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## *Nenbutsu* Orthodoxies in Medieval Japan

New approaches to Buddhist doctrine and practice flourished within and across diverse lineages and sub-lineages in early medieval Japan. The early-modern and modern sectarianization of Japanese Buddhism, however, has tended to obscure the complex ways that the very idea of orthodoxy functioned in this fluid medieval environment. In this article, I explore attempts to account for the diversity of views regarding *nenbutsu* orthodoxy in treatises composed by scholars monks affiliated with Mt. Kōya and Mt. Hiei. In particular, this article contextualizes how these monks constructed the idea of an esoteric *nenbutsu* by drawing upon earlier taxonomies developed in the Tendai school as well as the East Asian esoteric Buddhist corpus. Ultimately, this study concludes that the esoteric *nenbutsu* was not the provenance of a particular school or sect, but rather served as a polemical construct designed to subsume the diversity of approaches to *nenbutsu* praxis as monks in diverse lineages competed with one another to define esoteric Buddhism in the early medieval context.

KEYWORDS: esoteric Buddhism—pure land—esoteric *nenbutsu*—orthodoxy—Dōhan

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THIS ARTICLE explores how the *nenbutsu* 念仏 functioned within the evolving conceptions of orthodoxy in medieval Japan and the practice of constructing taxonomies as a dynamic form of Buddhist study and practice. In particular, this study examines the work of the scholar-monks Dōhan 道範 (1179–1252) of Mt. Kōya 高野 and Kōshū 光宗 (1276–1350) of Mt. Hiei 比叡 to consider how each defined and employed the idea of an esoteric *nenbutsu* (*himitsu nenbutsu* 秘密念仏) within their respective taxonomic projects. I argue that the esoteric *nenbutsu* functioned neither as one distinct kind of *nenbutsu*, nor the *nenbutsu* of a particular school of Buddhism. Rather, the esoteric *nenbutsu* was a polemical heuristic construct—a taxonomic tool—employed to participate in the ongoing evolution and contestation of orthodoxy in medieval Japan.

Ritual lineages derived from the Indian tantras—commonly labeled as esoteric Buddhism—flourished at the highest echelon of Tang dynasty (618–907) ritual culture. By the early ninth century, esoteric rites emerged as a foundational aspect of Japanese religion as well, characterized by the coordinated recitation of mantras, the performance of mudras, and the choreographed visualization of mandalic depictions of deities. In medieval Japan, scholar-monks drew upon and participated in diverse ritual regimes and areas of doctrinal study as lineages and sub-lineages vied for patronage, prestige, and power. Therein, the performance of esoteric ritual was widely used to achieve a variety of this-worldly and other-worldly ends, including one of the most sought-after soteriological goals of East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhist culture: postmortem rebirth in Sukhāvatī, the pure land of Amitābha Buddha. One of the most popular methods employed by premodern Japanese Buddhists in pursuit of rebirth in the pure land was devotion to Amitābha and the recitation of the Buddha's name in the form *Namo Amida Butsu* 南無阿弥陀仏, which is commonly referred to as *nenbutsu*. Although esoteric ritual culture and pure land soteriology were pervasive in premodern Japanese religion, little attention has been paid to the way in which these overlapping repertoires mutually functioned.

Just as scholars like Isomae Junichi have argued against essentialist conceptions of Japaneseness and religion as *sui generis* concepts (ISOMAE 2005), so too have scholars of Japanese Buddhism reflected critically on the potentially distorting effects that sectarianism as a default model may carry with it. In addition to the imposition of a sectarian framework or taxonomy over the diversity of Japanese Buddhism and East Asian Buddhism, these sects are also generally categorized according to a periodization system: Nara Buddhism (710–794), Heian

Buddhism (794–1185), Kamakura Buddhism (1185–1333), and so on (STONE 1999, 217–233; ABÉ 1999, 399–428). In Japan today, the largest schools of Buddhism are those affiliated with Jōdo Shin, Zen, and Nichiren traditions. As a result, scholars associated with these schools have been able to define the contours of the historiography of Japanese Buddhism as a whole and have exerted significant influence on the study of East Asian Buddhist studies more broadly (YU 2013, 116–117). Because the founders associated with the Jōdo, Zen, and Nichiren lineages lived during the Kamakura period, scholars affiliated with these schools have generally promoted a Kamakura-centric view of Japanese Buddhist history often at the expense of the Tendai and Shingon schools, which were transmitted to Japan during the early ninth century.<sup>1</sup>

This academic and sectarian orthodoxy was somewhat destabilized by scholars such as Kuroda Toshio, who established that in the early-medieval period Japanese religion remained dominated by temple-shrine complexes like Tōdaiji 東大寺 and Kōfukuji 興福寺 in the old capital in Nara, Enryakuji 延暦寺 and Onjōji 園城寺 on and near Mt. Hiei, and Ninnaji 仁和寺 and Daigoji 醍醐寺 in the Heian capital. As doctrinal and ritual lineages and sub-lineages based within these institutions often overlapped, intersected, and competed with one another, Kuroda and his interpreters contended that a cohesive orthodoxy emerged that served as ideological justification for the elite religio-political order. Drawing upon terminology used in medieval texts, KURODA (1996, 233–235) coined the term “exo-esoteric system” (*kenmitsu seido* 顕密制度) to refer to this dominant medieval orthodoxy comprised of diverse esoteric ritual lineages and exoteric doctrinal lineages. As scholarship on medieval Japan has shifted away from the Kamakura founder-sect taxonomy, the idea of an exo-esoteric orthodoxy has

1. The sectarianization of Japanese Buddhism developed over time and is not an essential quality of Buddhism in Japan. The way we understand *shū* 宗 to indicate a sectarian organization with an established lineage, set orthodoxy, and hierarchically organized institutional structure is a product of political and legal developments in early-modern Japan. Hikino and Williams have examined the early-modern transformation of the Jōdo and Sōtō Zen schools respectively, explaining that, following the protracted period of unrest in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, the Tokugawa regime issued a series of edicts in the seventeenth century that established rigid top-down state control of Buddhism and required temple networks to create for themselves clearly defined sectarian and institutional boundaries, refrain from competition or mixing, and focus exclusively on the teachings and practices associated with particular founders and lineages (HIKINO and MORRIS 2011; WILLIAMS 2009). Jacqueline Stone and Abé Ryūichi have noted that this sudden shift in the geography of early-modern Japanese Buddhism ultimately led to the transformation of a relatively fluid and competitive Buddhist environment into hierarchically organized sectarian institutions with clear distinctions between lineages, prescribed areas of study, regimented curricula for monks, and so on. In the modern period, with the introduction of European-style universities, Tokugawa sectarian academies were transformed into sectarian universities and seminaries, and this ultimately cemented the sectarian taxonomic approach to the study of Japanese Buddhism (STONE 1999, 217–233; ABÉ 1999, 399–428).

taken root. Jacqueline Stone and David Quinter, however, have suggested that scholars must continue to critique received knowledge in the field of medieval Japanese Buddhist studies, lest the idea of an exo-esoteric orthodoxy emerge as a *sui generis* construct that prevents us from seeing the diversity and fluidity of medieval Japanese religion (STONE 1999, 62; QUINTER 2006, 19–20, 30–31).

