

Preparing for the Pure Land in Late Tenth-Century Japan

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Devotion to Amida during the Nara period was only sporadic and it was not until the mid-Heian that his cult became firmly established and linked to the idea of salvation for the individual. This somewhat late arrival is due to the fact that Amidism in Japan did not emerge directly from Amidism in China but rather indirectly via the use of Amida as an object of meditation by Tendai monks. Considerable light can be thrown on the early development of this cult by a study of a vow, together with two covenants, signed in 986 by twenty-five founding members of a group dedicated to helping each other reach the Pure Land by preparing meticulously for the final moment before death. The Tendai monk Genshin, known primarily as the author of the influential Ōjōyōshū, played a leading role in this group.

The Vow of 986

WHEN THE BOY KNOWN to posterity as Emperor Ichijō 一條 (980–1011) suddenly found himself on the throne on 986/6/23, by the Western count he had only just turned six. His grandfather on his mother's side, Fujiwara no Kane'ie 藤原兼家 (929–990), the man who was causing the author of *The Gossamer Years* such distress with his infidelities, was named regent the following day. The boy's young uncle, Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 (966–1028), under whose thumb he was to remain all his life, was only twenty at the time but was soon to become the most powerful man in Japan in his own right. The year 986, therefore, lies on the threshold of what is commonly thought to be one of the high points of Japanese cultural history, the mid-Heian. Writing a history of the court some sixty years later, Lady Akazome Emon 赤染衛門 felt moved to entitle the chapter that dealt with this period "Joyous Events" (*Samazama no yorokobi*) (McCULLOUGH and McCULLOUGH

1980, pp. 135-56), and one might be forgiven for assuming it to be a time of optimism. But exactly one month earlier, on 986/5/23, a group of twenty-five monks had put their names to the following vow.

Now the three worlds are all [characterized by] suffering, and the five constituent elements of existence are [all characterized by] impermanence. Suffering and impermanence—who does not abhor them? And yet we have [continued] to be born and to die to no end since the non-beginning [of time] and still we are unable to give rise to a desire for enlightenment (*bodhicitta*), still we are unable to escape the paths of adversity. How sad this is. When shall we [ever be able to] plant firm roots on the path to liberation?

Now let us consider what it says in the *Sūtra on Visualizing the Buddha of Measureless Life* (*Kuan Wu-liang-shou ching* 觀無量壽經):

Or there be sentient beings who enact the five heinous sins and the ten evil acts, laying up all manner of wrong deeds. Foolish men such as these will, because of their bad karma, inevitably fall into adverse ways, where they will linger for many kalpas and suffer without limit. But if, at the very end of his life, someone this evil [is lucky enough to] meet a “virtuous friend” 善知識, that friend may bring peace and consolation, expound the marvelous Dharma for his sake, and teach him to be mindful of [Amida] Buddha 教令念佛. And if that man is too burdened by suffering to [be able to] be mindful of the Buddha, the “virtuous friend” should say to him: “If you are unable to concentrate, then [just] call on the name of the Buddha of Measureless Life 稱無量壽佛.” If in this fashion he constantly calls out in utter sincerity and completes ten thought-moments 具足十念, calling “All homage to the Buddha,” because he calls out the name of the Buddha in constant mindfulness, he will escape the sins of birth and rebirth of eight thousand million kalpas; and when he dies he will see appear before him a golden lotus flower bright like the orb of the sun, and in the space of a single thought 如一念頃 he will instantly be born into paradise.

This passage is proof enough of what lies ahead. We have debated among ourselves and can now state as follows:

We now promise to become “virtuous friends” to each other so that at the last moment of our lives we can help each other be mindful of [Amida] Buddha. We hereby

proclaim that the number of fellows shall be twenty-five. If one among us falls ill, through the power of our vow to bind ourselves together, we shall ignore whether the day be auspicious or inauspicious, we shall go to wherever he lies, and we shall ask after him and encourage him [to concentrate]. And if it so happens that he achieves rebirth into paradise, through the power of his own vow and through the power of the buddhas and gods, he is to indicate as such to the fellowship, either via a dream or when they are awake. And if it so happens that he has fallen [back] into adverse paths, this too he is to indicate. And the fellowship from time to time with like intent will carry out together those practices that will [help to] lead us to the Pure Land. In particular, every month on the evening of the fifteenth day we shall practice the meditation (*samādhi*) of being mindful of the Buddha 念佛三昧. We shall pray [that we may be able to achieve] the ten thought-moments at the instant of death. Every life span has its limit. How can we rely on this life, which is as transient as dew on grass? Success and failure [in this life] are uncertain. Better by far to pin our hopes on being welcomed at the lotus seat. Let us strive for diligence. Let us not fall into lax habits. (ESZ 1: 360–62)

