Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 48/2: 245–266

dx.doi.org/10.18874/jjrs.48.2.2021.245-266

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Shards from a Wooden Shoe Shop

Religious Experience, Historical Change, and Suzuki Daisetsu

The Myōkōnin are a distinctive group of devout Buddhist practitioners in Japan. Their history can be traced to the mid-Tokugawa period, generally associated with the Pure Land tradition, and over the centuries hundreds have been identified as belonging to this group. After a review of this history, with a particular look at its affective aspects and the history of the major chronicle of its members, the *Myōkōninden*, this article shows how early ideas associated with the Myōkōnin were taken up, and extended by Suzuki Daisetsu in the mid-twentieth century as part of his world historical arguments for a new Japanese-inspired form of self-realization appropriate to the postwar world.

KEYWORDS: Myōkōnin—Suzuki Daisetsu—Pure Land—religious experience—*nenbutsu*—history and religion—Asahara Saichi

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When Gōsei 仰誓 (1721–1794) was twenty-eight years old, the scholar-monk of the Honganji 本願寺 branch of the Jōdo Shin sect had just been appointed to his first position as a temple's head priest. While still settling into his new position, he heard rumors of a man of profound faith living in the mountains of Yoshino 吉野. So, in 1749, Gōsei arranged a journey into the Yoshino mountains, south of the ancient capital of Nara, in order to search for this man of true faith. By the time Gōsei met with Seikurō 清九郎 (ca. 1667–1750) of Yoshino, the latter was seventy-three years of age and indeed not long for this world. Gōsei spoke extensively with Seikurō, learned of his life, practice, and faith, and recorded many of these conversations in notes and letters. While many of these records are lost, many copies, some extensively edited by Gōsei's own students, remain and form the basis of the first chapters of the genre of faith records known as the *Myōkōninden*.

The meeting between Gōsei and Seikurō sparked a new fire in religious practice in Japan. Gōsei went on to collect ten more life stories from the surrounding area and many years later, after being moved to Jōsenji 浄泉寺 Temple in Iwami 石見 (present-day Shimane Prefecture), collected twenty-five more life stories of devoted Pure Land practitioners. These thirty-five stories constituted the beginning of a new genre of religious literature that was eventually copied, circulated, modified, lectured upon, and emulated even into the twenty-first century (Kikufuji 2009; Kodama 2009). While Seikurō is often identified as the first Myōkōnin, he most certainly was neither the last nor even the most famous (Bathgate 2007; Kikufuji 2016).

Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙 (1870–1966) was himself seventy-two years old in 1943 when he learned of a modern Myōkōnin from his friend and colleague Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 (1900–1990). At the time, Suzuki was working on his monumental *Nihonteki reisei*. Suzuki included a chapter on the Myōkōnin in this work and followed up with several other studies of the Myōkōnin in the postwar years, including an edited volume of poetry by the Myōkōnin introduced to him by Nishitani: Asahara Saichi 浅原才市 (1850–1932) of Iwami (Suzuki 1946, 195–256; Suzuki 1967). This Iwami was the very same area where Gōsei crafted his collection of the life stories of the faithful. Thus it was that some two hundred

* This work is part of a longer study titled *An Archipelago of Tears*, which treats various aspects of emotion as revealed in history, particularly as encoded in the Japanese past. Research for this article was conducted at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in 2019–2020 and the author is grateful for the support from this institution.

years after Gōsei's meeting with Seikurō, the flame of Amida and the Pure Land faithful once again burned brightly along the Japan Sea coast.

Suzuki asserted in his 1948 study *Myōkōnin*, "while there is such a thing as the *Myōkōninden*, there is no Myōkōnin research" (SDZ 10: 127). Suzuki, fascinated by the power and insights of the Myōkōnin in general and the poetry of Saichi in particular, is generally credited with being the first modern scholar to engage in Myōkōnin research and thus to create a new field in Japanese religious and cultural studies.

In this article, I juxtapose the following two interactions: those between the scholar-monk Gōsei and Seikurō the woodcutter from the mountains of Yoshino in 1749, and between the modern philosopher of religion Suzuki and Saichi, the wooden shoemaker of Iwami. Seikurō and Saichi are both widely recognized as Myōkōnin and, thanks to Suzuki's publication of Saichi's verses, Saichi himself has become the most well known and most extensively quoted of all the Myōkōnin even up to contemporary times. Of course, 1749 and 1949 are very different historical moments, and, the "Japans" of these two times are in fact very different places as well. Nevertheless, they do share a consistency of terminology and shared emphases in their discussion of the Myōkōnin.

The term "Myōkōnin" itself was easily and frequently deployed in both historical moments, as were terms related to faith, devotion, obligation, and prayer. Even the sublime joy and ecstasy of pure faith, the tears of joy, the experience of the compassion of the Buddha Amida, can be found in equal, and sometimes in hauntingly exact, terms in these two very distinct times and places. There is, in other words, a shared structural and affective quality of experience encoded in a replicated, if not a shared language. Whether the tears of joy experienced by the eighteenth century Seikurō and the monk Gōsei, and the similarly expressed tears shed by the twentieth century Saichi, are in fact "the same" is an issue that raises questions of the historicity of emotionality. To foreshadow one conclusion here, for Suzuki, to the precise degree that these experiences shared in the transcendent relation to the absolute truth of the Buddha Amida, an experience which itself stands outside of time and history, they could be said to be "the same" experience.[1]

Nevertheless, the Myōkōnin do not mean the same thing for Gōsei and contemporary Pure Land priests as they do for Suzuki and other mid-twentieth-century writers. For example, the recorded experiences of the Myōkōnin themselves are often accounts of dynamic and life-changing occurrences marked by

1. This conception of what can be called a mystical union outside of historical time draws upon William James's work, which was also influential in Japan, and is a dominant theme of Suzuki's own work and indeed of early twentieth-century Japanese religious philosophy in general (JAMES 1890; JAMES 1902; HU 1953; SUZUKI 1953).

extreme emotions such as anger turned into joy, or tears of grief altered to tears of bliss. While these emotional markers form a sort of structural latticework for the various versions of the *Myōkōninden* chronicles as well as in the later reconstructions by Suzuki and others, they also share in shifts in meaning across time. In other words, by looking closely at the Myōkōnin depicted over the centuries and at the construction of the *Myōkōninden* chronicles, we can glimpse the historicity of emotion and meaning as they emerge, change, and reappear in distinct historical moments.