Somewhat surprisingly, there is relatively little scholarship on the question of how the *nenbutsu* functioned in this exo-esoteric orthodoxy. Terms like *himitsu* (secret or esoteric) are generally associated with the Shingon or Tendai schools of so-called “Heian Buddhism,” while the *nenbutsu* is associated more with the pure land schools of Kamakura Buddhism. In the esoteric *nenbutsu* these categories collide, and through the study of this collision an opportunity arises to tell a different story about early medieval Japanese Buddhism. Scholars who study the exo-esoteric system tend to focus on institutional histories of major temple-shrine complexes, while scholars who study the *nenbutsu* tend to focus on the Jōdo and Jōdo Shin traditions founded by Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212) and Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262), respectively. However, in the early-medieval period, the *nenbutsu* was widely practiced across doctrinal and ritual lineages and contexts. Therein, diverse perspectives on the nature of the pure land, how exactly rebirth in the pure land should be understood, and various methods of practicing the *nenbutsu* proliferated.<sup>2</sup> From one perspective, the esoteric *nenbutsu* may be thought of as the orthodox exo-esoteric *nenbutsu*. Indeed, the esoteric *nenbutsu* arose through the confluence of esoteric Mt. Kōya and Mt. Hiei doctrinal and ritual lineages, which were themselves embedded in lineages connected to Nara- and Kyoto-based temple complexes. However, closer examination of the various threads that came together to compose the esoteric *nenbutsu* reveals that the very idea of orthodoxy was actually a major area of contention.

In this article, I first examine how the esoteric *nenbutsu* has been understood as a taxonomic tool within modern and contemporary scholarship. At times, this scholarship relies upon contemporary sectarian categories, and thus sometimes loses the context and nuance for the taxonomical projects of monks like Dōhan and Kōshū. The view proposed in this essay is that while early-modern Japan saw the rise of sectarian institutions as distinct sociologically identifiable entities, and therefore modern Japanese Buddhism may be divided into distinct sects, in premodern Japan, however, those traditions, practices, and teachings we tend to group together under such categories as pure land Buddhism, esoteric Buddhism, Shingon, Tendai, and so on, functioned as intersecting disciplines or areas of study and inquiry that could be pursued across diverse institutions, lineages, and sub-lineages.

2. For a study of exo-esoteric pure land Buddhist thought and practice in premodern Japanese religion, see Stone’s study of deathbed practices in STONE (2016, 40–43).

I also consider the prominent role that Mt. Hiei lineages played in the development of esoteric discourse and pure land soteriology and in particular consider exegetical strategies referred to as the fourfold rise and fall (*shijūkōhai* 四重興廢) and the three truths of *a-mi-da* (*Amida santai setsu* 阿弥陀三諦説). These taxonomical paradigms were fundamental to Dōhan's treatment of *nenbutsu* in the preface to his *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* (SAZ 2: 225–266), a compendium of sources concerning the practice of *nenbutsu*. Dōhan's preface established a fourfold *nenbutsu* taxonomy built upon the fourfold rise and fall, the three truths of *a-mi-da*, and earlier Chinese and Japanese esoteric taxonomies.

Finally, I turn to Kōshū's four-fold *nenbutsu* taxonomy as found in the *Keiran shūyōshū*. At first glance, it appears that Kōshū simply relegates Dōhan's thought to the category of Shingon *nenbutsu*. However, just as Dōhan's *nenbutsu* taxonomy incorporates various perspectives into his own taxonomical scheme, Kōshū incorporates Dōhan's perspective into his own comprehensive analysis of *nenbutsu*. Rather than revealing the esoteric *nenbutsu* to be the *nenbutsu* of the exo-esoteric orthodoxy or the *nenbutsu* of a particular school of Buddhism, this article ultimately demonstrates that the esoteric *nenbutsu* was a nexus for dialogue and debate as monks in specific contexts vied with one another and their shared doctrinal inheritance for mastery over the esoteric.

### *Defining the Esoteric Nenbutsu*

In order to fully appreciate how the esoteric *nenbutsu* functioned within the taxonomic conceptions of the *nenbutsu* in medieval Japan, we must first look to the ways in which scholarship has generally defined terms like “esoteric Buddhism” and “pure land Buddhism.” The concept of an esoteric *nenbutsu* subverts certain taxonomies currently in use within the study of Japanese religion. Moreover, in my own anecdotal experience, while some scholars find the term “esoteric *nenbutsu*,” or esoteric pure land, to be a very useful concept for approaching ritual and doctrinal repertoires that converged in medieval Japan, others take grave offense to the very idea that an esoteric approach to the pure land even exists precisely because it seems to challenge how they have conceived of the contours of their own disciplines or traditions. However, for those scholars who have examined the esoteric *nenbutsu*, there are generally three distinct approaches.

First, some scholars have suggested that the esoteric *nenbutsu* is a product of the syncretism of esoteric Buddhism and pure land Buddhism. According to this view, esoteric Buddhism is defined primarily by the sectarian historiography of the Shingon school and the teaching that esoteric ritual practice leads to attaining buddhahood in this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成佛). Meanwhile, pure land Buddhism is defined primarily by a postmortem soteriology wherein one attains rebirth in the pure land after death through reliance on the power of Amitābha.

That these seemingly diametrically opposed kinds of Buddhism may have intermingled in the chaos of the medieval period is, according to this perspective, nothing more than a brief concession to heterodox peasant religion. The Shingon scholar-priest Kushida Ryōkō is responsible for the first major investigation into the esoteric *nenbutsu*. Therein, Kushida identifies the esoteric *nenbutsu* as evolving suddenly as a result of the syncretism of the newly arisen pure land movement with esoteric Buddhism, especially in peripheral sites like Mt. Kōya. While Kushida does note the broad range of traditions that led to the development of the esoteric *nenbutsu*, and even identifies the way the esoteric *nenbutsu* impacted later traditions like Zen, Jōdo Shin, and Tendai, he nevertheless returns to the rhetoric of syncretism belying the assumption that esoteric Buddhism and pure land Buddhism are two inherently distinct traditions (KUSHIDA 1963). Kushida's view emerged in the same postwar context as the scholarship of Inoue Mitsusada, an influential historian of Japanese pure land Buddhism who also considers the esoteric *nenbutsu* as an expression of the syncretism of esoteric Buddhism and pure land Buddhism (INOUE 1956, 335–365). James Sanford draws heavily upon Kushida in his articles on the esoteric *nenbutsu* (SANFORD 2006). Like Kushida and Inoue, Sanford relies on the sectarian taxonomy that presents esoteric Buddhism and pure land Buddhism as *sui generis* schools of Buddhism with inherently distinct doctrinal and ritual positions.

Second, moving beyond the syncretism model, some scholars have acknowledged that, in fact, esoteric texts and rituals often deal with pure land rebirth, and there have been many figures associated with the Shingon school who regularly employed pure land-oriented practices as part of their broader religious program. These scholars generally identify the esoteric *nenbutsu* as the orthodox Shingon school approach to the *nenbutsu*. Indeed, as pure lands are a generic feature of Mahāyāna Buddhist cosmology throughout the sutras, it would only make sense that the Shingon tradition, as a Japanese Mahāyāna lineage, may have something to say on the matter. Mt. Kōya, a mountain monastic complex associated with the Shingon school and the cult of Kūkai, was a vibrant locale where monks and aristocrats made pilgrimages and where a diverse esoteric pure land culture flourished (TANABE 1998). Furthermore, Shingon scholar-monks such as Kakuban 覚鑁 (1095–1143) wrote several treatises on topics concerning the *nenbutsu* and Amitābha and their relation to esoteric Buddhist doctrine. Kakuban's perspective on the *nenbutsu* and pure land was not simply a product of syncretism but rather represents the orthodox Shingon view on the pure land, as his writing was one part of a broader project to establish Kūkai's doctrinal writings at the center of Shingon discourse (VAN DER VEERE 2000, 11–12).