The title given to this text is “Meditations on the twenty-five [states of existence] at the Ryōgon’in—a vow signed by twenty-five founding members (*Ryōgon’in nijūgo zanmai konpon kesshū nijūgonin renjo hotsuganmon*).” The Ryōgon’in 楞嚴院 refers to the Shuryōgon’in 首楞嚴院 (The Hall of Heroic Valor [*Śūraṅgama*]), a building in the Yokawa 横川 sector of Hieizan that started life as a small repository for sutras but was rebuilt in 848 by Ennin 圓仁 (794–864), who decided to develop Yokawa as a religious center after his return from China. At this juncture the head monk was a man called Genshin 源信 (942–1017), on whom there will be more later. The “Meditations on the twenty-five states of existence” refers to twenty-five different meditative states (*samādhi*) in which one was required to overcome the obstacles presented by the twenty-five states of existence. The locus classicus for these *samādhi* is the *Nieh-p’an ching* 涅槃經 (T. no. 375, vol. 12.690b)¹ and the twenty-five comprise fourteen states in the realm of desire (hell, hungry spirits, animals, anti-gods, the four continents where humans dwell, and six heavens), seven states in the realm of pure form (seven higher heavens), and four states in the realm of no form (the four

¹ See DONNER and STEVENSON 1993, p. 284.

highest heavens). Why this particular number of *samādhi* was chosen here is unclear. It is possible that it was adopted because it reflected the number of participants, although the reverse might also be the case. It does not seem to have any direct relevance to the cult of Amida.²

The *Kuan Wu-liang-shou ching* is one of three works that form the textual basis of Amidism, the other two being the *O-mi-t'o ching* 阿彌陀經 or *Smaller Sukhāvativyūha* (Supernal Manifestation of [the world of] Bliss), translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva c. 402, and the *Wu-liang-shou ching* 無量壽經 or *Larger Sukhāvativyūha*, which exists in five Chinese versions, the canonical one being a fifth-century revision of a third-century translation. The *Kuan Wu-liang-shou ching* has no Sanskrit version and was probably composed in China or perhaps Central Asia (FUJITA 1990; TANAKA 1990). In it the Buddha teaches Queen Vaiḍeḥī, who has been imprisoned by her son Ajātaśatru, the consolation of sixteen meditative techniques (*shī* 思) by which she may visualize the Pure Land and in the end see Amida himself. This is followed by a description of nine possible ranks of rebirth in the Pure Land (three sets of three ranks) known as the *kuhon* 九品, which depend on the level of achievement of the individual and range from those with the highest merit right down to those who have committed the worst of crimes. The quotation appearing in the vow of 986 comes from the passage that explains how salvation is possible even for the lowest of the low (*gebon geshō* 下品下生). It was this expression of unconditional, universal compassion excluding no one that gave the *Kuan Wu-liang-shou ching* its central position in the Amidist canon. This is partly because other sutras were not quite so liberal. The *Wu-liang-shou ching*, for example, which contained the famous 48 vows made by Amida as the bodhisattva Dharmākara in a much earlier existence, is less inclusive. The crucial set of vows, 17–20, is as follows:

17. If I reach buddhahood and the innumerable buddhas in all worlds in the ten directions do not praise me utterly and do not proclaim my name, I will not accept perfect awakening.