A preliminary caution is that our contemporary categories for interpreting ecstatic religious experiences owe a great deal to William James and this is no less true in the Japanese intellectual milieu than it is in the Anglophone world. For example, Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945) began his towering life work with a close analysis of "experience" (*keiken* 経験), the possibility of entering into a place of "pure experience" (*junsui keiken* 純粋経験), and the subsequent construction of a logic derived therefrom (Nishida 1911; Abe 1990). Nishida, like Nishitani Keiji, Suzuki Daisetsu, and many other early twentieth-century Japanese scholars who examined "religion," all read James (alongside William Blake, the Desert Fathers, medieval Christian theology, Continental Philosophy, modern phenomenology, and so on) as they each went on to craft distinctly Japanese terms (many of them neologisms) for detailing their own analyses of the Japanese religious past, the ("mystical") experiences associated therewith, and the logical and philosophical possibilities derived therefrom. Gōsei and his fellow scholar-monks in the eighteenth century obviously deployed no such language and operated within very different intellectual parameters.

While Suzuki and others found within the Myōkōnin examples of psychological and spiritual principles with historically significant religious experience, pure and otherwise, we must bear in mind that the very terms used here—experience, spirituality, religion—did not have currency in the eighteenth century. Obviously, people certainly had experiences, and religion most assuredly existed. However, the way these phenomena were thought about and expressed were also distinct from the psychological and philosophical problems current to the twentieth century.

Following Suzuki's work, there has been a sustained series of publications related to the Myōkōnin.[2] While the Myōkōnin have been examined from Buddhological and Pure Land doctrinal perspectives, they have also undergone philosophical, psychological, historical, social, and economic analyses. So mature is Myōkōnin and *Myōkōninden* research now there are also valuable meta-narratives

2. A recent scholar conservatively estimated that more than five hundred publications related to the Myōkōnin have appeared during the intervening seventy years (Hayashi 2016).

involving research into the history of the research itself (Kodama 2009).[3] The *Myōkōninden* chronicle itself has been continually rereleased throughout the Meiji, Taisho, Showa, and Heisei periods (Hayashi 2016). Any contemporary history of the Myōkōnin must thus include layers extending from the eighteenth through the twenty-first centuries. Here I would like to unpack some of these layers to show first how the ideas and emotions associated with the Myōkōnin were constructed and subsequently how they were then put to use by Suzuki in the postwar period.

Defining Myōkōnin

Some writers in Japan, and many Western writers unfamiliar with Buddhological tradition, literally translate the two characters *myō* 妙 and *kō* 好 in Japanese and produce various versions along the lines of a "wondrous, excellent person," or "rare, good person."[4] Eschewing such literal interpretations, and also noting that many Myōkōnin were in fact women, the term "Myōkōnin" has a complex history. *Myōkō* is a Japanese calque of a Chinese interpretation of the Sanskrit term *pundarīka*, which refers to a lotus plant that blossoms with a pure white flower. Its roots, like all lotus plants, are embedded in swampy mire below. Gōsei, of course, read the Pure Land sutras and the works of the saints of the Pure Land tradition and as such was familiar with both Shinran's 親鸞 (1173–1263) and the Chinese master Shandao's 善導 (613–681) writings.

The passage in the *Sūtra on the Meditation of Immeasurable Life*, which forms the urtext for the conception of the ideal of the Myōkōnin, can be translated as follows:

> One who actualizes the practice of visualizing the Buddha will, while living in this world, be able to behold the Buddha of Immeasurable Life (Amida) along with the two bodhisattvas (Kanzeon 観世音 and Daiseishi 大勢至).… If there is one who concentrates upon this buddha, this person will be a lotus flower among humans. They will be a noble friend of Kanzeon and Daiseishi. This

3. Kodama identified three major periods or phases to Myōkōnin research: (1) Suzuki and similar religious, cultural, and social studies, often treating specific Myōkōnin; works by Yanagi Soetsu 柳 宗悦, Nakamura Hajime 中村 元, and Ienaga Saburō 家永三郎 are typical here; (2) critical engagement with the construction of the *Myōkōninden* chronicle, its relation to the Pure Land sect, and the Tokugawa government; see works by Kashihara Yūsen 柏原祐泉 and Doi Jun'ichi 土井淳一 in the 1970s; and (3) works focused on questions of ethics, national ideological strategies, and the beginnings of comparative international studies. The work of Kikufuji Akimichi 菊藤明道 and Kodama Shiki 児玉 識 are prominent here. Throughout these phases there has also been a constant release of publications by popular, especially doctrinal, presses.

4. Or, my personal favorite, which was coined by the redoubtable and self-described "philosophical entertainer" Alan Watts, who claimed a Myōkōnin was a "marvelously fine fellow"; see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxyFpPmInJc (accessed 6 September 2021).

> person will be reborn into a seat in the garden of enlightenment and will dwell in the home of the buddhas. (quoted in SSZ 7: 217–220)

Shinran, in his commentary on this sutra, after the line "one who concentrates upon this buddha, this person will be a lotus flower among humans" writes:

> An accomplished practitioner of the *nenbutsu* is truly rare, and as such is here called a *pundarī* blossom. The *pundarī* is a good flower among humans, a rare flower, indeed a superlative flower among humans, without question it is a marvelous (*myōkō*) flower. (SSZ 7: 217–220)

In his major work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証, Shinran also includes a quote from the Chinese master Shandao as follows: "The person who knows the *nenbutsu* is a *pundarīka* … such a person is a good person, an excellent person beyond measure, a person of the highest quality, a truly rare person, the most victorious of all people" (Sasaki 2016, 14).[5] Variations on this theme of the *pundarīka* and the marvelous and the good persons who truly understand and practice the intoning of the *nenbutsu* appear in introductions to all the *Myōkōninden* editions except the earliest manuscript, which glosses the *pundarī* flower as the "*myōkō* lotus" such that "those who practice the *nenbutsu* are called the 'Myōkōnin' and this is their record" (TSS 8: 107–108). The term eventually gained currency and the Myōkōnin came to be associated with the purest of the lotus flowers while their faith was identified as the most elegant because, like the lotus plant itself, it arose from the swampy depths of ignorance but nevertheless bloomed brilliantly, revealing the illumination of the buddha Amida. This much was as true for Gōsei as it was for Suzuki two centuries later.