Kakuban is closely associated with his contemporary Jippan 実範 (d. 1144), and both Kakuban and Jippan are commonly identified as pure land thinkers within the Shingon school. However, their backgrounds and educations are

more complex than modern sectarian labels account for, requiring us to reconsider exactly what we mean by the word “shingon.” Jippan, for example, was based in Nara, studied Hossō at Kōfukuji, and worked to revive the precepts at Tōdaiji (BUIJNSTERS 1999). Moreover, Jippan spent a considerable amount of time studying pure land thought in the Tendai tradition (SATŌ 1965, 22–24). Kakuban also trained at Kōfukuji and Tōdaiji, and when he relocated to Ninnaji he encountered ongoing efforts to promote devotion to Kūkai as a Shingon lineage patriarch through the study of his doctrinal and ritual texts. As it turned out, Ninnaji monks such as Shōshin 性信 (1005–1085), Saisen 済暹 (1025–1115), and others working to establish Kūkai as the authority on esoteric Buddhism were also interested in pure land thought and practice (SATŌ 1979, 11–14, 397–425). Indeed, this makes sense because the primary object of devotion at Ninnaji is Amitābha Buddha. Kakuban also trained at Onjōji, a Tendai offshoot of Mt. Hiei, which was at that time the site of a major esoteric lineage. Kakuban’s most famous works, the *Gorinkuji myō himitsu shaku* and *Amida hishaku*, demonstrate the fluency with which he and others could simultaneously speak the language of the pure land mythos and esoteric ritual. While the tendency of Jippan and Kakuban to implement Hossō, Tendai, Shingon, pure land, and other areas of study into their writings may seem eclectic or heterodox when viewed through the lens of modern sectarian categories, this was the norm in premodern Japan. Dōhan, a Mt. Kōya scholar-monk working in the thirteenth century, expanded upon the writings of Kakuban and Jippan in his articulation of a *nenbutsu* taxonomy. Rather than an outlier, Dōhan’s view of *nenbutsu* reflects the orthodox nature of such an accumulative approach within the medieval Shingon tradition (SATŌ 2002; NAKAMURA 1994; 2010).

To provide some nuance to the study of the esoteric *nenbutsu*, it is necessary to look beyond the idea that Shingon orthodoxy was a monolithic tradition. While we may now identify Shingon Buddhism as a particular school of Japanese Buddhism, Shingon was first established as an area of study found across multiple institutions such as Tōdaiji, Kōfukuji, Mt. Hiei, Onjōji, Tōji, Ninnaji, Daigoji, Mt. Kōya, and others (ABÉ 1999, 371–376; RUPPERT 2013, 391, n. 6). Rather than conceive of Shingon as a single school originating with the works of Kūkai, we must keep in mind the institutional heterogeneity of Shingon as a body of competing lineages and sub-lineages with significant points of rupture and discontinuity and retroactive bricolage.

Third, scholars taking a post-sectarian view tend to position esoteric pure land thought as an aspect of the dynamic doctrinal and ritual culture of medieval Japan. According to this interpretation, it was not the case that pure land Buddhism emerged as a distinct sectarian position through a rejection of esoteric Buddhism. Rather, pure land-oriented soteriology functioned within ritual and doctrinal contexts that were dominated by esoteric ritual culture (HAYAMI



1978, 187–201; KURODA 1996, 255–261). The study of deathbed practices reveals a similar point about the works of Dōhan and Kakuban; both figures promote a view of pure land that encompasses multiple perspectives. Esoteric notions that awakening to buddhahood in our current world is immanent do not preclude the attainment of rebirth in the pure land as a worthwhile soteriological goal (STONE 2007, 155–159). Furthermore, such practices serve as a case study in how rituals for controlling the moment of death intersected with the pure land mythos and esoteric ritual regime, especially for those aristocrats able to harness the power of the sangha. We might, therefore, conceive of the esoteric *nenbutsu* as the confluence of “multiple logics” functioning simultaneously in the fluid environment of medieval Japan (STONE 2016, 4–5).

One of the issues that remain to be explored more fully in the study of the esoteric *nenbutsu* is the degree to which Shingon school orthodoxy and historiography should be the default point of reference. The Shingon school has dominated popular and academic discussion of esoteric Buddhism more broadly, often occluding the dominant role that Tendai Buddhism actually played in premodern Japan (WEINSTEIN 1974). Following the career of Kūkai, Shingon as an area of study was dominated by Nara- and Mt. Hiei-based institutions and lineages (McMULLEN 2016, 8–9). Therefore, any consideration of premodern esoteric Buddhism in Japan must necessarily situate Shingon as an area of disciplinary focus and specialization, and eventually a sect or school in its own right, in this Tendai dominated doctrinal, ritual, and polemical context. The syncretism and orthodoxy models are insufficient. However, further inquiry beyond the traditional boundaries of the Shingon school reveal that, indeed, the esoteric *nenbutsu* developed through the establishment of competing and complementary taxonomies encompassing the *Lotus Sūtra*, the pure land mythos, and esoteric ritual culture.

### *The Tendai Roots of the Esoteric Nenbutsu*

Many of the lineages that established pure land soteriology and esoteric ritual culture in Japan were based on Mt. Hiei and affiliated with the Tendai school of Japanese Buddhism, which was transmitted to Japan by Saichō 最澄 (766–822) in the early ninth century. Saichō traveled to China as part of the same delegation as Kūkai. After their ships were separated due to a storm, Saichō continued on to Mt. Tiantai 天台 where he learned the meditation and doctrinal system associated with Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597) as well as Chan and esoteric Buddhism. Upon his return, Saichō worked to establish institutional independence from the Nara monastic bureau for his monastic community on Mt. Hiei (GRONER 2000, 38–64). Following Saichō and Kūkai’s early transmission of esoteric ritual lineages from Tang China, several monks affiliated with Mt. Hiei followed in their



footsteps. Ennin 円仁 (794–864) and Enchin 円珍 (814–891), for example, traveled to China and stayed significantly longer than either Saichō or Kūkai, and returned with many more texts and ritual implements as well (GRONER 2002, 16–33). In this way, Mt. Hiei monks would eventually establish themselves as the dominant authority over esoteric ritual power.

