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## Illustrating the Mind

### “Faulty Memory” *Setсуwa* and the Decorative Sutras of Late Classical and Early Medieval Japan

This article explores the overlap between descriptions of sutra devotion that appear in *setsuwa* narratives and graphic traditions of sutra decoration popular in classical and medieval Japan, particularly from the eleventh century onward. Drawing on material from two Heian-period *setsuwa* collections, *Hokke genki* (1040–1044) and *Konjaku monogatari shū* (ca. 1120), the article focuses on the visual elements of written sutras, especially as elaborated in tales concerning “faulty memory.” The article considers particular *setsuwa* as written stories which can be embodied in performance (preaching) and which attempt to activate the visual imaginations of their reader-listeners. Furthermore, the article argues that these *setsuwa* posit the memory, the page, and the human body as intertwined locales for the inscription of sacred Buddhist text.

KEYWORDS: *setsuwa*—sutra decoration—memory-material culture—reading—preaching

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**S**ETSUWA 説話 (literally “explanatory tales”) represent the earliest attempt in Japanese Buddhism to find a popular literary genre capable of expressing complex aspects of abstract doctrine in concrete, sensually verifiable, and compelling narrative terms. Although their subject matter overlaps with that of other genres such as *kōsōden* 高僧伝 (hagiographies of high priests) and *ōjōden* 往生伝 (accounts of rebirth in the Pure Land), Buddhist *setsuwa* collections differ from these wholly textual enterprises in that they are also linked intimately to performance, to the public and popular venue of the sermon (FUKUDA 1981, IKEGAMI 1984, HIROTA 1990). Some collections (*Nihon ryōiki* 日本靈異記 [ca. 823]) state their desire to act *like* a preacher, “pull[ing] people forward” with their words and guiding them onto the Buddhist path (NKBZ 10: 245). Others (*Sanbōe* 三宝絵 [984] and *Kankyō no tomo* 閑居友 [1222]) bring sermon material to recently-tonsured women. Some (*Hyakuza hōdan kiki-gakishō* 百座法談聞書抄 [1111]) represent the transcription of multi-day sermonizing events, while yet others (*Shasekishū* 沙石集 [1284]) comprise compilations of a preacher’s favorite material. While their language of composition and literary quality vary, one commonality that binds Buddhist *setsuwa* as a recognizable genre is their attempt to engage the popular imagination with the teachings of Buddhism by shaping short narratives that are in turn emotionally gripping, erotically titillating, forcefully violent, and frankly miraculous.<sup>1</sup>

The word *setsuwa*, as used to signify a literary genre, is modern scholastic shorthand. The term refers to a diverse body of extremely brief, prosaic stories, compilations of which were particularly popular during the Heian and Kamakura periods. Typically the stories are linked to one another, sometimes tangentially,

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1. The word *setsuwa*, as applied to literature, is a relatively modern coinage and has been used to indicate an entire range of literature, both oral and written. Thus, some collections classified by modern scholars as *setsuwa* are not explicitly Buddhist, and may be oriented more toward a particular locale (Yoshino 吉野 or Uji 宇治, for instance), or may compile stories detailing the arts and courtly culture, as with Ōe no Masafusa’s 大江匡房 (1041–1111) *Gōdānshō* 江談抄 (ca. 1111). To speak more precisely, then, I am concerned with “Buddhist *setsuwa* literature” (*bukkyō setsuwa bungaku*). For a discussion of the origin and range of the term *setsuwa* in Japanese scholarship, see KOMINE 2001, 298–302.

around a theme (such as religious awakening) or a revolving set of themes (for instance, aristocratic arts and pastimes). Some collections are composed in Japanese, and some in Chinese, and their authors employ a number of quasi-generic terms for them, describing their works as *monogatari* 物語 (narrative tales), *ki* 記 (records), *shū* 集 (collections), and even *tomo* 友 (companions). The debate about whether *setsuwa* comprise a distinct genre is a vibrant one, and I do not wish to wade too deeply into those waters here.<sup>2</sup> To state my position briefly, I concentrate on specifically Buddhist collections and I understand them as intimately related to the performance venue of preaching. In a preaching context, *setsuwa* occur as part of sometimes lengthy sermons which are aimed at elucidating the meaning of sutra passages. In this sense, they act as a bridge, ferrying meaning from classical Chinese to the vernacular and describing a connection between sacred texts and the human body.

*Setsuwa* collections were written and disseminated in such a way that they transcend class boundaries. Though most collections stem from the immediate environs of the aristocratic capital and its elite culture, *setsuwa* authors nevertheless do attempt to move Buddhism beyond the cloister or villa and into the broader population, and they attempt to move popular audiences of mixed social classes from the streets into the temples. On the one hand, works such as *Uji shūi monogatari* 宇治拾遺物語 (ca. 1190–1242) may purport to be compendia of stories gathered, literally, on the street. On the other hand, the clever author of *Hōbutsushū* 宝物集 (by 1180?) anchors his readers to an aristocratic eavesdropper who, to avoid the crush of an enthusiastic crowd of commoners, secrets himself in a side room of Seiryōji 清涼寺, from where he overhears a preacher's all-night sermon.<sup>3</sup> By moving between elite and popular culture, *setsuwa* anticipate later medieval trends and genres that would take Buddhist narrative beyond both temple and court to consistently engage a fuller range of Japanese society.