The *Myōkōninden* chronicle has a complicated textual history. Put simply, this chronicle is not a single work, but was crafted by multiple authors, multiple editors, and constructed out of a plethora of intentions over several decades, and yet it is often still represented as a single work, a monument to Gōsei's creativity and insight. The standard, and here much abbreviated, narrative of textual construction is that Gōsei, after his meeting with Seikurō in the Yoshino mountains, was inspired to collect other case studies as well. He started in the Kinai 畿内 area and then, after being transferred to Jōsenji near the Japan Sea coast in Iwami, went on to collect several more life stories from exemplary *nenbutsu* practitioners to form the first twenty-five stories found in the first manuscript version of the *Myōkōninden* (TSS 8: 3–29).

The full title of this early manuscript is the *Shinmon myōkōninden* (Record of Myōkōnin Tales Told to Me) with *shinmon* 親聞 indicating that Gōsei himself "heard" each and every one of these stories from actual people. These spoken events are recounted and offered as examples parallel to central Buddhist teach-

5. Different versions of this quote are found in most works regarding the *Myōkōninden*.

ings which are themselves said to have been passed on orally directly from the Buddha himself. The Myōkōnin are thus seen here as living manifestations of the Buddha's teachings.[6]

It is important to note that Gōsei himself did not finish or release his work, and it was left to a later scholar-monk, Sōjun 僧純 (1791–1872), to collect and edit Gōsei's and his students' notes, which were used to compile a much larger edition of the *Myōkōninden*. Sōjun's version was the first printed version and volume one was released in 1842, with more volumes being added, until a fifth volume was released in 1858 (TSS 8: 107–326). Moreover, additional biographies written in 1851 and 1852 titled the *Zoku myōkōninden* (TSS 8: 327–400), were subsequently combined with Sōjun's five-volume work to make a "final" collection of six volumes in twelve sections. Collectively, these works contain one hundred and fifty-seven distinct exemplars of Pure Land practitioners identified as Myōkōnin and were published in six volumes from the Meiji era until at least 2009 (HAYASHI 2016).

It bears emphasizing that it was not until twenty-five years after Gōsei's death that his notes were compiled into the first *Myōkōninden* manuscript. Moreover, it was not until 1852, almost fifty years after Gōsei's death, that the first printed edition was released, and not until 1858, a full one hundred and ten years after the fabled meeting with Seikurō took place, that "Gōsei's" text was "completed." Some scholars have even argued that Sōjun misunderstood Gōsei's intentions to in fact not publicly release the *Myōkōninden* as a single work (SASAKI 2016, 28; ŌKUWA 2016, 60).

Who Were the Myōkōnin?

Of the 157 individuals included in the *Myōkōninden*, ten were clergy (six nuns and four monks), ten were of the samurai class, and four were identified as physicians. The remainder were lay practitioners and most (sixty-four) were identified as peasants. Moreover, a substantial group (twenty-four) were identified as members of the merchant class. The others were from various walks of life: fishermen, beggars, and prostitutes. They were also resident in areas throughout the entire range of the Tokugawa state's rule.

There were ten children included as Myōkōnin. While Gōsei only included one female in his initial group (a seven-year-old girl), later editions of the *Myōkōninden* included many more women, in some cases fully half of the examples. In all, by the time we reach the last edition, about one third of the total were women. Intriguingly, not everyone was a Pure Land follower, and many were not

6. Buddhist sutras begin with the phrase (pronounced in Japanese) *nyoze gamon* 如是我聞, meaning "thus have I heard," which affirms the veracity of the account to follow as having been expressed by the Buddha himself.

even Buddhist practitioners. Zen, Nichiren, Tendai, and devout Shinto believers were all eventually brought into the comprehensive fold of the Pure Land teachings. Finally, quite a few life stories (twenty-six) are so pared down that it is difficult to tell the station or profession of the Myōkōnin being highlighted.

Most studies of the Myōkōnin describe them as illiterate, uneducated members of the peasant class. However, while this is certainly true for many, it is an inaccurate description of the full range of the Myōkōnin and in fact misses an important didactic aspect (Kodama 2009, 448–449; Kikufuji 2016, 407–409, 414, 429–431). While the key unifying factor in all the stories is the purity of faith and the depth of devotion, the lives of the Myōkōnin exemplified the universal applicability of Pure Land truths to all possible people. In language appropriate to the time, let me here quote Shinran:

> In order to attain the other-power (*tariki* 他力) true heart of faith it does not matter if you are noble born or a person of no rank, a member of the priesthood, or a layman. It does not matter if you are a man or a woman, old or young. Attainment is possible if you are a great doer of evil deeds or a mere petty criminal, a master or a novitiate. Moreover, if you are poor and uncultured, or wealthy and sophisticated, or among the educated elite or truly ignorant, it matters not in terms of your ability to have a true heart of faith.
>
> (Kodama 2009, 465–466)

While many have interpreted and continue to interpret this passage to mean that "even the poor and ignorant" have direct access to transcendent truth, it can also be emphasized that this position equally asserts that "even the well to do and educated" have access to such insight. Social and mental abilities, or the lack thereof, are in and of themselves neither advantageous nor disadvantageous to pure faith.

Doctrinally this appears to be clear. Thanks to the other power and compassion of Amida, any and every person can be received into the Pure Land. Yet for the sake of comparison, let me also provide a list of terms that are used in the *Myōkōninden* to describe the specific behaviors and personalities of the Myōkōnin themselves. Myōkōnin are variously described as hard working, industrious, diligent, thrifty (if not parsimonious), honest (often to a fault), simple (sometimes seeming even simple-minded), and direct; they are patient (often beyond measure), abhor the senseless taking of life, are loyal and dedicated, filial and respectful, concerned more with others than themselves (including being deeply supportive of the temple and its organization); Myōkōnin are compassionate, gracious, and kind.