設我得佛，十方世界無量諸佛，不悉咨嗟，稱我名者，不取正覺。

18. If I reach buddhahood and any one sentient being in the ten directions should desire to be reborn in my land with utter sincerity, and absolute conviction—be it for a mere ten thought-moments—and yet not gain such rebirth, I

² The Buddha known in Japan as Amida has two Sanskrit names, either Amitābha, “Immeasurable Light,” or Amitāyus, “Immeasurable Life.” Since the primary focus is on Japan, the name Amida and the term Amidism will be used throughout this article, even when an Indian or Chinese context makes this look rather incongruous.

will not accept perfect awakening. But this excludes those who have committed the five heinous sins and those who have reviled the True Dharma.

設我得佛，十方衆生，至心信樂，欲生我國，乃至十念，若不生者，不取正覺，唯除五逆誹謗正法。

19. If I reach buddhahood and any one sentient being in the ten directions should arouse *bodhicitta*, cultivate all virtues, vow with utter sincerity to be reborn in my land and then at the moment of death I fail to appear before him surrounded by a great assembly, I will not accept perfect awakening.

設我得佛，十方衆生，發菩提心，修諸功德，至心發願，欲生我國，臨壽終時，假令不與大眾圍繞，現其人前者，不取正覺。

20. If I reach buddhahood and any one sentient being in the ten directions should hear my name, fix his thoughts on my land, cultivate all roots of virtue, transfer this merit with utter sincerity, desire to be reborn in my land, and yet fail to bring this to fruition, I will not accept perfect awakening.

設我得佛，十方衆生，聞我名号，係念我國，植諸德本，至心廻向，欲生我國，不果遂者，不取正覺。

(T. no. 360, vol. 12.268a–b)

At first sight Vow 17 does not seem central to salvation for sentient beings, but it contains the words 稱我名者, which, although clearly referring here to other buddhas, was eventually conflated with the substance of Vow 18, so that the “ten thought-moments” 十念 in the latter became interpreted in the light of “proclaim my name” 稱我名. Vow 18 turned out to be important for later Pure Land Buddhism in Japan. The phrase 至心信樂, 欲生我國, for example, was punctuated in such a way as to produce the “three beliefs” 三心 of “utmost sincerity” 至心, “conviction” 信樂, and “desire for rebirth in the Pure Land” 欲生. But this vow was also the most problematic. There was considerable disagreement about the meaning of the term 乃至十念—did it mean “at least ten times” or “merely ten times”?—and it was also unclear as to what kind of “mindfulness” (*nen* 念 [*buddhānusmṛti*]) was meant; but the real difficulty came with the exclusion clause at the end, which runs counter to the spirit of Amidism. It was plainly an embarrassment, and whenever Vow 18 is discussed it is usual to find the *Kuan Wu-liang-shou ching* being invoked to provide the counterargument.

The object of the vow of 986 was to bind the signatories in a fellowship. The object of their meetings was to force each other to practice the extremely difficult matter of intense mindfulness of Amida so that

at the moment of death each member would be able to concentrate hard enough to fulfill the required “ten thought-moments” that were needed to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. But what is meant by the term “Pure Land,” and why the emphasis on Amida at this particular juncture?

What is the Pure Land?

Despite the difficulties involved in absolute concentration at the moment of death, Amida’s Pure Land in fact offers a much easier path to enlightenment than that normally proposed in early Buddhism. It represents the logical extension of Mahāyāna universalism in that salvation becomes open for all, achievable not through strenuous discipline over an inconceivable time span by men of extraordinary stamina and self-control, but by ordinary men (and women). Belief and devotion was all that was necessary to lead one into this paradise that lay in the West and from where final liberation was guaranteed. Theoretically, the Buddha taught that one could only achieve real liberation from the human state, not from a heaven or a paradise; but what we have here is the development of a halfway house beyond the six paths, a haven from which there can be no regression and from which the final rebirth would be an easy step. The majority of believers, of course, could see no further than this first stage, which was more than enough for most mortals to envisage and to strive for.