Finally, *setsuwa* evince a long-standing relation to the visual traditions and plastic arts of classical and medieval Japan, primarily Buddhist statuary and the arts of sutra decoration. While *Sanbōe* represents one of the very few collections specifically intended to be accompanied by textual illustration,<sup>4</sup> numerous *setsuwa*

2. For a variety of viewpoints, some of which champion *setsuwa* as a genre, others of which attempt to dismantle it, see HONDA et al., 1991.

3. *Hōbutsushū* was long attributed to a known historical figure, the famous *waka* poet, warrior, and courtier Taira no Yasuyori 平康頼 (fl. 1157–1200). Modern scholars have begun to doubt Yasuyori's authorship and Yamada Shōzen 山田昭全, one of the foremost scholars of the collection, has suggested that whoever the real compiler was concealed himself behind a cleverly constructed narrator who was made to resemble Yasuyori in many of his life experiences (SNKBT 40: 516–18).

4. A number of *setsuwa* in this collection end with the line, "There is an illustration." None of the indicated illustrations is known to be extant today. Either the artwork was never completed, or it has been lost in the intervening centuries. For more, see KAMENS 1988. In addition,

employ metaphors borrowed from the visual and plastic arts. In one story, for instance, the author of *Hōbutsushū* remarks that “the more than 69,000 characters of the *Lotus Sutra* all become golden buddhas that stream forth from the chanting tongue and shine upon the devotee’s head, cleansing him completely of the sins and obstructions that lead to endless rebirth” (SNKBT 40: 323).<sup>5</sup> In summoning the vision of tiny golden buddhas streaming forth from the chanter’s mouth, this brief comment suggests the close relationship between written characters, spoken words, and Buddhist bodies in the medieval imagination,<sup>6</sup> and it also calls to mind the shining golden deities of Buddhist statuary and the calligraphic practice of gilded sutra characters.

This article will explore the relationship between *setsuwa* narratives and various graphic traditions of sutra decoration that were popular in the classical and medieval periods, particularly from the eleventh century onward. To this end, I focus on tales from two Heian-period collections, *Hokke genki* 法華驗記 (1040–1044) and *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集 (ca. 1120).<sup>7</sup> Because of its exclusive concern with miracles of the *Lotus Sutra*, *Hokke genki* is particularly rich in *setsuwa* dealing with the visual elements of written sutras, especially as elaborated in tales concerning what I will call “faulty memory.” Though no doubt influenced by the ideas of Chingen 鎮源 (fl. early eleventh century), the compiler of *Hokke genki*, the motif is not entirely the province of a single compilation, nor does it reflect only the idiosyncrasies of a single editor. *Konjaku monogatari shū*, for instance, repeats each of the *Hokke genki setsuwa* I will examine below, generally with some degree of elaboration. Analyzing material from these two collections, this article considers Buddhist *setsuwa* as written stories which can be embodied in performance (preaching) and which attempt to activate the visual imaginations of their reader-listeners. In particular, I argue that *setsuwa* posit the memory, the page, and the human body as intertwined locations for the inscription of sacred Buddhist text.

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Tachibana no Narisue 橘成季, compiler of *Kokon chomonjū* 古今著聞集 (1254), also originally intended to create an illustrated collection, in this case a guide to the poetic and musical arts. GOMI Fumihiko (1991, 271–72) has suggested that although this aspect of the project was abandoned, the stories that eventually found their way into the collection may have been chosen at least in part for their ease of illustration.

5. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

6. For a more theoretical discussion of the interrelation between voice, written word, and Buddha body in Japanese Buddhist philosophy, see ABE 1999.

7. For a translation and study of *Hokke genki*, see DYKSTRA 1977, 1983. For *Konjaku monogatari shū*, see KELSEY 1975 and URY 1979.



FIGURE 1. *Ichiji hōtō kyō* 一字宝塔經. Copy of the *Lotus Sutra*, with each character enclosed in a jeweled stupa (*Hokke ichiji hōtō kyō* 法華一字宝塔經). Calligraphy attributed to Fujiwara no Sadanobu 藤原定信 (d. 1156), twelfth century. Togakushi Jinja 戸隠神社, Nagano Prefecture. Photograph courtesy of the Nara National Museum 奈良国立博物館; printed here by permission of Togakushi Jinja.

### Voice, Writing, Relic

The idea that an actual piece of writing can be housed within the human body (through the faculty of memory), can permeate that body (through the medium of sound), and can also incorporate into a divine body is an idea that lies at the core of Mahāyāna Buddhism. This complex doctrine of the body's entanglement with textuality forms the backbone of the “Preachers of the Dharma” (Hosshihon 法師品) chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, which encourages the Buddhist faithful to “look with veneration on a roll of this scripture,” of which the chapter is itself a part, “as if it were the Buddha himself” (HURVITZ 1976, 174; T 9.262.30C11). Further, the chapter maintains that “if a good man or good woman shall receive and keep, read and recite, explain or copy in writing a single phrase” of the sutra, “that person is to be looked up to and exalted by all the worlds, showered with offerings fit for a Thus Come One,” and is to be understood as a great bodhisattva who “is preaching the [*Lotus Sutra*] with breadth and discrimination” (HURVITZ 1976, 175; T 9.262.30C17–18, 20–23). Following these observations, the historical Buddha, who is preaching the text that (he knows) will later be written down as the *Lotus Sutra*, issues the following mandate: “Wherever it may be preached, or read, or recited, or written, or whatever place a roll of this scripture may occupy, in all those places one is to erect a stupa of the seven jewels, building it high and wide and with impressive decoration. There is no need even to lodge a śarīra [relic] in it. What is the reason? Within it there is already a whole body of the Thus Come One” (HURVITZ 1976, 178; T 9.262.31b26–29).