Be this as it may, again following the *Myōkōninden* chronicle itself, the Myōkōnin tend not to be of the elite classes (even the samurai and clergy included are of the lower ranks); to be sure there are many wealthy and devout

individuals mentioned in the *Myōkōninden* but they are often cast in roles where they are in fact schooled by the Myōkōnin as to the true nature of the Pure Land teachings. The few educated Myōkōnin are country physicians and there are no major public intellectuals included. While the Myōkōnin are indeed made up of people from a wide array of locations, professions, and classes, in the end they stand as exemplars of the everyday and of the common person.

It is helpful to recall in this context that the spiritual terrain of eighteenth-century Japan was exceptionally complex. In addition to Buddhist organizations supported and regulated by the Tokugawa government, which permeated the cultural landscape even to the smallest town, there were also numerous (neo) Confucian schools and academies (such as the Zen/Confucian teaching of Shingaku 心学), a wide array of Shinto and Shinto-esque organizations, as well as the newly arisen and exceptionally vibrant so-called New Religions such as Kurozumikyō 黒住教, Tenrikyō 天理教, and Konkōkyō 金光教. Kikufuji writes that the Myōkōnin were in part used by the Pure Land sect to shore up its teaching in the countryside and to serve specifically as a countering force to the inroads being made by these various teachings (Kikufuji 2009, 422).[7]

Seikurō and the Blossoms of Yoshino

Given the density of Chinese characters and the prominence of Buddhist technical terms in the manuscript versions, it is easy to assume that the *Myōkōninden* chronicles were designed for the priesthood and to be used as teaching guides to be read out or interpolated as hortatory exemplars, which is in fact how the *Myōkōninden* is used today. Sōjun's late Tokugawa edition is, however, of a different sort. Except for the more formal introduction (where the marvelous nature of the *pundarī* blossom is pointed out), the language is much simpler, using fewer Chinese characters and technical terms, and it appears that the work was designed to be accessible to a more general audience. That is, the printed publications were designed to reach households throughout Japan and to serve as useful reference works for the faithful. Not quite a Buddhist Bible, rather the *Myōkōninden* was latterly designed as a prayer guidebook and life guide.

In terms of the Seikurō sections of these editions, there are quite a few changes from earlier drafts, some large and some small. Sōjun, for example, added in a number of Seikurō stories not included in the earlier editions that underscore Seikurō's devotion to the main temple in Kyoto, his abiding filial piety as expressed in his caretaking and memories of his mother, and, at his own death,

7. From the perspective of world history, Nakamura Hajime also suggested that the Myōkōnin could be compared to the Quakers in Europe and North America or the Sikhs in India as an entirely new form of faith-based religious praxis that could have sparked changes as comprehensive as the Protestant Reformation (Kodama 2009, 455).

Seikurō's preternatural expression of calm and peacefulness. In contrast, what follows is a somewhat lengthy passage from the *Shinmon myōkōninden* wherein Gōsei wrote about his first encounters with Seikurō.

> His dwelling was a mere hut with a thatched roof located along a mountain pass. There were two or three straw mats spread on the dirt floor; he had one iron pot, one teacup, but seemingly no other utensils. It was during spring, in the second month of Kan'en 寛延 (1749), that I went along with two or three fellow believers on a visit. I met Seikurō and saw for myself the impoverished conditions of his home. We should be grateful that there is such a commendable believer such as Seikurō as he is an inspiration to others. There are in fact a great number of such devoted practitioners throughout the Yoshino and Yamato areas. In talking with the faithful residing nearby I heard from everyone that this man, regarding all things, "spoke with silence and acted without sound" (*gomoku dōjō* 語黙動靜). Everything he did was perfectly in accord with all components of the teachings. Examples of this were so numerous that I found I was unable to write them all down….
>
> Seikurō, widely knowledgeable regarding self and others, who is resolute in intoning the Buddha's name, showed to me in a brilliant light my own inadequacies (*asamashiki koto* 浅ましきこと) and as such inspired in me an even greater joy in the gratitude towards Amida Buddha. It is regrettable that I had not had the opportunity to meet him before this time.… In addition to Seikurō, I also met with [many other] superlative[8] men of faith.… I was so overwhelmed by the elegance of these many exchanges that I silently cried tears of great joy (*kanki no namida* 歓喜の泪).
>
> Since I thought I should not be the only one privileged to have such experiences … I gathered together five or six like-minded friends and we again set out for Yoshino.… [We met] so very many people all deeply embedded in and completely at ease with the strength of their faith. I was again made profoundly aware of my own unworthiness and through this experience I developed a vast sense of gratitude [towards the faithful and Amida] that was coupled with my heart being overwhelmed by joy. I treasured this unbridled joy that I felt while traveling there and carried this bliss back home with me….
>
> Many, many people of this world travel great distances only to view the famous cherry blossoms when they are in bloom in Yoshino. We, drawn by the power of our ancestors into the deepest reaches of the Yoshino mountains, were, however, able to see the most bountiful of all blossoms: the faithful themselves. What marvelous and inexplicable karma. (TSS 8: 11–12)

In this text Gōsei exudes a palpable enthusiasm for and admiration of Seikurō and the many others he meets. Impressively, the priest openly acknowledges that

8. The term I render as "superlative" here is *saishō* 最勝 ("most victorious") and is redolent of Shandao's and Shinran's earlier language regarding the distinctive quality of the Myōkōnin.

he himself does not experience the compassion of Amida as deeply or as intimately as do the lay faithful he meets and honestly records his own feelings of wretchedness or inadequacy. When Gōsei writes that he was moved to tears and to unbridled feelings of joy he was referencing the seventh of the "Ten Worldly Benefits" of the *nenbutsu* practice wherein one's heart is filled to overflowing with true happiness (*shinta kangi* 心多歓喜). Moreover, he also clearly treasured these joyful feelings and strove to carry them with him back to his own life and practice and to share them with others. While Gōsei did not refer to these faithful as Myōkōnin in his manuscript, the blossom metaphor he used nevertheless clearly invoked the idea.