Tendai Buddhism should not be taken as a monolithic entity, as competition among lineages was as prevalent within Tendai as without. The first major schism in Japanese Tendai was between the Enryakuji faction led by descendants of Ennin's lineage and the Onjōji faction led by the descendants of Enchin's lineage (McMULLIN 1984). Different lineages on Mt. Hiei developed over time and were associated with particular geographical features. For example, one way of dividing up Mt. Hiei's geography is related to different pagodas such as the Eastern Pagoda of the Ichijō Shikandō 一乗止観堂 and the Western Pagoda of the Shakadō 釈迦堂. The Yokawa 横川 area near the Northern Pagoda was first established by Ennin and later associated with Genshin 源信 (942–1017), the famous pure land scholar-monk and author of the *Ōjōyōshū*. The Eshin'in 恵心院 in the Yokawa area was the site of the Eshin lineage, which looks to Genshin as its founder. There are also traditionally sixteen *tani* 谷 (valleys), such as the Kurodani 黒谷, near the Western Pagoda. The Kurodani was dominated by the Eshin lineage and came to be associated with Hōnen. The Higashidani 東谷 was the site of the Dannain 檀那院 from which arose the Danna lineage, which considers Kakuun 覚運 (953–1007) as its founder. Kakuun and Genshin were contemporaries and both studied under Ryōgen 良源 (912–985), who is responsible for Mt. Hiei's close relationship with the center of political power (GRONER 2002, 162; FUKUHARA 2018). The Eshin and Danna lineages are two major streams of the Tendai school, which are in turn comprised of several sub-lineages, texts, and teachings associated with each of these lineages that were important for the development of the esoteric *nenbutsu*.

These lineages competed against one another through the production of scholarship, treatises, and taxonomies. The lineage best able to marshal sources and promote its own interpretation would fair better in acquiring patronage and prestige. Mastery of esoteric ritual and the promotion of the pure land path were both key to the success of Mt. Hiei lineages. Saichō's Tendai lineage cultivated a dual focus on Chinese Tiantai doctrinal study and meditation with Tang esoteric ritual culture. Therefore, in Japan, Tendai was the vehicle for developing esoteric approaches to rebirth in Sukhāvātī.

Tendai pure land thought and practice stemmed from Zhiyi's *Mohezhiguan*. Among the many meditations outlined in this expansive work on Buddhist practice, Zhiyi, the de facto patriarch of the Tiantai school, prescribes a ninety-day constant walking meditation. Due to the difficulty of this practice, he proposes that the recitation of the name of Amitābha Buddha may aid in concentration

during this period (T 1911, 46.12a19–13a23). This custom of invoking the name of Amitābha established a textual precedent for a systematic *nenbutsu* practice. Therefore, Tiantai in China and Tendai in Japan were central to pure land movements expounding devotion to Amitābha Buddha through the recitation of this Buddha's name.

In Japan in particular, the recitation of Amitābha's name became a regular part of practice on Mt. Hiei, and the Constant Walking Samadhi Hall (Jōgyō Zanmai Dō 常行三昧堂) became a powerful center for pure land practice. This form of practice may have been taught by Saichō himself, and eventually served as the foundation for the development of several forms of official and “unofficial” pure land practice (NARA 2002, 34–36, 65–66). This grueling regime is said to lead to a breakdown of one's sense of self, ultimately resulting in a realization of the non-duality of the Buddha and one's own existence. In Japan, the constant walking meditation harmonized with esoteric deity yoga practices and inspired a diverse range of popular practices, such as mountain-based thaumaturgical practices, or “mountain *nenbutsu*” (*yama no nenbutsu* 山の念仏).<sup>3</sup> These forms of practice spread beyond Mt. Hiei and proliferated around other mountain-temple complexes, including Mt. Kōya by the early-medieval period (NARA 2002, 103–115, 243).

The career of Ennin may well signify the definitive fusion of esoteric ritual culture and Tendai pure land practice in Japan. Elsewhere, I have considered the important role of Ennin in the construction of Japanese esoteric Buddhism and pure land Buddhism, noting in particular that Ennin's deathbed practice—which employed the mudra, mantra, and visualization of Amitābha Buddha—may be thought of as one of the first esoteric pure land practices in Japan, a model that would then be repeated and emulated by Buddhists in Japan throughout the early medieval period (PROFFITT 2019). Nara Hiromoto notes that there is disagreement over whether or not Saichō or Ennin may in fact have been aspirants for pure land rebirth in the way they are often depicted by medieval and modern Buddhists and whether or not these popular forms of pure land practice were retroactively attributed to them. For example, that *nenbutsu* practices attributed to Ennin, such as the constant walking meditation, uninterrupted *nenbutsu* (*fudan nenbutsu* 不断念仏), and so on, may in fact have predated Ennin's career (NARA 2002, 47–62). In any case, Mt. Hiei was not an island, but rather one of many sites where monks from various temples and lineages studied. As Mt. Hiei lineages grew in power and prestige, these ascetic forms of *nenbutsu*, which were articulated through the language of esoteric ritual, eventually proliferated

3. For a discussion of the role mountains played in the development of an esoteric approach to practice in medieval Japan, see BUSHELLE (2020).

throughout Japanese mountain centers such as Tōmine 遠峰 in Yamato 大和, various temples in Kyoto, and eventually Mt. Kōya (KAKEHASHI 2012, 85).<sup>4</sup>

Arguably the most important pure land thinker in Japanese history is the Mt. Hiei scholar-monk Genshin. Genshin's work was broadly influential among monks and laity alike, and ultimately established the foundation upon which pure land Buddhism as a distinct form of Japanese Buddhism would be established (RHODES 2017). As a direct disciple of Ryōgen, Genshin studied broadly across doctrinal disciplines, was well-versed in esoteric ritual, and systematized and categorized approaches to rebirth in Sukhāvātī.<sup>5</sup> He also compiled prescriptions for various exoteric and esoteric practices said to be effective for leading to pure land rebirth, including various mantras, *dhāraṇī*, and so on, as are found throughout the Mahāyāna sutras (T 2682, 84.46b19–23, 84.77b24–c1).

As mentioned above, Genshin is regarded as the founder of the Eshin lineage. As this lineage grew in power, affiliated monks began producing various texts attributed to Genshin. The fourfold rise and fall was an influential Eshin taxonomy that emerged from these texts, which discuss different approaches to Amitābha Buddha, rebirth in Sukhāvātī, and the *nenbutsu* through a view of history rooted in the revelation of the *Lotus Sūtra* (KITAGAWA 2001, 9–11).

### *The Fourfold Rise and Fall and the Three Truths of A-mi-da*

Early-medieval Japanese Buddhism was characterized by fluidity and diversity as well as fierce competition within and between the various lineages and sub-lineages connected to different temple complexes and institutions. Monks, as state employees, accumulated mastery of ritual and doctrinal lineages as they competed for patronage, prestige, and power. Therefore, the writings of monks from this period were not merely dispassionate chronicles of Buddhist thought and practice. They were also polemical statements of a tradition's ideals. In other words, taxonomies, such as the fourfold rise and fall, were frameworks for thinking about the complex, and often contradictory, interpretations of practice and how the multifaceted dimensions of practice can ultimately lead to buddhahood.

As examined in the following sections, the fourfold taxonomy served as a template for the *nenbutsu* taxonomies used by Dōhan and Kōshū. Like other doctrinal

4. Ennin was perhaps the first to establish a crowned image of Amitābha, an esoteric form of the Buddha, in the Constant Walking Samadhi Hall on Mt. Hiei, and, from there, this image and texts associated with it flowed through diverse monastic centers throughout Japan (KAGIWARA 2014, 259–267).