A good description of the Pure Land can be found in the *O-mi-t’o ching*. It is not so much a Buddhist equivalent of the Garden of Eden as a realm of artifice: the ground is made of gold, it is furnished with ponds and steps of precious stones, celestial music is heard, the wind blows softly through jewelled trees, and beautiful birds sing the message of the Buddhist Dharma. But despite this element of physicality in its representation, it is pure, unsullied, and ethereal. It would be difficult to locate oneself within it, for example, or to recreate it geographically in the mind’s eye, because the description is not architectural. How many believers thought of it as a “real” place and how many as a state of mind is difficult to gauge, of course, but the artificiality is certainly a function of its being seen as something other than simply a beautiful environment. The same phenomenon can be found in descriptions of the Christian paradise, which was often represented in terms of a city. The historical Buddha Śākyamuni, who is the “presenter” of the description in the sutra, makes the following promise:

Śāriputra, living beings who hear this should generate an earnest desire, wishing to be reborn in that land. Why? Because

in that land one will be able to meet in one place persons of such high virtue as the many living beings I have described here. Śāriputra, one cannot be reborn in that buddha-field, if one depends on the merit of only a few roots of goodness. Śāriputra, if good men or good women hear this explanation of the qualities of the Buddha Amida, and embrace his name 執持名号, and keep it in mind single-mindedly and without distraction 一心不亂, be it for one day, or for two, for three, for four, for five, for six, or for seven days, then, when their lives come to an end, the Buddha Amida, together with his holy entourage, will appear before them. At the time of their death, their minds free from any distorted views, they will be able to be reborn forthwith in Amida Buddha's Land of Supreme Bliss.³

(T. no. 366, vol. 12.347b)

Why Amida?

The research of Inoue Mitsusada has shown that before the mid-Heian period interest in and devotion to Amida was only sporadic. There is the occasional reference in the *Nihon shoki* to Pure Land sutras as early as the mid-seventh century, but statues and images of Shaka and Miroku far outnumber those of Amida until the late eighth century, and even then, Inoue argues, Amida simply figured as one of a number of buddhas and bodhisattvas to whom one might appeal for help. The halls that were built to hold these statues were either dedicated to the "souls" of the dead or were to ensure good fortune in this life; there is little evidence that they were geared to the personal salvation of the donor or sponsor. These findings are in line with Inoue's overall argument that Japanese Buddhism only began to show signs of being concerned with the salvation of the individual in the mid-Heian period (INOUE 1975, pp. 1–40). Neither did he discover much evidence for anything more than academic interest in the major Pure Land sutras among the monks themselves, despite the availability of a good number of commentaries, Shan-tao's *Kuan Wu-liang-shou ching shu* 觀無量壽經疏 and Wōnhyo's *Panju-sammae kyōng yakki* 般舟三昧經略記 among them. The best-known Nara scholar of these sutras was Chikō 智光, a Sanron monk from Gangō-ji, who produced the commentary *Muryōju-kyō ron-shaku* 無量壽經論釋 (5 vols). Although this is not extant, it is known to have drawn on the *Wang-sheng-lun* 往生論 (spuriously attributed to Vasubandhu) using the *Wang-sheng-lun chu* 往生論註 by T'an-luan 曇鸞 (476–542) as a guide. From quotations found in other works, however,

³ Translation adapted from GÓMEZ 1996, p. 148.

it would seem to have been concerned more with meditation and visualization techniques than with the recitation of Amida's name.

Inoue's views have been challenged by those who refuse to believe that sponsors of such images could have been unaware of the salvational possibilities inherent in such activities, but the consensus is that Amida only becomes noticeable in the late Nara period and even then does not stand out in particular from any other buddha or bodhisattva (HAYAMI 1986). It is, in fact, not until the late tenth century that the cult of Amida becomes a serious issue, and when it does emerge it comes not straight from Pure Land practice in China but as an offshoot of Japanese Tendai.

The rise of Amidism in China is beyond the purview of this article, but it is important to note that Amida was adopted as an object of contemplation in T'ien-t'ai Buddhism. When Chih-i 智顛 (538-597) set about improving rules of behavior for his community on T'ien-t'ai, one of the religious practices he encouraged was deep meditation (*samādhi*). This was considered necessary preparation for stilling the mind and ridding it of all disturbances. His *Mo-ho chih-kuan* 摩訶止觀 identified four methods of cultivating *samādhi*. The second of these he named "constantly-walking *samādhi*" (*jōgyō zanmai* 常行三昧), which involved circumambulating an image of Amida for 90 days without rest. The practitioner had to try and visualize the image while intoning the name. The description of this ritual draws directly from that given in the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra* ("The *samādhi* of direct encounter with the buddhas of the present," *Pan-chou san-mei ching* 般舟三昧經), one of the earliest Buddhist texts to be translated into Chinese.⁴ Amida appears here not as an exclusive figure but merely as a major example of a buddha to be visualized, the aim being to produce a mental image as if one were standing face-to-face with a buddha. Two fundamental forms of meditation are dealt with, one that takes three months and another that takes a mere seven days. The relevant section of the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* goes as follows:

Speech. When to speak and when to keep silent with the mouth: while the body walks for ninety days without pausing, for ninety days the mouth ceaselessly chants the name of Amida Buddha without pausing, and for ninety days the mind recollects [the form and meritorious qualities of] Amida Buddha without pausing. One may chant and recollect simultaneously, or first

⁴ The *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra* exists in four Chinese versions: T. 418 (translated 179 A.D. and available in two different versions); T. 419 (probably late Han); T. 417 (an anonymous abridgment of one of the versions of T. 418); and T. 416 (translated by Jñānagupta and others in 594-595). The version in commonest use was the shortest, T. 417. For a study and translation of the Tibetan version, which is closest to T. 416, see HARRISON 1990.

recollect and then chant, or first chant and then recollect. But reciting and recollecting are, nevertheless, to be carried out continually without a moment's pause. The merit that accrues from chanting [the name of] Amida is equal to that of chanting [the names of all] the buddhas in the ten directions. However, Amida alone is to be regarded as the focus of this practice. Every step, every utterance, and every thought should be centered solely upon the Buddha Amida.

Mind. With respect to mind we discuss calming and contemplation. One should mentally recollect the Buddha Amida ten trillion buddha lands to the west, in a jewelled pavilion, under a jewelled tree, on an island in a jewelled pond in a jewelled land, expounding sutras while sitting amid a congregation of bodhisattvas. Recollect the Buddha [Amida] continually like this for three months. How should you think of him? Mentally recollect his thirty-two marks, one by one in reverse order, from the thousand-spoked wheel on the sole of each foot to the invisible mark at the top of his head. Then you should review all the marks in the proper order, from the mark at the top of his head to the thousand-spoken wheels on his soles and think to yourself, "Let me come to have these marks as well."

(DONNER and STEVENSON 1993, pp. 239–40)

Eventually the aim is to lose the image of Amida altogether and to meditate on the nature of mind so as to arouse an awareness of the emptiness of all dharmas.

In 812 Saichō had a hall specially built on Hieizan for the practice of the Lotus *samādhi* (*hokke zanmai*), which formed a part of Chih-i's third method, the "part-walking/part-sitting *samādhi*," but there is little sign of much interest being shown in the other three meditations that are given detailed treatment in the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*. Gishin 義真 (781–833), in his compendium entitled *Tendai hokkeshū gishū* 天台法華宗義集 (c. 830), mentions all four techniques as a matter of course but says almost nothing about *jōgyō zanmai*, merely explaining that "the technique of this practice is different [from the "continually-sitting" *samādhi*] but it lasts just as long. The original text [*Mo-ho chih-kuan*] deals with this in great detail so I shall not expound on it further" (T. no. 2366, vol. 74.277c; ROBERT 1990, p. 170; SWANSON 1995, p. 111). In fact we have to wait until the return of Ennin in 847 to find this particular *samādhi* being practiced on Hieizan. While in China, Ennin had personally experienced a version devised by Fa-chao 法照 (d. 820?) that was in vogue at both Wu-t'ai shan and in the capital Ch'ang-an, and a few years after his return to Japan he had a special hall built in the Tōtō 東塔 sector so that this technique could be practiced. A second

hall was built at Saitō 西塔 in 893 but Yokawa itself had to wait until Ryōgen 良源 (912–985) managed to get one constructed in 968. It is known that Fa-chao's particular style of *jōgyō zanmai* included chanting Amida's name to the accompaniment of music. It was a stylish affair, underpinned by devotionism, and to this extent differed markedly from the practice as described in the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*, which can be firmly identified as a meditational technique. The name is therefore a little misleading and the *jōgyō zanmai* that Ennin introduced and that was to reach parity with *hokke zanmai* in Tendai practice was somewhat more "Amidist" than might otherwise have been the case.