Intriguingly, both Rizen and Sōjun in their editions of the *Myōkōninden* almost entirely removed Gōsei's humility. Gōsei is still allowed his admiration and his tears of joy, but his unbridled enthusiasms and his abject humility are either edited out completely or significantly dialed back in their intensity. In addition to this recrafting of Gōsei's emotional worldview, both editors also made significant changes to Gōsei's text. For example, any trace of teachings other than the "sacred texts" of the Pure Land sect are carefully erased. Numerous editorial changes indicate a preference for using unambiguously sectarian language and for limiting the degree of humility a Pure Land priest might be expected to exhibit.

Seikurō had less than a year to live when he met Gōsei that spring (Naobayashi 2019, 24; TSS 8: 9, 17). The dozen or so life events he recounted to Gōsei were eventually expanded into scores of tales that went on to become a subgenre in Myōkōnin literature. The title alone of one such work, *Jōdo shinshū kōshin Seikurō monogatari* 浄土真宗孝心清九郎物語 (Tales of the Filial and Faithful Seikurō of the True Pure Land Sect) gives a clear indication of the hortatory nature of these collections (Kikufuji 2009, 405). These tales contributed to an image of Seikurō as an enlightened sage whose occasional forays into the secular world were marked with insightful barbs and occasionally confounding behavior—like the time he was found joyously rolling naked in the snow, or the gratitude he felt after he was robbed of the few possessions he had. Seikurō, filled with the joyful spirit of gratitude to the Buddha Amida, often comes across as a sort of "madman" (*guchi* 愚痴). Gōsei himself noted "those truly mad in the faith are but one or two in a thousand. Seikurō is one of these rare people" (Ōkuwa 2016, 76–77; TSS 8: 16–17, 124–125).

All three main editions of the *Myōkōninden* begin their Seikurō sections with Gōsei describing him as being "by nature an imbecile" (*hinsei rodon* 稟性魯鈍). Seikurō was illiterate and supported himself for most of his life by gathering twigs and branches for people to use in cooking and hearth fires. Later he also worked as a woodcutter. Finally, all editions included the following origination

story to describe how Seikurō came to be such a dedicated practitioner of the *nenbutsu*.

For several years, the tale goes, Seikurō noticed that a pair of *uguisu* 鶯 (Japanese bushwarblers) would often follow him and sing nearby while he worked gathering wood. He thought nothing of this until one day he visited nearby Honzenji 本善寺, the temple founded by Rennyo 蓮如 (1415–1499), and saw one of the temple's treasures on display: an ivory and gold lacquer bird cage used by Rennyo himself to house an *uguisu*. It is said that Rennyo loved the song of the *uguisu* because it sounded like the bird was singing "Hō, Hō-ki-ke, Hō, Hō-ki-ke" or "The Dharma! Listen to the Dharma!"[9] Seikurō was deeply moved by this story and concluded that the *uguisu* that had been following him all these past years were in fact all the while trying to lead him to Buddhism. He took this birdsong—"The Dharma! You must listen to the Dharma!"—seriously, and thereafter at every opportunity stopped by temples in the area to learn from the priests. By the time Seikurō met with Gōsei he was a constant practitioner of the *nenbutsu*; he chanted while sitting, while standing, while walking, while resting; he chanted while working, while listening to the Dharma. He never learned to read but he perfected how to pray without ceasing.[10] After Seikurō died, Gōsei wrote:

> I am certain that Seikurō is now bathing in the seven-jeweled ponds and is cleansed in the eight virtuous waters of the Pure Land. He is listening to the Dharma as preached in the marvelous and subtle voice of the Tathagata Amida.… He was an ignorant and foolish man who could not even read "Seikurō of Hakotate" written in *kana* syllabary [on his own hat], but now he has passed through the one hundred illuminated gates of the dharma, he now knows immeasurable numbers of esoteric chants (*dhāraṇī*), and he has become a man of incomparable wisdom.… In one moment of thought he can make offerings to tens of thousands of buddhas. (TSS 8: 124–125)

Indeed, Gōsei concluded, Seikurō awaits in the Pure Land for those of us who are dedicated practitioners to join him on the lotus of enlightenment.

Unfortunately, as rich as this area of inquiry is, in the interest of textual space and narrative time, I must here leave the eighteenth century and the textual and ideological origins of the Myōkōnin idea structure, and proceed to the concluding section of this article and a discussion of Suzuki Daisetsu and his uses of

9. In contrast, most contemporary Japanese hear the bird sing "Hō, Hō-ke-kyō" which means "The Dharma! The *Lotus Sūtra*!" A perhaps not-so-subtle difference between the Lotus sect's and the Pure Land sect's teachings.

10. I extend special thanks to Okada Masahiko for helping me find "Myōkōnin Yamato Seikurō's" spirit temple Kōrenji 光蓮寺, the site of his mountain hut, and his grave in an isolated mountain grove in Ōyodo 大淀, Yoshino.

this earlier history in his own reimagination of the role of the Myōkōnin for the twentieth century.

Shards from a Wooden Shoe Shop

By the mid-twentieth century, thanks to the wide circulation of the *Myōkōninden*, the Myōkōnin were both well known and numerous, though their recognition was still largely associated with the Pure Land tradition. This changed with Suzuki Daisetsu. Suzuki saw Japan and its history as crucial to the history of humanity itself and the Myōkōnin as integral to a possible healing of the human spirit after the devastations of the Second World War. Suzuki's work on a collection of short verses by a "modern-day Myōkōnin" interpreted the generations of Pure Land *nenbutsu* practitioners after Seikurō as a historical and spiritual evolutionary force. World history ebbs and flows with changes in the human spirit, and for Suzuki the mid-twentieth century was ripe for the lessons of the Myōkōnin.