5. Ryōgen, the eighteenth abbot of Mt. Hiei, employed his mastery of esoteric ritual and the pure land mythos to simultaneously address the this-world and other-worldly needs of the aristocracy in his *Gokuraku jōdo kuhon ōjōgi* (1–36). Kakehashi notes that Ryōgen's emphasis on vocal recitation of the *nenbutsu* seems to have been especially influential upon later practitioners (KAKEHASHI 2012, 86–87, 90–93).

paradigms and discourses in medieval Tendai that were initially transmitted orally from master to disciple, it is difficult to establish a chronology for the fourfold rise and fall. Although the taxonomy had become a standard classification scheme by the mid-thirteenth century, there is substantial evidence that it existed in some form centuries earlier.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the precise dates for the taxonomy, it had a significant influence on medieval Tendai scholasticism as well as the formation of Nichiren's 日蓮 (1222–1282) analysis of the *Lotus Sūtra* (HANANO 2002).

The fourfold rise and fall is a hierarchical taxonomy, stipulating that when a teaching “rises” the preceding teaching “falls.” In other words, the teachings become progressively superior as one gives way to the next. The taxonomy is intended to be comprehensive in that it includes all possible teachings of the Buddha, while also taking into account the abilities and needs of individual practitioners engaging with these teachings. The fourfold rise and fall can be outlined as follows (based on STONE 1999, 168–175).

#### 1. TEACHINGS THAT PRECEDED THE *LOTUS SŪTRA* (NIZEN 爾前)

In the most basic sense, this category includes all teachings expounded by Śākyamuni prior to the preaching of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Although the *Lotus Sūtra* was always important to the Tiantai/Tendai school, over time the sutra became more and more central to the school's doctrinal identity. In Japan in particular, the supremacy of the *Lotus Sūtra* was a fundamental element of Saichō's efforts to differentiate his new school from the Nara establishment. This polemic was even further stressed when Tendai scholiasts began to integrate the teachings of the sutra with esoteric Buddhism. Enchin, for instance, asserted that the perfect teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra* were superior to the teachings of other sutras and equated it with the esoteric teachings. Therefore, the teachings that preceded the *Lotus Sūtra* are the most basic form of Buddhist teachings, which “fall” away as the practitioner “rises” to a higher level of teachings in this seminal Tendai sutra.

#### 2. THE TRACE TEACHINGS (SHAKUMON 迹門)

Tiantai/Tendai exegetes traditionally divide the *Lotus Sūtra* into two halves. The first fourteen chapters are referred to as the “trace teachings,” which, like the preceding sutras, were expounded by Śākyamuni in his provisional aspect as the historical Buddha. The teachings in the first half of the sutra were, nonetheless, deemed superior to those of previous sutras. Thus, as the trace teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra* “rise,” the teachings that preceded them “fall.”

6. For a summary of the Japanese scholarship regarding the dates of the fourfold rise and fall, see STONE (1999, 417, n. 76).

### 3. THE SOURCE TEACHINGS (*HONMON* 本門)

The “trace teachings” are derivative of the “source teachings,” which are revealed in the latter half of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Along with other pairings such as principle (*li* 理) and phenomenon (*shi* 事), the source/trace dichotomy has deep roots in Chinese Buddhist thought. However, this distinction was even more pronounced in Japanese Tendai. While the trace teachings were preached by Śākyamuni Buddha during his lifetime, the source teachings were expounded by the Buddha who had awakened long ago (*kuon jitsujō butsu* 久遠実成仏). In the Eshin and Danna lineages, the source teachings were considered to be superior in that they directly revealed the truth of original enlightenment. This preference for the source teachings was further amplified in Tendai esoteric Buddhism, which equated the long-ago awakened Buddha of the *Lotus Sūtra* with Mahāvairocana. As Mahāvairocana represented the inconceivable body of the dharma (*hosshin* 法身), the long-ago awakened Buddha was none other than the embodiment of original enlightenment. Thus, the trace teachings “fall” as one grapples with the profundity of the source teachings.

### 4. DISCERNING THE MIND (*KANJIN* 観心)

The final stage of the fourfold rise and fall taxonomy is not a specific set of teachings but references contemplation. However, in the Japanese Tendai context, contemplation not only denoted a form of meditation or practice but invoked “the insight of original enlightenment, considered as an a priori ground” (STONE 1999, 172). Contemplation methods were actually categorized as belonging to the trace teachings. As the source teachings were elevated by the Eshin and Danna lineages as well as in Tendai esoteric Buddhism, some practices for “discerning the mind” were associated with the source teachings. This association created the need for a final and supreme stage that encompassed all teachings and practices. The “rise” of contemplating the mind was to realize the original enlightenment of all phenomena and, thus, supersede the distinctions between the preceding stages of the paradigm.

The version of the fourfold rise and fall paradigm in the *Jigyō nenbutsu mondō*, a medieval pure land apocryphon attributed to Genshin, maps this system onto the characteristics of Amitābha Buddha. Following the structure of the standard fourfold taxonomy, the text first discusses the appearance of Amitābha in pre-*Lotus* teachings in which the Buddha is presented as a potential object of devotion and a popular character in Mahāyāna sutra literature. Amitābha is then identified with the Tathāgata of Supreme Penetration and Wisdom in the “Parable of the Conjured City” chapter of the trace teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The text positions Amitābha as an arbitrator between the trace teachings preached

by Śākyamuni and the source teachings expounded by the long-ago awakened Buddha of the latter half of the sutra. Finally, the *Jigyō nenbutsu mondō* associates contemplating the mind with the invocation of Amitābha's name, that is, the *nenbutsu* (STONE 1999, 175; DNBZ 31: 201a–b).

The fourfold rise and fall from the *Jigyō nenbutsu mondō* intersects with another taxonomy prevalent in texts associated with Genshin and the Eshin lineage: the three truths of *a-mi-da*. This exegetical technique explores conceptions of Amitābha Buddha and, thus, the doctrinal significance of the syllables chanted in the *nenbutsu*. In practical terms, the syllables constituting the name of this buddha—*a*, *mi*, and *da* in Japanese—are equated with the three truths of emptiness (*kū* 空), nominal existence (*ke* 仮), and the middle (*chū* 中) in which the truths of emptiness and nominal existence mutually coincide. According to this seminal Tendai doctrine, ultimate reality, which is the truth that all phenomena are empty of permanent existence, is accessible through the provisional reality of the nominal existence of all phenomena. It is at this point of tension between ultimate and provisional reality where sentient beings can attain liberation by realizing the truth of emptiness while abiding in a nominal state of existing. Therefore, the recitation of the name of Amitābha is tantamount to invoking the fundamental components of Tendai soteriology.<sup>7</sup>

The three truths of *a-mi-da* discourse was an attempt to resolve the problem of how ordinary beings could perceive Amitābha Buddha in his pure land of Sukhāvātī from the position of nominal existence. The *nenbutsu*, thus, functioned as a nexus in which the ultimate truth of emptiness, the realization of which is the objective of practice in the pure land, could be made accessible in the mundane world of ordinary beings. Depending on one's level of ability, the simple practice of reciting the name of the Buddha could have multiple soteriological outcomes: postmortem rebirth in Amitābha's pure land, or enlightenment in one's current body.

