the scope of this present essay. Imperial women trained under these masters themselves became master-teacher, 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.