Suzuki called Asahara Saichi the "most marvelous of all the Myōkōnin." In language much like the eulogies for Seikurō almost two centuries prior, Saichi, claimed Suzuki (who in fact never met him), had "eyes that sparkled with a profound sense of the miraculous (*kyōi* 驚異)." Suzuki continued:

> He is not only what is normally called a Myōkōnin. He is also a poet, a literatus, in essence a great philosopher. Even so, in addition to his ability to express directly his immediate experiences, he is also largely unlettered and does not avail himself of any specialized knowledge. Regardless, he has filled upwards of one hundred notebooks written in a plodding and clumsy hand.
>
> (Suzuki 1967, 3)[11]

Why did Suzuki take up Saichi's writings? One simple answer is that as historically important as the previous generations of Myōkōnin experience might have been, the more recently deceased Saichi is the only one to have left any material, written testimony to his struggles and insights. This textual resource, often redolent of pithy Zen-like verse or capping phrases, provides an engaging and evocative glimpse into Saichi's life and experiences. A fuller answer to this question regarding Suzuki's interest was alluded to in the introduction of this article and is encompassed by two distinct and interrelated ideas often used by Suzuki: history and experience. Suzuki used Saichi to write a new *Myōkōninden* chronicle,

11. Saichi 才市, often written Sai'ichi, always spelled his name in his poems as Saichi さいち. Some writers put Saichi's dates as 1851–1931, but Suzuki claimed 1850–1932 was more accurate. Saichi's notebooks have largely disappeared. Suzuki notes elsewhere that there were about sixty notebooks: thirty of these were destroyed by fire in the war, and most of the others were scattered and lost. As of 1948 there were only eight extant notebooks (written when Saichi was sixty-five and seventy-three years of age). Most of these were published by Suzuki in 1967.

wherein Saichi metonymically signed as the sole exemplar of a transhistorical experiential phenomenon. Moreover, based upon Saichi's experiences, Suzuki also strove to write a new chapter in the history of humanity itself. Between 1944 and 1948 Suzuki used interpretations of Japanese, trans-Asiatic, and world history to outline the calamitous present state of world conditions and to then go on to argue for the possibility of and need for an experientially-based spiritual awakening of humankind. Such an awakening, what he called a "spiritual self-realization" (*reiseiteki jikaku* 霊性的自覚), was essential to maintaining the "nobility of the human spirit" and indeed was in fact crucial to the very survival of humanity itself (Suzuki 2016, 38–39). As fortune would have it, a template for this transcendent realization already existed and Suzuki found it in actual people and practices in Japanese history.

Suzuki came to the Myōkōnin, and to Saichi in particular, gradually over these several years. While he first heard of Saichi from his friend Nishitani Keiji in 1943, he may also have already known of him due to the 1919 publication of some of Saichi's writings (Suzuki 2016, 2, 42). Suzuki's treatment of the Myōkōnin took on increasing importance, if not urgency, as the months passed after the war ended. Eventually, Saichi's personal biography—his experiences and insights—were fashioned into Suzuki's newest *Myōkōninden* chronicle, that was now fashioned as a specific exemplar of the national biography. Saichi's spiritual life in particular was offered by Suzuki as a guide for postwar Japanese life in general. Moreover, Suzuki was not only suggesting a homily or parable for war-torn Japan; rather, he saw Saichi's life as in fact holding the cure for what ailed modern global society itself.

Suzuki's treatment of the Myōkōnin in 1944 showed how deeply intertwined with Japanese history these figures were. For Suzuki this history began in Japan seven centuries prior during the spiritual revolution of the Kamakura period: "Japanese spiritual history demonstrated its true significance for the first time upon reaching the Kamakura period" (Suzuki 1972, 54). In outlining this historical moment, Suzuki draws almost equal attention to the Pure Land for its deepening of religious belief, Zen for its aesthetics and contribution to "the foundation of Japanese life," and Nichiren for its political and internationalist spirit—all emergent during the Kamakura—and credits each of these three traditions with creating a broad cultural awakening that nurtured the remarkable growth of a distinct Japanese form of introspective life (Suzuki 1972, 46–47). Moreover, "the historical environment of modern Japan quite closely resembles that of the Kamakura times, but with even more tenseness and urgency" (Suzuki 1972, 54). Suzuki also offers a caution redolent of both the Kamakura and germane to wartime modern Japan: "Armed might, the power of the machine, disputes over wealth—these things are finally, and have been so since the dawn of history—but

small twigs. What does matter are spirituality, and faith, and thought" (Suzuki 1972, 55).

Perhaps not surprisingly, Suzuki linked some of his readings of the Myōkōnin to his understanding of Zen. For example, he notes that "even a true Zen man could not rival a Myōkōnin in their unconventional free and easy sense of play (*shasha rakuraku* 洒洒落落)" (Suzuki 2016, 34). Even so, he also carved out an intellectual, spiritual, and cultural space for the other-power Myōkōnin that is utterly unique: "Seen from the perspective of the vast power of the spiritual creativity that emerges from the Myōkōnin, we must also seek to advance these ideas at the global level" and thereby extend them into a new "world culture" (Suzuki 2016, 37).

Suzuki was well aware that spirituality in Japan derived some of its components from elsewhere. For example, he describes how the Buddhist teaching of *bonnō soku bodai* 煩悩即菩提, the contradictory identification of "ignorance" or "delusion" (*bonnō*) and "awakening" or "enlightenment" (*bodai*), most certainly was first formulated in India, subsequently taken up in China, and eventually transmitted to Japan. "And yet, when this idea arrived in Japan, it changed and took on the form of the Myōkōnin Saichi." Moreover, Suzuki insists, "in India, Buddhism itself took on too abstract a form and was soon extinguished. It fortuitously was then taken up by the peoples of the Han dynasty, and later, in the Tang and the Song, it became Zen" (Suzuki 2016, 51). To continue this trans-Asiatic history of Buddhism, Suzuki concludes that while Buddhism in Japan was not initially able to escape the Indian penchant for abstract thinking, eventually, "during the Kamakura period, Buddhism became purely Japanese. It was no longer either the Buddhism of India, or the Buddhism of China" (Suzuki 2016, 51). Importantly, it was precisely at this point, when Buddhism became "purely Japanese," that Buddhism, for the first time in its history, also came to possess a truly global character (*sekaisei* 世界性). The central component of this new global Buddhism was matured, by means of the other-power teachings, into the faith practice and spiritual experiences of the Myōkōnin. As such, the Pure Land teachings now "stand alongside other world religions in holding up the vibrance of humanity. One specific example of this uniquely 'Japanese-style spiritual self-realization' (*Nihonteki reiseiteki jikaku* 日本的霊性的自覚) is none other than the Myōkōnin Saichi" (Suzuki 2016, 51).