### *Dōhan's Fourfold Nenbutsu Taxonomy*

One of the earliest and most influential appropriations of the fourfold taxonomical model to the medieval discourse on the esoteric *nenbutsu* is Dōhan's *Himitsu nenbutsu shō*. Composed around 1224, the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* is a collection of dialogues (*mondō* 問答) between the author and an imagined interlocutor regarding theories of the *nenbutsu* found in multifarious Chinese and Japanese commentaries and other exegetical writings. As a Shingon monk based

7. This way of imbuing the *nenbutsu* itself with the content of the whole of the Buddhist path may have paved the way for Hōnen and others associated with the early pure land movement to advocate for the *nenbutsu* as the sole practice sufficient for rebirth in Sukhāvātī (SUEKI 1979; 2008, 141–144).

on Mt. Kōya, Dōhan was well-versed in the esoteric sutras and their respective commentaries. However, Tendai sources are also prominent in his analysis of the *nenbutsu*. Considering the fact that lineages based on Mt. Hiei dominated early medieval Buddhism, scholar-monks such as Dōhan, writing on the faraway and comparatively marginal Mt. Kōya, would have had to rely on the ideas at the political and religious center as he worked to establish his perspective on the *nenbutsu*. In the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō*, Dōhan calls upon both Shingon and Tendai exegetical traditions to craft his own *nenbutsu* taxonomy.

Dōhan was a prolific scholar and ritual master, and one interesting thread throughout his writings is an emphasis placed on devotion to Amitābha Buddha. Amitābha is the main object of worship (*honzon* 本尊) at Shōchiin 正智院, Nin-naji, and several other temples where Dōhan trained.<sup>8</sup> The main image of a temple is not inconsequential, as it often takes center stage in the ritual program of that temple. The fact that Dōhan's career began before an image of the Amitābha and much of his training and activities took place at temples where this buddha was the main object of devotion suggests that Amitābha-oriented practices were always a predominant concern for him. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the topics of *nenbutsu* and aspiration for rebirth in Sukhāvātī were at the core of his thought on ritual, doctrine, and practice (PROFFITT 2015, 290–345).

Dōhan begins his *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* by asking why so many practitioners of mantra and *shikan* 止観 (the two basic forms of meditation, *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*, which in Tendai became a general term for all contemplation practices), have come to rely on Amitābha Buddha as their object of devotion and the *nenbutsu* as their primary form of practice. Is it because the *nenbutsu* is easy, or is it because of the multivalent nature of this practice? This question from Dōhan's imaginary interlocutor sets up the main thesis of the text: the soteriological goal of rebirth in Sukhāvātī, devotion to Amitābha Buddha, and the practice of *nenbutsu* can be interpreted from multiple perspectives depending on one's level of ability to comprehend the esoteric *nenbutsu* (SAZ 2: 226).

Immediately following this rhetorical question regarding the diversity and popularity of pure land thought and practice, Dōhan lays out a fourfold esoteric explanation (*shishu hishaku* 四種秘釈) for categorizing the different levels of engagement with Amitābha and *nenbutsu* practice. While he organizes his taxonomy around Shingon doctrinal themes, such as the Vajradhātu and Garbhadhātu Mandalas and Mahāvairocana Tathāgata as the manifestation of

8. In addition to his writings on doctrine, perhaps Dōhan is most well-known historically for his involvement in the 1243 dispute over patronage, and the estates that accompany it, between Kongōbuji 金剛峰寺 and Daidenbōin 大伝法院, two competing monastic centers on Mt. Kōya. As a result of his role in the violent altercations that ensued, Dōhan, along with around thirty other monks, was exiled from the mountain until permitted to return six years later (KS 154, 157; SATŌ 2003, 89).



ultimate reality, there is substantial continuity between his taxonomy and the fourfold rise and fall associated with the Eshin lineage. Dōhan's taxonomy outlined in the preface to the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* (SAZ 2: 226) can be summarized as follows:

# 1. THE SHALLOW (SENRYAKU 浅略) INTERPRETATION OF AMITĀBHA BUDDHA

In the first level of his taxonomy, Dōhan proposes a “shallow and abbreviated” understanding of Amitābha as the former bodhisattva Dharmākara, who, upon fulfilling his vows to Lokeśvararāja Buddha, achieved buddhahood and generated the pure land Sukhāvātī. As with the first category of the rise and fall taxonomy in the *Jigyō nenbutsu mondō*, Dōhan substitutes the historical Buddha of the pre-*Lotus* teachings with Amitābha. He begins his taxonomy with a hagiographical depiction of Amitābha that is common across traditions, which, much like the standard fourfold rise and fall paradigm, functions as a catchall polemical category for exoteric interpretations of this buddha. Labeling this category of his *nenbutsu* taxonomy as “shallow” may also have been a subtle criticism of Hōnen's *Senchakushū* (YAMAGUCHI 2002, 113–115). It seems that Dōhan's main critique of the exclusive *nenbutsu* associated with Hōnen's movement hinged primarily on the notion that the recitation of Amitābha's name could be isolated from other forms of practice. Rather than an exclusive practice, Dōhan subsumes the *nenbutsu* within a spectrum of interpretations of Amitābha. As the most basic understanding of devotion to the Buddha, it eventually “falls” away as the practitioner realizes the secret meaning inherent in such practices.

# 2. THE PROFOUNDLY SECRET (JINPI 深秘) INTERPRETATION OF AMITĀBHA BUDDHA

This second level of the taxonomy refers to Amitābha as the manifestation of the cognition of wondrous observation (*myōkansatsuchi* 妙觀察智) depicted in the Garbhadhātu Mandala and the esoteric sutras. Dōhan contrasts this level with the previous one. Invoking the exoteric-esoteric dichotomy typical of Shingon polemics, he notes that in the exoteric teachings of the first level, each buddha, such as Amitābha, becomes a buddha through their own efforts as a result of numerous lifetimes of cultivation. In the mantra teachings, however, the myriad virtues of the *tathāgatas* are revealed to the practitioner. In other words, the “shallow” *nenbutsu* of the first level merely leads to the realization of a particular buddha, whereas the “profoundly secret” interpretation of Amitābha reveals that devotion to the esoteric version of this buddha is actually a means for achieving the awakened wisdom of all buddhas. Much like the trace teachings of the rise and fall taxonomy, the second level of Dōhan's fourfold model of *nenbutsu* posits the introductory esoteric practices regarding Amitābha, as one of the buddhas of

the mandala, as the first step of the superior path. Thus, the “shallow” interpretation of the *nenbutsu* “falls” away as the superior esoteric interpretation “rises.”

### 3. THE PROFOUNDLY SECRET AMONG THE SECRET (*HICHŪJINPI* 秘中深秘) INTERPRETATION OF AMITĀBHA BUDDHA

The third level explicitly identifies Amitābha with Mahāvairocana Tathāgata, who in the Shingon and Tendai traditions is considered the body of the dharma’s unfading wisdom that pervades past, present, and future. Hence, Dōhan notes, Amitābha is also called Limitless Life (Muryōju 無量寿, which is also in the title of the pure land sutra, the *Sutra of the Meditation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*). The confluence and interchangeability of Mahāvairocana and Amitābha goes as far back as the Mt. Hiei monk Kōkei 皇慶 (977–1049), who trained in various Shingon lineages (KAGIWADA 2009, 607), as well as a major doctrinal point in the works of Kakuban upon whom Dōhan relies throughout the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō*. The fourfold rise and fall created a precedent for identifying the long-ago awakened Śākyamuni of the *Lotus Sūtra* with the Buddha of Limitless Life, a view that became pervasive in Japanese Tendai and even appears in the writings of Shinran (KAKEHASHI 2004). However, Dōhan takes this correlation a step further in his version of the fourfold taxonomy by replacing the long-ago awakened Buddha of the source teachings in the *Lotus Sūtra* with Amitābha, who he exclaims to be none other than Mahāvairocana, the dharma body of the Buddha. Therefore, the second level of the *nenbutsu* taxonomy is merely a “trace teaching” of this level in which the practitioner recognizes that Amitābha in the outer levels of the mandala is identical to Mahāvairocana at the center. Thus, reciting the *nenbutsu* is the same as invoking the dharma body of the Buddha.