Here, the *Lotus Sutra* proposes four interrelated points. First, the written



FIGURE 2. *Hōtō mandara* 宝塔曼荼羅. Copy of the Golden Light Sutra in which the characters of the first chapter are arranged to form the shape of a stupa (*Konkōmyōsaishō kyō hōtō mandara, daiitō* 金光明最勝王經宝塔曼荼羅, 第一塔). Twelfth century. Daichōju'in 大長寿院 (sutra repository at Chūsonji 中尊寺), Iwate Prefecture. Photograph courtesy of the Nara National Museum; printed here by permission of Chūsonji.

words of the sutra contain the Buddha's voice in a way that is analogous to the enshrinement of corporeal remains in a stupa. Both sites enshrine presence and provide a locale around which ritual activity may be organized. Second, the written words of the sutra are not simply a subcategory of relic. Rather, they supersede all other types of relic, for two reasons. In terms of scale, because the sutra contains the words of the Buddha which are the basis of his enlightenment and thus of his claim to be a buddha incarnate, the sutra contains an entire body of the Buddha, whereas other types of relic typically consist of bodily pieces (hair, teeth, bones). In terms of efficacy, the sutra remains a living substance capable of interacting with and activating those with whom it comes into contact, allowing them to become enlightened as they ingest its teachings.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, bodily relics, as many have noted, are paradoxical objects, at once serving as a locale of personal presence and as a reminder that that person whose presence is commemorated has died (RUPPERT 2000). Third, because it is the birthplace of future buddhas, any place that the entire *Lotus Sutra* exists constitutes a holy site, on a par with the site of a buddha's birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and passage into nirvana. Finally, this logic can be extended to the human body which, once someone has memorized the words of the sutra, becomes a container (skin and flesh) of a container (the heart-mind) of the words of the sutra. In other words, medieval Japanese Buddhist practice is behaving in a completely orthodox manner when it conflates body, voice, and writing into a complex nexus of worship, devotion, sacred presence, and religious experience.<sup>9</sup>

As the following will demonstrate, Japanese *setsuwa* literature on the topic of faulty memory explicitly posits this final extension in logic when it describes the act of memory as a type of writing. Several practices of sutra copying developed around the belief in a text-body compound, as with the *ichiji hōtō kyō* 一字宝塔經 (one character jeweled stupa sutra), in which a miniature stupa is drawn or printed around each written character in the text (FIGURE 1), and the *hōtō mandara* 宝塔曼荼羅 (jeweled stupa mandala) in which the written characters of the sutra are rearranged to form the architectural profile of a stupa (FIGURE 2).<sup>10</sup> Based on earlier continental forms, both types of decorative sutras became

8. Food, water, and nectar are common metaphors in sutras, suggesting that reading, listening, eating, and drinking were thought of as analogous activities. See GUMMER 2000 and HARE 1990 for two discussions of this theme.

9. My observations here benefit from the classic discussion of these, and similar, passages in Gregory SCHOPEN, "The phrase *sa prthivipradeśāś caityabhūto bhavet* in the *Vajracchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna," Chapter 2 of his *Figments and Fragments* (2005). Briefly, Schopen argues that Mahāyāna distinguished itself early on by establishing cultic centers organized not around bodily relics of the Buddha housed in stupas, but instead around texts housed in books which were recited, worshipped, honored, and circumambulated.

10. For more about these two genres of sutra copying, see TANABE 1988.

increasingly popular in Japan during the eleventh century. I contend that sutra-copying techniques like these provided a vocabulary for medieval *setsuwa* compilers to describe the process of sutra memorization, envisioning the memory as a kind of written text.

In my exploration of this nexus of body-voice-writing, I follow Mary Carruthers's assertion that writing and memorization are simply two related ways of storing a text. CARRUTHERS argues, for instance, that "books are themselves memorial cues and aids, and memory is most like a book, a written page or a wax tablet upon which something is written" (1990, 16). The voice is a way of activating either of these storage systems. As we will see in the *setsuwa* passages that follow, medieval Japanese practices of reading and recitation involved pronouncing the words of the text aloud, with the voice, the mouth, and the breath, not simply with the eyes, so that repeated vocalization provided a method for moving units of text from the scroll to the mind.<sup>11</sup> In other words, medieval Japanese *setsuwa* understand the faculty of memory in ways that are generally governed by a dominant metaphor of writing and the written character. Throughout this article, then, I will be using the word "text" to indicate a recognizable unit of language (here, specifically, passages from sutras) as copied down on paper (written), carved into the heart-mind (remembered), or produced through breath and sound either when looking at an externally written text (read) or when called forth from memory (recited).