The argument Suzuki advances here was not only an example of the classic three-nation Buddhist history, often deployed in Japan, drawing as it does on doctrinal and cultural differences for emphasis. It was also an attempt to interpret and address the volatility of his present historical moment. "After loss in the war we are now forced to contemplate many different issues. Even if you thought we could simply somehow move on after such a loss, things are clearly not so simple." For example, he continues, "if you think that Absolutism, Fascism, and

Naziism were eliminated during the last war, you are sadly mistaken" (Suzuki 2016, 38–39). There is also a new absolutism, Suzuki argues, one driven by politics, economics, manufacturing, and technology that threatens to eliminate all traces of humanity's "internal life, spiritual self-realization, and the nobility of the human spirit." Many people during the war claimed that we should all seek to "love thy neighbor." But this emphasis on a social ethics, similar to the false hopes that somehow a pure science or a new technology might help humanity think or construct its way out of contemporary problems, Suzuki saw as but a shallow response to the more fundamental need to nurture humanity's interior life (Suzuki 2016, 38–40).

With sublime understatement Suzuki points out that "from before the war, and continuing throughout, the spiritual condition of the Japanese was exceedingly unhealthy." Shinto, he asserts, has been dead for quite some time. And Buddhism? "Perhaps it too is destined for the same fate." Indeed, "the world of eastern, especially Japanese, spiritual realization has long been neglected. What I am introducing here [the life and experiences of the Myōkōnin Saichi] is meant for not only the youth of Japan." Rather, Suzuki contended, Saichi as exemplar would be meaningful for the entire world. "The world of spiritual realization is a world unconstrained by east or west, by ancient or modern" (Suzuki 2016, 40–41).

Let us now turn our attention to Asahara Saichi, that is, Suzuki's reading of the "Myōkōnin Saichi" (as he often called him) and see how Suzuki deployed Saichi to serve as this vital metonymic touchstone for world historical change and, more particularly, as a guiding light for war-torn Japan.

As suggested above, Suzuki situates Saichi, and the Myōkōnin in general, within the Pure Land tradition, and traced the spiritual awakening they experienced and exemplified to the teachings of Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), Shinran, and the Kamakura efflorescence of Japanese spiritual awakening. This form of self-realization, Suzuki argues, was unique in world history and was in fact first actualized in Japan. While it has had various permutations, it was most clearly manifest in the lives of the Myōkōnin. The various *Myōkōninden* chronicles thus provided scores of examples of those who had directly experienced the power of self-realization through their faith. They all knew that true faith "must permeate deeply into one's innermost being. It cannot be accessed by mere study … and just visiting the temple or church is not enough.… The world of self-realization is only open to those who reflect seriously on human life itself" (Suzuki 2016, 41). In the middle of the twentieth century, Suzuki, fearing that Japan and the Japanese might very well lose the very qualities of humanity that they themselves discovered centuries ago, was compelled to introduce the world to the Myōkōnin Saichi.

Surely such a great weight, the possibility of the resurrection of a pure, noble human spirit after years of destruction on a global scale, years of terrible

warfare and sacrifice and loss, is far too great for any single human life to bear at any point in history, no matter how saintly or ripe with insight that human life might be. The fact that Saichi himself was nearly illiterate, had only a few years of elementary schooling, lived in poverty, and worked, after his years as a ship's carpenter, for decades making and selling wooden shoes, further underscored his all too human fragility. Saichi held no priestly or secular rank, and never held any position in society; he did not teach or expound on his insights; and he accumulated no wealth or property. Suzuki calls Saichi a lotus among men, a shining light in "Myōkōnin literature" (*Myōkōnin bungaku* 妙好人文学), a term in fact coined by Suzuki, and saw him as a paradigmatic figure in world religious history. "Saichi is very much a buddha, bathed in brilliant light, sitting comfortably on a lotus dais" (Suzuki 1967, 6). Much of this rhetoric sounds familiar and indeed echoed Gōsei eulogizing Seikurō two hundred years earlier. But Suzuki went further. It is precisely because Saichi was a true man of no rank, was the simplest among us, that he could also be compared favorably with the Buddha, and indeed also with Jesus, as a true son of man. For Suzuki, Saichi served as a powerful paradigm of brilliant insight shining forth during a historical moment of almost unfathomable violence and suffering (Suzuki 2016, 21).

Suzuki, in other words, read the Myōkōnin, the spiritual insights held by generations of people described in the *Myōkōninden* chronicles, as having been ripened and matured for the modern age in the figure of Saichi. Saichi's life experiences were thus construed by Suzuki as a quintessentially divine parable for modern life.

During his over eighty years of life, Saichi had thirty years of spiritual struggle (*seishin kutō* 精神苦闘). From around the age of twenty until his fiftieth year, Saichi waged what Suzuki called a hard-fought horrible war (*akusen kutō* 悪戦苦闘) in his struggle for genuine insight and spiritual realization. His enemies were cruelty, heartlessness, pride, greed, ignorance, and selfishness.[12] The more self-aware Saichi became during this "war," the more he became consumed by feelings of shame, misery, worthlessness, hopelessness, pathos, and wretchedness. Here are the first lines of one of Saichi's writings:

> Saichi will here speak the truth. / Saichi's heart is a pathetic heart. / It is abject. / It is pitiable. / It is miserable. / It is sordid. / It is worthless. / It is vile. / It is unworthy. / It is wretched. / It is shameful. / It is shallow. / It is superficial. / It is frivolous. / It is wretched. / Wretchedness is the truth.