### 4. THE PROFOUNDLY SECRET AMONG THE EXTREMELY SECRET (*HIHICHŪJINPI* 秘秘中深秘) INTERPRETATION OF AMITĀBHA BUDDHA

Like the “discerning the mind” category of the fourfold rise and fall, Dōhan’s final level attempts to dissolve the hierarchal nature of the previous three levels by declaring that Amitābha is the true aspect of form and thought (*shikishin jissō* 色心実相) for all sentient beings. In other words, from the perspective that Amitābha ultimately denotes the wisdom of the Buddha that surpasses all cognitive distinctions, even the “shallow” interpretation of Amitābha as one of many buddhas to whom one might worship is, in essence, the esoteric *nenbutsu*. Therefore, the “rise” of this fourth level of the taxonomy negates the superficial hierarchy of the preceding levels.

Following this exploration of the four levels of Amitābha Buddha, Dōhan spends a considerable amount of time exploring the exoteric and esoteric meanings of the three characters of the name of Amitābha Buddha in Japanese: *a-mi-da*.

Dōhan sets up his discussion of the three truths of *a-mi-da* through his imaginary interlocutor's inquiry into the profoundly secret meaning of Amitābha's name. Asserting that a single character of the Buddha's name encompasses a myriad of meanings, he juxtaposes the three characters constituting the name with the three sections of the Garbhadhātu Mandala, namely, buddha, vajra, and lotus. The first character *a* denotes the originally unarisen middle way (*honpushō chūdō* 本不生中道), a standard trope for the origin of that Mahāvairocana's mantra in esoteric Buddhism based on the Sanskrit syllabary. The second character *mi* is equated with the doctrine that the self as well as all phenomena are ultimately empty (*ninpō nikū* 入法二空). Finally, the third character *da* signifies the inherently pure principle of suchness (*shōjō nyonyo ri* 性淨如如理) (SAZ 2: 228).

As with the discussion of the three truths of *a-mi-da* in the *Jigyō nenbutsu mondō*, Dōhan compares the three syllables with the Tendai doctrine of the three truths. However, he adds another layer of interpretation to this paradigm. In response to his interlocutor regarding the "shallow" and "profound" meanings of each syllable, Dōhan asserts that each can be understood according to a superficial exoteric notion of the three truths or their more subtle esoteric meaning. If one follows the exoteric teaching (in this case, the classical Tendai view), then the syllable *da*, which signifies the truth of the middle, is merely the initial stage of awakening (*shigaku* 始覺). In contrast, for those who abide by the esoteric teaching of mantra, the utterance of the syllable *da* denotes inherent awakening (*hongaku* 本覺). Dōhan then proceeds to map the three syllables constituting Amitābha's name onto the sections of the Garbhadhātu Mandala (SAZ 2: 228).

By devising his own version of the fourfold rise and fall taxonomy and the three truths of *a-mi-da*, Dōhan appropriated the systematic logic of these scholastic models to construct his own interpretation of the popular practice of *nenbutsu*. Ultimately, Dōhan's esoteric *nenbutsu* is not simply the *nenbutsu* of a single doctrinal position or school, albeit he does associate the most profound interpretation with that of his own Shingon school. Rather, the esoteric taxonomy organizes diverse approaches to *nenbutsu* practice and orientates them toward the mantra path. By adopting the scholastic language of taxonomy from his Tendai counterparts in the Eshin lineage, Dōhan incorporates the *nenbutsu*, devotion to Amitābha Buddha, and rebirth in the Buddha's pure land into the doctrinal framework of esoteric Buddhism in an effort to establish an esoteric orthodoxy.

### *Kōshū's Fourfold Nenbutsu Taxonomy*

About a century after Dōhan penned his *Himitsu nenbutsu shō*, the topic of the esoteric *nenbutsu* resurfaces in fascicle fifteen of the *Keiran shūyōshū*. Compiled by Kōshū, a chronicler in the Tendai school on Mt. Hiei and member of the

Eshin lineage, the *Keiran shūyōshū* is a massive compendium of orally transmitted interpretations of doctrines, rituals, and practices expounded in the Tendai school. Therefore, it should not be surprising that debates regarding the meaning of the *nenbutsu* are featured prominently in this compilation.

By the time Kōshū began his project of compiling and organizing the content of the *Keiran shūyōshū* in the fourteenth century, the various factions of the pure land movement had become an influential intellectual force in Japanese Buddhism. Thus, Kōshū considers Dōhan's esoteric *nenbutsu* in the context of the evolving diversity of *nenbutsu* practice and thought. Although Kōshū relegates Dōhan's taxonomy to just one of four categories of interpretations, the Mt. Hiei scholar-monk proclaims the theory of his Mt. Kōya predecessor, along with the Tendai view, as a means for directly realizing buddhahood.

Kōshū identifies four categories for interpreting the *nenbutsu* and devotion to Amitābha based on the Eshin lineage fourfold taxonomy. In a subsequent passage (T 2410, 76.551c27–552a13), he labels these interpretations as belonging to (1) the Shingon school, (2) the Tendai school, (3) Genshin's *Ojōyōshū*, and (4) the school of Shandao 善導 (613–681), the patriarch of Chinese pure land thought. However, he uses slightly different language in his analysis of the four categories, which can be summarized as follows (T 2410, 76.551).

#### 1. ESOTERIC NENBUTSU

Although he does not mention him by name or cite the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* in this first category of *nenbutsu* interpretations, Kōshū alludes to the latter three levels of Dōhan's taxonomy. As in the second level (the first esoteric level) of Dōhan's discussion of Amitābha, Kōshū notes that this interpretation identifies Amitābha with the manifestation of the cognition of wondrous observation depicted in the Garbhadhātu Mandala. He also states that this interpretation equates Amitābha with the “single buddha of the esoteric teachings” (*mikkyō no ichi butsu* 密教之一仏), presumably referring to Mahāvairocana. This equation of the two buddhas resembles the third level of Dōhan's taxonomy. Finally, Kōshū invokes the fourth level of the taxonomy by associating the recitation of Amitābha's name with the esoteric practice of resonating the three secrets of the Buddha (*sanmitsu sōō* 三密相応). In other words, similar to the “discerning the mind” category of the fourfold rise and fall, the final level of the esoteric *nenbutsu* is to overcome the distinctions between the practitioner and the Buddha.