### *Faulty Memory*

This notion of the memory as yet another place, aside from the page or scroll, to write or store a text is supported by the motif, common in medieval *setsuwa* collections, of a devout person who is unable to remember all the words of a sutra despite great efforts and incredible concentration. He may have successfully memorized nine-tenths or more of the text, but is unable to master completely the final portion. *Hokke genki* 78, for instance, tells the story of the priest Kakunen 覚念 (dates uncertain, but thought to have lived in the Ōhara 大原 area and been active at the nearby Mount Hiei temple complex just north of the Heian capital). Despite being mentally and spiritually prepared for the practice of sutra memorization—having "a heart that was pure, steady, and gentle"—and despite many years of regularly reciting the *Lotus Sutra*, Kakunen finds himself distraught at being unable to complete his feat of memory, as a miniscule portion of text, a mere three lines, continually escapes him (NST 7: 545). The *Lotus Sutra*

11. Recent Japanese scholarship has produced a number of invaluable studies that explore the vocal arts of medieval Japan and detail practices of sutra reading and recitation. See KOMINE 1998; HYŌDŌ 2000; SHIBA 2004; SHIMIZU 1997 and 2001.



is 69,384 characters in the Chinese translation most commonly used in Japan.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the classical and medieval periods, sutra-copying practices generally relied on a standard of seventeen characters per line. To put things into proportion then, Kakunen finds his otherwise perfect memory marred by the absence of a mere fifty-one characters (three lines' worth), representing less than one-tenth of one percent of the total sutra.

The particular wording of the *Hokke genki setsuwa* concerning Kakunen provides some insight into one of the ways in which Japanese Buddhists understood the complex relationships between writing, voice, and memory. Describing Kakunen's predicament, the *setsuwa* explains that "whenever he recited that particular sutra (the *Lotus Sutra*), there were three lines of the text that, again and again, he was unable to recite. Every time he reached that point, he would completely forget those three lines of writing and, though he piled up dark recitation upon dark recitation (that is, recitation from memory), time and again he was unable to bring [those three lines] into the light" (NST 7: 545).<sup>13</sup>

This passage makes use of a number of very particular terms that crop up consistently in *setsuwa* about faulty memory. The term which I have translated as "recite" (*ju* 誦) indicates the devotional act of chanting a sutra aloud and suggests that the chanter is doing so from memory, without looking at the physical, external object of the written text. This suggestion is made binding later in the passage as the compiler insists that Kakunen is engaging in "dark recitations" (*anju* 暗誦), recitations which rely entirely on the memory and which consist of vocalizations of the written text as recorded in the "dark" recesses of the human heart or mind, the *kokoro* 心 of the earlier quote. Probably with half- or fully-closed eyes, and at least with an inward-trained gaze, Kakunen is thus reciting aloud from a sutra that he sees written in his heart-mind, mentally envisioning each character as it moves from darkness into light and back again into darkness. This smooth movement of light over the scrolls of his heart-mind is consistently interrupted when three lines of written text refuse visualization, and resisted being brought "into the light."

### *Sutras of Gold and Navy*

The visualization technique indicated here bears a certain similarity to a particular form of sutra copying that, though expensive, was relatively common during

12. That is, T no. 262, the 406 CE translation into classical Chinese that was overseen by the Indo-Iranian monk Kumārajīva (ca. 350–410).

13. Throughout my treatment of the theme, I will be translating in a literal fashion in order to capture the metaphorical system at work. The term *anju*, for instance, might be rendered "recitation from memory," but this loses the sense of "darkness" 暗. To keep the image, I will translate it here as "dark recitations." Similarly the term *meiryō* 明了, which could be translated "to understand 了 clearly or with illumination 明," will be translated as "to bring into the light."



FIGURE 3. *Konshi kinji kyō* 紺紙金字經. Main text of the 262-character version of the *Heart Sutra* 般若心經 in which the characters are in gold ink against a dark blue background. From *Heike nōkyō* 平家納經, 1164. Itsukushima Jinja 厳島神社, Hiroshima Prefecture. Photograph courtesy of the Nara National Museum; printed here by permission of Itsukushima Jinja.

the medieval period, namely the *konshi kinji kyō* 紺紙金字經 (literally “dark blue paper gold character sutra”) which, much as the name suggests, involved using a special form of liquefied gold to write sutras on scrolls of indigo-dyed paper (FIGURE 3). Tanabe notes that the paper was “beaten with mallets to produce a sheen, and then glazed.... The resulting depth of color suggested lapis lazuli, which, along with gold and silver, was one of the seven precious jewels or treasures mentioned in the *Lotus Sutra* and other scriptures” (TANABE 1988, 79). In other words, part of the reason for the navy and gold decoration scheme has to do precisely with this notion, stemming from the *Lotus Sutra*, that the sutra text should be enshrined in a jeweled stupa. Additionally, the use of gold ink for the calligraphy visually cues one of the marks of the Buddha’s body, golden skin. The specialized form of calligraphy thus served as an ocular reminder of the *Lotus Sutra*’s claim that the sutra itself contained the physical body of the Buddha. Further, the coloring, meant to represent precious jewels like lapis lazuli and gold, also symbolized the treasure of the contents themselves. The teachings of the Buddha, recorded in written form in the sutras, number among the “three treasures” (*sanbō* 三宝) of Buddhism.

The metaphors of light and dark used in the *Hokke genki setsuwa* reflect the artistic tradition of gold-on-blue sutra copying, with the individual characters of the memorial sutra momentarily shining gold in the mind's eye, before dropping back into the indigo field, the darkness of the memory. For Kakunen, not being able to remember the three lines is equivalent to a dark spot on the scroll, an error or omission, a place where the expected characters were either never written or were damaged beyond the point of legibility.