Saichi does not end with wretchedness, however. This fulsome description of the suffering and weakness endemic to human life is followed, in the latter

12. I derived this list from various collections of Saichi's verses.

portion of the same verse, by the inescapable power of the transcendent grace of the Buddha Amida:

> Wretchedness is the truth. / *Namu Amida Butsu* is also the truth. / How grateful for the Original Vow [of Amida] is he without a purpose. / How grateful for a Way forward is he who is lost. / Chanting the name [of Amida] is the joyful expression of devotion (*goon hōsha* 御恩報謝). / How grateful! / *Namu Amida Butsu Namu Amida Butsu / Namu Amida Butsu Namu Amida Butsu / Namu Amida Butsu Namu Amida Butsu / Namu Amida Butsu Namu Amida Butsu / Namu Amida Butsu Namu Amida Butsu / Namu Amida Butsu Namu Amida Butsu / Namu Amida Butsu Namu Amida Butsu*. (Suzuki 1967, 16)

This verse is both more simple and more complicated than indicated by my translation. In the first part of the verse, Saichi in fact wrote the word *asamashiya* あさましや over and over again, about two dozen times. *Asamashiya* was the term used by Gōsei two hundred years prior to this moment to describe his own feelings of wretched inadequacy in the face of Seikurō's profound faith practice. The repetition (*asamashiya asamashiya asamashiya*) here in Saichi's verse causes this wretchedness to take on a hypnotic or deeply meditative quality, hauntingly redolent of how Saichi ended the verse by repeating *Namu Amida Butsu* a dozen times. The realized human condition of despair itself, in other words, becomes a *mantrayāna* esoteric Buddhist chant of suffering, and stands in stark contrast to the forceful liberation of spirit as revealed in the chanting of Amida's name.

True confession (*zange* 懺悔) within Buddhist practice is not merely an exercise in social morality or legal ethics. Rather, it is an acknowledgment, a realization, of one's innermost self of insurmountable aspects of this world, of the inalterable limitations of one's own finite self and life. This hard-fought realization of things-as-they-are, likened by Suzuki to war itself, yielded in Saichi's practice and in his verses a unity of shame, of wretchedness on the one hand, and of joy, of abjectness, and of delight on the other. In Pure Land teaching this is the world of *goon hōsha*, the world of simultaneous unrepayable debt and of boundless gratitude. Here again is Saichi:

> Hey! Saichi! What is blessing? / Hmm. "Blessing" is! / This Saichi here was made out of blessing. / His clothing was made out of blessing. / His food was made out of blessing. / His shoes were made out of blessing. / All things in this world were made out of blessing. / Tea bowls, chopsticks, rice were all made out of blessing. / Every single thing *Namu Amida Butsu Namu Amida Butsu* / Blessing! Joy! *Namu Amida Butsu Namu Amida Butsu*.
>
> (Suzuki 2016, 47–48)

Saichi wrote his verses on splinters of wood chipped from the blocks he used to make *geta* 下駄 (wooden shoes). Later, he collected the inscribed wooden shards and transcribed his writings in notebooks. Most of the notebooks, and

FIGURE 1. Statue of Saichi. Plaque reads "Myōkōnin Asahara Saichi." Ōda 大田, Shimane Prefecture. Photo by author.

all of the splintered shards, are now gone. His *geta* workshop remains, much as he left it, and is open for any passersby to visit.[13] His tools, hammer and chisels, brush and notebook, are all neatly arranged. In 1981, a statue of Saichi, with quotes from Suzuki included in the accompanying plaque, was erected in the old town square. Intriguingly, the life-sized bronze likeness of Saichi, kneeling with his hands joined in prayer, depicts him as having horns like a devil (*oni* 鬼). Saichi himself declared he was no holy man, but merely a devil in human form.

Conclusion

Over the centuries, hundreds of individuals in Japan have been identified as Myōkōnin. Among them, Seikurō was the first to be recorded in Pure Land records, and Saichi was elevated by Suzuki to a position of world historical importance. The classic chronicle, the *Myōkōninden*, is now circulated as a unified text and is regularly referenced by Pure Land priests, teachers, and practitioners. However, Myōkōnin are not only parables and exemplars of the Pure Land teachings; they are also actual practitioners who regularly chant Amida's name and who live and work in the world today. One may join Myōkōnin pilgrimages (*Myōkōnin junrei* 妙好人巡礼) to practice as they did and to simultaneously

13. The workshop is located in Yunotsuchō 温泉津町, Kohama 小浜, Shimane Prefecture. It also hosts visits by local school children and displays their various poetic compositions.

celebrate their lives and practice (Shirakawa 2018, 42). Moreover, their numbers continue to increase and new records, new chronicles, and even new verses continue to appear. Some verses even pick up where Saichi left off:

> Saichi wrote: "If you get a cold / you cough. / Saichi caught the cold of the Dharma / The *nenbutsu* cough comes again and again."
> Over fifty years later, Saitō Masaji wrote: "I heard you caught / the *nenbutsu* cough. / I can still hear it today / resounding with boundless compassion."
> (Asaeda 1993, 22)

For Suzuki, generations of Myōkōnin lived in an abiding present and did not engage in philosophical speculation: they

> do not speak about how "the one is the many, and the many is the one" (like Buddhologists); they do not talk about "contradictory self-identification" (as used in Nishida Kitarō's work); nor do they debate issues of critical theology (like contemporary philosophers). Rather, with calm insouciance, in the midst of everyday life, they manifest the reality of their spiritual self-realization.
> (Suzuki 2016, 52)

The Myōkōnin have "self-realized Japanese spirituality" and have been doing so for generations, indeed since the Kamakura period. For Suzuki, the "Myōkōnin Saichi," though ostensibly a man of the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa periods, was also understood to be a man outside of imperial, linear, and even Buddhist history. Finally, "he is not just a Pure Land figure, nor even a Buddhist of any particular sect" (Suzuki 1967, 3). Rather, the experience and self-realization of Saichi, at once both transcendent and immanent, was held up by Suzuki for the postwar world as a practical exemplar of a universally available spiritual self-realization. For it is precisely through sincere faith and dedicated practice, through the direct experience in everyday life of the unity of "the one and the many," in a "contradictory self-identification" of the wretchedness of humanity and its concomitant sublimity, that an antidote to human failures and weakness could be found. For Suzuki, when examined in its entirety, the world historical discoveries and experiences of Japan and the Japanese have yielded not only warfare, but also insights into humanity itself. The current historical moment, Suzuki asserted, is ripe with the need for these insights that just might heal the horrible, undeniable, wounds of war.

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SSZ *Teihon Shinran Shōnin zenshū* 定本親鸞聖人全集. 9 vols. Ed. Shinran Shōnin Zenshū Kankōkai 親鸞聖人全集刊行会. Hōzōkan, (1969) 2008.

TSS *Taikei Shinshū shiryō denkihen Myōkōninden* 大系真宗史料伝記編妙好人伝. vol. 8. Ed. Shinshū Shiryō Kankōkai 真宗資料刊行会. Hōzōkan, 2009.

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