#### 2. NENBUTSU OF THE TENDAI SCHOOL

Kōshū's summary of *nenbutsu* theory in the Tendai school is by far the most extensive of the four interpretations discussed in the *Keiran shūyōshū*. He begins this section by clarifying that, from the Tendai perspective, the pure land of

Amitābha is synonymous with the entirety of the dharma realm (*hokkai* 法界). Thus, the pure land is, according to this interpretation, replete throughout the ten realms (*jikkai enman* 十界円満; a metaphor for the respective worlds of all beings in the six realms, *śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, bodhisattvas, and buddhas). As a singular vehicle (*ichijō* 一乘) of the Buddha's teachings, Tendai can be understood from one of four perspectives (*kehō shikyō* 化法四教): *tripitaka* (*sanzō* 三藏), shared (*tsū* 通), distinct (*betsu* 別), and perfect (*en* 円). Kōshū states that the Tendai approach to the *nenbutsu* is a perfect teaching. Therefore, by invoking the name of Amitābha, the practitioner brings to mind the self-realized wisdom of the buddha's enlightenment (*jijuyūshin chi* 自受用身智). Kōshū includes the three truths of *a-mi-da* in this interpretation. Similar to the theory found in the *Jigyō nenbutsu mondō*, the three syllables signify the doctrine of the three truths. However, this interpretation takes the correlation a step further. According to Kōshū, the oral activity (*kugō* 口業) of invoking the name of the Buddha is karmically equivalent to obtaining the teachings of the Buddha. Therefore, simply by intoning the name, one's oral, physical (*shingō* 身業), and mental (*igō* 意業) actions become the true characteristics (*jissō* 実相) of the Buddha, which, he declares, has the same purport as *shikan* practice. In other words, Kōshū not only aligns the three syllables with the three truths, but with the three activities through which the practitioner attains buddhahood.

### 3. SHARED MAHĀYĀNA VIEW OF THE NENBUTSU

Kōshū next identifies a general Mahāyāna approach to the *nenbutsu*, which he associates with theories proposed by various teachers including those in Gen-shin's *Ōjōyōshū* and treatises on the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*. From this perspective, ordinary people (*bonbu* 凡夫) who are incapable of realizing the true characteristics of the Buddha through the recitation of the *nenbutsu* are reborn in the pure land, where there are few obstacles to obtaining enlightenment. In other words, this interpretation is addressed to those who seek the pure land because they are weary of this defiled world (*gonjō ene* 欣浄厭穢).

### 4. NENBUTSU IN THE PURE LAND SCHOOL

The final interpretation ostensibly encompasses an array of views subsumed under the category of the Pure Land school. First, Kōshū summarizes the perspective of Shandao, which stipulates that one can be reborn in the pure land by taking refuge in the compassion of Amitābha and reciting the name of the Buddha. He next compares Shandao's teaching with Hōnen's school, which adds that even ignorant beings (*gūchi* 愚癡) can be reborn in the pure land. Kōshū additionally references theories that would typically be classified as esoteric. For instance, he notes that the ultimate goal for practitioners of the exo-esoteric teachings (that

is, Tendai esoteric Buddhism) is to realize that the defilements are inherent to the mandala. Citing an interpretation attributed to the semi-legendary Shingon patriarch Nāgārjuna, Kōshū suggests that this concept is embodied in the manifestation of esoteric deities such as Fudō Myōō 不動明王 and Aizen Myōō 愛染明王. In conclusion, Kōshū offers his own interpretation of the pure land view of *nenbutsu*, referring to it as the middle way (*chūdō* 中道) that allows rebirth in the pure land for ignorant beings who have yet to grasp the more profound meaning of the *nenbutsu* and who have not yet been able to sever their attachments to this impure world.

Kōshū structured his taxonomy based on the hierarchal model of the four teachings, which, like the rise and fall and Dōhan's esoteric *nenbutsu*, assigns various levels of profundity to these categories. The *nenbutsu* of the pure land schools is most suitable for ordinary people who cannot comprehend the more complicated methods. In this case, like Dōhan's first level, the *nenbutsu* is a simple practice that does not require adherence to the precepts or advanced capabilities in Buddhist practice. The shared Mahāyāna interpretation, which primarily refers to Genshin's view of the *nenbutsu* in the *Ōjōyōshū*, is applicable to sentient beings at various levels of the path and can lead to buddhahood in the current world or rebirth in Amitābha's pure land.

Kōshū's taxonomy differs from the rise and fall of Dōhan's esoteric *nenbutsu* in that it is not a sequential process but rather a typology of interpretations. One level does not "fall" away as another "rises." However, like Dōhan, Kōshū employs the exoteric versus esoteric polemic to parse the soteriological significance of the four categories. The Shingon and Tendai interpretations are esoteric views that allow the practitioner to internally realize (*naishō* 内証) the current world as a pure land, whereas Shandao and Genshin's exoteric views have the external function (*geyū* 外用) of aiding those who seek rebirth in Sukhāvātī where they can practice free of the defilements of this world. Nonetheless, as a taxonomy, Kōshū's compilation of *nenbutsu* interpretations is an attempt to impose order on an ever-sprawling body of theory regarding Buddhist praxis. By including Dōhan's esoteric *nenbutsu* in this paradigm, Kōshū accepts it as the orthodox esoteric understanding of *nenbutsu* practice.

### Conclusion

The very act of constructing a taxonomy is prescriptive. Taxonomies were not only attempts to systematize various theories on the liberatory practice of *nenbutsu* that had proliferated through centuries of scholastic wrangling over the purport of the Buddha's teachings. They were also propositions for how the teachings should be universally applicable regardless of the obvious differences among those who receive them.

In the case of the fourfold rise and fall and the three truths of *a-mi-da*, Tendai exegetes attempted to account for how the pure land mythos, the nature of Amitābha Buddha, and the salvific syllables of the *nenbutsu* could be engaged on multiple levels. As lineages such as the Danna and Eshin continued to diversify, so did variations on these fundamental taxonomies. While attempting to impose order on this cacophony, scholar-monks from inside and outside of the Tendai tradition adapted the fourfold rise and fall for their own polemical purposes.

Two such scholar-monks were Dōhan of Mt. Kōya and Kōshū of Mt. Hiei. Dōhan drew upon his training in esoteric ritual and knowledge of scriptural commentaries to imagine the interconnections between diverse perspectives on *nenbutsu* practice. In addition to paradigms found in esoteric sutras, their commentaries, and treatises by Kūkai, Dōhan utilized exegetical strategies from his Tendai counterparts and the growing pure land movement on Mt. Hiei. Applying the progressive model of the fourfold rise and fall, he devised a comprehensive taxonomy of *nenbutsu* based on esoteric Buddhist doctrine. A century later, Kōshū's compilation of *nenbutsu* theories demonstrates the diversity of interpretations of the practice of chanting the name of the Buddha that existed in medieval Japan. In addition to *nenbutsu* practices in the pure land schools and Genshin's references to this practice in his *Ōjōyōshū* that guided the ordinary person to rebirth in Amitābha's pure land through the simple recitation of the Buddha's name, Kōshū proposed that Dōhan's esoteric *nenbutsu*, along with the Tendai view, was a major component of the *nenbutsu* orthodoxy.

Through this brief examination of Kōshū, Dōhan, and their predecessors in the Eshin lineage, the fluid intellectual context for the formation of *nenbutsu* taxonomies becomes clear. The study of the esoteric *nenbutsu* reveals the porous boundaries between esoteric and pure land Buddhism as well as highlighting the way lineages originating in different institutions, like Mt. Hiei and Mt. Kōya, borrowed from and influenced one another in the arena of the medieval Japanese struggle for orthodoxy.

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