### *The Sutra Inside*

However small a portion of the whole these three lines may represent, not being able to remember them causes Kakunen to suffer strong emotions of “grief and anxiety,” and he implores the bodhisattva Fugen 普賢 for divine assistance (NST 7: 545). Fugen is a natural choice, as a close attendant to the historical Buddha, whose words Kakunen is attempting to remember, and as a deity particularly charged with overseeing doctrinal law and spiritual practice. Fugen grants Kakunen a dream in which an old man reveals the root cause of Kakunen's situation, saying, “You have karmic debts from a past life that are bringing about consequences in this life, and thus you completely forget these three lines of written text. In a past life you were incarnated as a bookworm and lived inside of the *Lotus Sutra* where you ingested and destroyed three lines. But, since you lived inside the sutra, you were able to achieve a human body in this incarnation and you recite the *Lotus Sutra*. Because you ate the written text, you are unable to recite those three lines from memory” (NST 7: 545). Remembering this dream upon waking, Kakunen is suddenly able to recall the three lines without any difficulty, and he continues to recite his now-complete memorial sutra for the rest of his life, never again missing even a single character.

The Kakunen tale also appears in *Konjaku* (14: 13), a collection that postdates *Hokke genki* by approximately eighty years.<sup>14</sup> As with the earlier version, the *Konjaku* text refers to the practice of recitation, using the compound verb *dokuju* 読誦. *Doku* indicates the act of reading while looking at a written text, whereas *ju* indicates recitation strictly from memory. The suggestion is that Kakunen engages in both of these activities, using the process of repeated reading to inscribe his memory. In addition to the light-dark imagery, the *Konjaku* author also employs a visual metaphor for forgetting, using the term *kaku* 闕, “to be hidden,” as behind a door or gate, or “to go missing” (SNKBT 35: 299). The *Konjaku*

14. *Shūi ōjōden* 拾遺往生伝, compiled approximately sixty years after *Hokke genki*, also contains a truncated version of the story, leaving out much detail but still insisting on the fact of recitation from memory. NST 6: 300 (account 1: 13).

text thereby reinforces the idea that Kakunen visually searches his memorial text in much the same way that he would visually scan a written one.

Concerned as it is with miracles associated with the *Lotus Sutra*, *Hokke genki* contains several other, related *setsuwa*, one of which speaks more precisely to the process of repeated reading. The account relates the story of the priest Ezō 惠増, who was devoted exclusively to the *Lotus Sutra*:

He single-heartedly read the Lotus until he was easily able to recite it from memory, bringing it into the light. But every time he got to the “priest gāthā” in the “Expedient Means” chapter (Hōbenbon 方便品), he would err and forget two characters. Though he practiced constantly for years, he was completely unable to retain these two characters, always forgetting them utterly. When he was looking at the sutra, he was able to make them out clearly, but as soon as he left the text and tried to recite, he would immediately be unable to remember them. Coming to this point [in his recitation], he would grieve over the weight of his sins and pray to gain insight. (NST 7: 526)

Like the tale examined earlier, this *setsuwa* relies on a metaphorical language of light and darkness. Though when Ezō looks at the written sutra all the characters are plain to see, when he attempts to pull them out of the darkness of his memory, he is consistently stymied by the absence of two characters. Checking his memorized text against the physical artifact of the written text, he is clearly able to recognize his error, but when he turns that vision back to the internal text, the writing is still incomplete. He concludes, then, that there is a deeper problem, one that is probably tied up with the weight of his sins from a past life.

In a move that is familiar from the story of Kakunen, Ezō sequesters himself and prays, this time to the merciful bodhisattva Kannon 観音. Kannon grants him a dream in which an old man appears and reveals to him the following: “In your former life when you read and recited the *Lotus Sutra*, you read while facing a fire. Sparks from the flames crackled out and burned the two characters in the sutra. You did not repair the sutra by rewriting the characters. That is why in this life, though you read the sutra, you utterly forget the two characters” (526). The old man then tells Ezō that the sutra in question—the one that was actually singed—still exists in the world outside of Ezō’s memory. He gives its location, and suggests that the priest find and repair the sutra. As soon as Ezō awakens—and before he actually repairs the paper sutra—he is able to recall the missing characters with no difficulty, indicating that his memorial text has been repaired already. But he follows the old man’s suggestion anyway, finding and fixing the calligraphic version that he had damaged earlier.

Again, this *setsuwa* is repeated in *Konjaku monogatari shū*, although with slightly more elaboration. In the *Konjaku* story the dream occurs “just at day-break,” at which time the two characters, which had been lost “in darkness,” are

miraculously restored to Ezō's memory (SNKBT 35: 311). The literary convention that conflates the dawning of a revelatory dream with the dawning of day perhaps carries extra weight here. Daybreak—or, more precisely, the moment of the appearance of the morning star in the lightening sky—was the exact time of day that the historical Buddha gained enlightenment and, as a symptom of that, was able to recall all of his past lives. The story of Ezō's restored memory therefore ties into an entire system of Buddhist symbolism in which memory, signaled with symbols of light overcoming or punctuating dark, is linked both to the specific practices of sutra copying and to the processes of enlightenment, illumined understanding, and self-knowledge. By knowing himself (his former incarnation), Ezō's ability to know the text is also restored.

### *Past Life, Present Memory*

These *setsuwa* can easily be read as tales of karmic retribution. In each instance, regardless of which collection they appear in, the *setsuwa* specifically mention the role of past sins in creating the present situation. Priests who damaged the *Lotus Sutra* in a past life, either out of negligence or necessity—what else is a bookworm to eat?—are plagued in this life by an inability to memorize precisely that portion of the sutra they once destroyed. Taken together, however, these *setsuwa* suggest a concern with something more than simply the illustration of sin and retribution. They are also commentaries on medieval perceptions of textuality as lived, personal experience. In other words, these *setsuwa* suggest a general medieval Buddhist understanding of sutras as texts which can and do embody themselves in one's memory, written in the heart-mind exactly as one has personally encountered them. There are many other *setsuwa* in which the priest is not to blame (at least not in any direct or immediate sense) for his faulty memory. Before developing a more detailed commentary on the relationship between text, voice, and memory as understood in the context of medieval Buddhism, I would first like to introduce a handful of these *setsuwa*, so as to separate out the sin-and-punishment narrative and focus more selectively on the depiction of embodied textuality.

*Hokke genki* 77 tells the story of the priest Gyōhan 行範. A devotee of the *Lotus Sutra*, Gyōhan has been able to remember the entire text except for the “Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King” chapter (*Yakuō Bosatsu honjihon* 薬王菩薩本事品). The *setsuwa* describes the situation as follows:

He was by nature a tranquil person. He had set his heart on the pursuit of the Buddhist Law and he read and recited the *Lotus Sutra* with great care, able to make his way through the entire text by memory without impediment. But, when he came to the “Medicine King” chapter, he always had difficulty with the dark recitation. Though he practiced for many years, he was never able to recite it.

(NST 7: 545)

Seeking to remedy the situation, Gyōhan first turns to the state of his memory organ, the heart-mind, reconfirming his mastery of tranquil concentration. Then, when this does not solve the problem, he begins cultivating a “repentant heart” (545). Praying for clarity, he receives a dream in which an old man, in the appearance of a Shinto god, tells him that karma from a past life is keeping him from being able to recite the sutra in its entirety. In his former life, Gyōhan had been incarnated as a black horse owned by a *Lotus Sutra* devotee. In the course of his years of service, Gyōhan the horse had managed to hear all the sections of the sutra except the “Medicine King” chapter. Though he was an animal of no understanding in his previous life, Gyōhan has been reborn as a Lotus devotee “through the force of hearing the sutra,” that is, simply through the sound of the sutra which has imprinted itself on his memory and affected the form of his physical reincarnation (545). After explaining this, the old man awards Gyōhan a rather interesting promise: “If you read well in your present life, in the next incarnation you will, without restraint, move through this sutra with clarity and will reach great enlightenment.” Knowing his karma, Gyōhan opened his ignorant and unenlightened heart, believed in the *Lotus Sutra* deeply, and read the sutra day and night without halting (545).

The basic plot and most of the language of this *setsuwa* come as no surprise. As before, the *setsuwa* insists on a distinction between “reading” the sutra—an action which involves sitting before a written text and running one’s eyes across the paper as one announces the words—and “reciting” the sutra from memory. The *setsuwa* also employs familiar metaphors of light and dark, speaking of “dark recitations” and promising “clarity” of understanding. The heart-mind, as the memory organ, is also of importance here, the compiler being careful to point out that Gyōhan is a “tranquil” person, one who is by definition able to concentrate and set his heart on the accomplishment of a goal. His faulty memory, then, does not stem from a lack of mental preparation and must have its causes elsewhere. Finally, the relationship between “reading” and “reciting” is, if anything, made more evident in this *setsuwa* than in the ones examined previously. In his dream Gyōhan is instructed to “read”—not to “recite”—the sutra. Whereas in other *setsuwa* the memory is miraculously restored, Gyōhan will have to exert his own, very human powers in order to memorize the sutra. Sitting with an “opened” heart in front of an equally open sutra scroll, Gyōhan can now proceed to transcribe in full the sutra that he holds in his hands, transforming it into a sutra that he will hold in his mind. He is told that this is the work of a lifetime.<sup>15</sup>

Taken together, *setsuwa* on the topic of faulty memory suggest that the heart-mind as an organ of memory could be cleaned or polished through meditation

15. In other variants, the monk discovers his previous existence as a cow (*Hokke genki* 80), a grasshopper (89), and a snake (93).

or other practices of mental concentration. Buddhist literature often likens the focused heart-mind to a still pond, or polished mirror, reflecting moonlight. As in the pond and mirror instances, protagonists in faulty memory *setsuwa* must intentionally focus the heart-mind. When this is accomplished, they fully expect that their memory organ will, so to speak, reflect light. In this case, the light is not that of the moon per se, but that of the moon's referent (enlightenment), as captured in the radiant words of gilded sutra calligraphy. This means that we can understand the heart-mind as analogous to a writing surface, as well as to a pond or mirror.

### *The Heike-Dedicated Sutras and the Puzzle of Embodiment*

I will turn now to a consideration of one last piece of Japanese Buddhist artwork in order to stress again the close interrelation of visual arts and sutra recitation and the way the praxis of devotional reading envisions weaving sacred writing and human flesh together into a single organism. The *Heike nōkyō* 平家納経 is a heavily decorated, hand-copied set of sutra scrolls which the powerful warrior and politician Taira no Kiyomori 平清盛 (1118–1181) dedicated at Itsukushima Shrine 厳島神社 in the ninth month of 1164.<sup>16</sup> The set consists of thirty-three scrolls, and the texts included reflect standard medieval practices of sutra recitation. The twenty-eight scrolls of the *Lotus Sutra* comprise the bulk of the set and are accompanied by four other sutras, each in one scroll: the *Sutra of Immeasurable Meanings* (*Muryōgikyō* 無量義経) and the *Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue* (*Kan Fugenkyō* 観普賢経), with which devotees typically book-ended the *Lotus Sutra*, chanting the former as a prefatory text and the latter as a concluding one, and the *Sutra of Meditation on the Buddha Amitāyus* (*Kan Muryōjubutsukyō* 観無量壽佛経) and the very short *Heart Sutra* (*Hannya shingyō* 般若心経), both popular texts for recitation in their own right. The remaining thirty-third scroll is a short petition (*ganmon* 願文) composed by Kiyomori, in which Kiyomori offers the entire set to the deity at Itsukushima with the request that the deity protect the clan and allow it to continue its political ascendancy.

The thirty-three volume set is a particularly exquisite example of the considerable artistry and expense entailed in the creation of such dedicated sutras. In order to show their loyalty to and support for the man who was one of the most powerful military and political figures of his day, Kiyomori's collaborators spared no expense. The paper and calligraphy are of the finest quality, the axles around which the paper was wound are tipped with cut crystal or shaped metal, the protective overleaves are intricately brocaded, and the frontispiece for each chapter is immaculately decorated, often with copious amounts of gold foil and silver dust.

16. For full color reproductions of the *Heike nōkyō* frontispieces, see TANABE 1988.



FIGURE 4. *Heike nōkyō Yakuō bon* 平家納経薬王品. Frontispiece to the “Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. From *Heike nōkyō* 平家納経, 1164. Itsukushima Jinja 厳島神社, Hiroshima Prefecture. Photograph courtesy of the Nara National Museum; printed here by permission of Itsukushima Jinja.

The frontispiece for the scroll containing the twenty-third chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, dealing with “The Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King,” is no exception and has particular bearing on the subject of our discussion as it illustrates the interpenetration of writing and body, pointing to that interpenetration as both the message and the hope of Buddhism (FIGURE 4). In its lower right-hand corner, the frontispiece depicts a noblewoman with flowing hair and full court robes. On her lap she holds an open sutra scroll. She is looking up, over her shoulder, to the corner diagonally opposite where a golden buddha sits atop purple clouds, a traditional symbol of the *raigō* 来迎, or “welcoming procession,” in which the buddha Amida 阿弥陀 comes to the believer at the moment of her death in order to lead her to the Pure Land, sometimes referred to as the “world-sphere comfortable” (*anraku sekai* 安楽世界).



The artwork links the two bodies of the buddha and the woman through a series of visual cues, both subtle and obvious. From his forehead, the buddha casts three rays of golden light, which bisect the painting diagonally and fall upon the woman's face and upper torso. These gold lines underscore the visual reciprocity of the scene, as the woman returns the buddha's iconic light with a hopeful gaze. Around these strong diagonals are wrapped the gentle undulation of a sandy, brownish line which stretches from the buddha to the woman and suggests the rippling surface of a muddy pond, from which several lotus flowers can be seen growing. Finally, scattered throughout the frame of the illustration are a handful of written characters, some lightly disguised in the *ashide* 葦手 ("reed hand") technique:<sup>17</sup> above the woman's head, the kana *moshi* もし ("if"); in a diagonal chain falling from the tip of her right sleeve, the kana *arite* アリテ ("there is"); below her knees, the word *kono* コノ ("this"); level with her shoulders, the Chinese characters *kokoni myōjū* 此命終 ("when this life is over"); on the edge of the golden shore, the character *sunawachi* 即 ("straightaway"); below the Buddha's left knee and amongst the lotus petals beneath him, the mixed kanji-kana phrase *anraku sekai* 安楽せかい; and finally, atop the lotus blossom that rests beside the buddha at the top of the painting, the single character *mumarū* 生 ("to be born").

Collectively, these chirographic fragments form a rough paraphrase of a passage that appears in the written text of the chapter illustrated by the frontispiece. This chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* opens with the Buddha Śākyamuni addressing a large assembly of beings with the story of one of his previous incarnations in which he, as a buddha named Pure and Bright Excellence of Sun and Moon, preached the *Lotus Sutra* to an assembly which included the bodhisattva Seen with Joy by All Living Beings. Just before entering ultimate nirvana, Pure and Bright Excellence of Sun and Moon entrusts the sutra and any relics which may be gleaned from his soon-to-be-cremated body to the bodhisattva. Stepping back into the narrative present, the Buddha then identifies Seen with Joy as a previous incarnation of the bodhisattva Medicine King, who is currently listening to the Buddha's sermon.

Concluding the story-within-a-story and speaking now to the assembly at large, the Buddha praises the *Lotus Sutra* at length, ascribing any number of blessings to those who are able to accept, keep, read, recite, copy, or explain even a portion of it in those latter days after his own nirvana. In one of these promises, he claims:

17. The "reed hand" technique was practiced in elite circles at the Heian court. It involves the use of visual elements to hint at representative portions of a poem or prose passage, some of whose words or syllables are disguised as reeds, rocks, pines, and shore birds. My discussion of the Heike frontispiece benefits greatly from Julia MEECH-PEKARIK's work (1977–1978) on the "reed hand" technique and its use in this and other artworks.

After the extinction of the Thus Come One, within the last five hundred years, *if there is a woman who hears this scriptural canon and practices it as preached, at the end of this life she shall go straightaway to the world-sphere comfortable, to the dwelling place of the buddha Amida, where he is surrounded by a multitude of great bodhisattvas, there to be reborn on a jeweled throne among lotus blossoms.* (HURVITZ 1976, T 9.262.54c1-3)

Certain words and phrases from this passage (author's italics), which medieval sutra readers would have encountered in classical Chinese, appear as words and phrases in the frontispiece, where they have been translated into Japanese and arranged into Japanese word order.

For the fragmentary words and phrases to cohere into a single, meaningful sentiment, however, one must read certain of the pictorial images as words. That is, the image of the court lady has to be read as "woman," the golden buddha figure as "the buddha Amida," the sutra in her lap as "scriptural canon," and the lotus pedestal floating on the pond as "a jeweled throne among lotus blossoms." Reading these pictorial details as writing yields the sentence, "If there is a woman who hears this scriptural canon, when this life is over, she will be immediately reborn on a jeweled throne amidst lotus blossoms surrounding the buddha Amida." One could push this analysis a step further and read the image of the hand-held sutra as a visual approximation of the words from the sutra that refer to the auditory power of the sutra. In fact, a close inspection of the scroll that the woman is holding reveals it to be a roll containing precisely this chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* which, in the temporal frame of the painting, the woman has clearly just been reading before she was pleasantly interrupted by the beams of light shining from the buddha to illumine her face. Reaching out from inside her sleeve, her finger marks her exact spot in the text: "If there is a woman who has heard this chapter on the former affairs of the bodhisattva Medicine King and who is able to accept and keep it, she will quit her female body and never again receive [that form]. If, after the Thus Come One's extinction..." (T 9.262.54b28-29).

There are three salient points to be gleaned here. First, the woman's finger points directly to the words "Thus Come One" (*nyorai* 如来) in the passage. In other words, what we see in the frontispiece is her vision of those two characters of the text, which have taken on corporeal form as a shining, golden buddha who appears before her eyes as a salvific force in the world. Second, the golden buddha has appeared in response to her reading practice. Her act of reading the sutra, of accepting it and keeping it in close faith, allows her to meet the conditions stipulated in the sutra for rebirth in the Pure Land. In a synaesthetic vision of sensual fusion, the moment her reading voice touches her ears is the same moment in which the illuminated buddha springs into being, summoned forth by the sound of her devotions. Finally, the last phrase that she reads bleeds into

the first phrase that she is. That is, according to the logic of the frontispiece, the woman reading this chapter of the sutra is the woman who appears in the very next sentence of this chapter of the sutra. It is an individualization of sutra text that takes place at light speed and which results in the melding of human body and sacred writing. That one finger, holding her place in the text, vaults her into the world of the sutra and she becomes part and parcel of its fabric. Through the process of devotional reading, the woman incorporates herself into the sutra and her body becomes a written and spoken character. Her body is a portion of the text in which she believes, and the text in which she believes fluctuates seamlessly between corporeal and chirographic forms.

### Conclusion

All of the *setsuwa* and decorative sutra arts examined here converge on a single point: the miraculous moment of sutra reading or recitation when the acoustic power of the devotee's voice combines with a forceful burst of mental concentration, resulting in a fusion of body and text, and pointing to the numinous intensity of the sutra in the medieval imagination. As TANABE has shown, since the introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the sixth century, the *Lotus Sutra* has been "regarded as an object of worship as much as a document of discourse" (1988, xvii). I would build upon her statement to argue that *setsuwa* on the topic of sutra reading and recitation reveal a popular fascination with the mechanics of sutra devotion. Importantly, *setsuwa* make no substantial distinction between texts produced chirographically and texts produced orally. Both are methods for transforming the human body, permeating the heart-mind with Buddhist textuality and preparing it as a site for the manifestation of Buddhist presence. Both the voice that emanates from one's mouth when one chants the sutra and the patterns of ink traced by one's hand when one copies the sutra calligraphically on paper contain the presence and the body of the Buddha. As such, religious acts of sutra copying and recitation may be most profitably understood as what Robert SHARF has called "socially sanctioned and ritually structured meditations on the puzzle of embodiment" (2001, 16).

Indeed, as the clever use of the "reed hand" technique indicates, the *Heike nōkyō* frontispiece was a puzzle, requiring an aesthetic mastery and a playful esotericism that was the province of the uppermost echelons of late classical and early medieval Japanese society. "Faulty memory" *setsuwa* also draw on visual techniques of decorative sutras, but in a broader sense. Although still referencing activities that, for most, would have been unattainable—owning a copy of a sutra, having the time to memorize the entire text—the visual iconography these *setsuwa* utilize was also available in more public art forms than the privately-produced, elaborately decorative sutras. Golden buddhas, for instance, would

have been familiar from temple statuary, and the sight of clerics reading or reciting sutras would have been a common visual and aural component of temple visits and other ceremonies. Nevertheless, while Buddhist *setsuwa* represent one early generic endeavor to reach beyond cloister and villa, it would remain for later medieval Buddhism to find a way to yoke illustration and narrative into more immediately accessible literary forms which, as other articles in this volume indicate, were perhaps less “puzzling” and more widely popular.

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- NST *Nihon shisō taikai* 日本思想大系, 67 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1970–1982.
- SNKBT *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikai* 新日本古典文学大系, 105 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1989–2005.
- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. 85 vols, ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932.

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