In the period of over a hundred and thirty years between Ennin's return and the taking of the vow in 986 we find a gradual shift away from *jōgyō zanmai* in favor of a more direct form of devotion to Amida. This is mirrored in the development of the halls themselves. It is not known what Ennin's first building at Tōtō looked like but when it was rebuilt by Sōō 相應 (831–918) in 883 it is known to have contained five statues (Amida plus four bodhisattvas) in the esoteric form that one finds in the Assembly of the Attained Body (*jōjinne* 成身會) of the Kongōkai mandala. Amida is sitting cross-legged deep in *samādhi*. By the time the Yokawa hall was built some seventy years later, however, we find Amida surrounded by Kannon, Seishi, Jizō, and Ryūju, and the esoteric flavor is attenuated. Whether or not Amida was standing is not known, but if he were standing this would represent a further shift in emphasis, since it is in this form that he was meant to appear to the dying.⁵ From the description given in Minamoto no Tamenori's *Sanbōe* 三寶繪 of 984, it is clear that the period normally spent circumambulating was only seven days and that the practice had turned from being a solitary, demanding ordeal into a rather noisy gathering at which a large number of monks were supposed to take part. This is another sign that the devotional aspect was effectively masking the meditational.⁶ We can therefore date the beginnings of a recognized cult of Amida to somewhere in the 960s.⁷ The main figures in this story are the courtier Yoshishige no Yasutane 慶滋保胤 (c. 931–1002) and the monk Genshin.

Yoshishige no Yasutane

Yoshishige no Yasutane, "one of the most interesting personalities of the Heian period" (URY 1993, p. 368; WETZLER 1977), was the guiding

⁵ See the descriptions of Amida halls in KATADA 1983 and HAMASHIMA 1989, pp. 65–68.

⁶ See "The continuous *nenbutsu* on Hie 比叡山不斷念佛會" in KAMENS 1988, pp. 342–44.

⁷ For a listing of records that support this contention see INOUE 1975, pp. 87–88.

spirit behind the emergence of a fraternity called the Kangakue 勸學會, set up in 964 dedicated to the study of (Chinese) poetry and Buddhism. A group of twenty courtiers and twenty monks agreed to meet twice a year (on the fifteenth of the third month and the fifteenth of the ninth month) for one day at a temple at Sakamoto at the eastern foot of Hieizan, to listen to lectures on the *Lotus Sutra* in the morning, to chant the name of Amida Buddha and meditate on him in the evening, and then to compose Chinese poetry on topics from the sutra throughout the night until dawn the next morning.⁸ The group itself seems to have come together fairly regularly, and, although attempts to create a permanent meeting place met with failure, the *Rokuharamitsu-jī engi* seems to suggest that some of the meetings were accommodated there. The fraternity was disbanded in 986 when Yasutane became a monk, taking the name Jakushin 寂心. Although the Kangakue has sometimes been treated lightly as an occasional event held by literati dabbling in religion in dilettante fashion, Kamens has pointed out that it “represents the beginnings of very personal involvement by sincere lay Buddhists in Amidist piety and worship outside the confines of formal monastic ritual, and so marks an important development in the early history of the Pure Land movement” (KAMENS 1988, p. 16). Yasutane is also known as the author of *Chiteiki* 池亭記 and *Nihon ōjō gokuraku ki* 日本往生極樂記 (c. 986). This last work is a collection of exemplary biographies of forty-two Japanese figures ranging from Shōtoku Taishi to “a woman from Kaga” and includes Gyōgi, Ennin, and Kōya (Kūya). The reasons for its compilation are set out clearly in the preface:

From my youth I have been mindful of Amida Buddha and now that I am over forty years of age this interest has become stronger and stronger. I recite his name and I visualize in my mind his thirty-two major marks and his eighty minor signs. I keep him in mind every waking moment and “I cleave to this in times of haste and in times of sudden change.”⁹ Wherever I find an image of Amida or a painting of the Pure Land, be it in temple, on stupa or mausoleum, I never fail to offer devotion and prayers. Everyone, monk or layman, man or woman, who desires Supreme Bliss and who wishes to be reborn [in paradise] must link themselves [to him]. The sutras, *śāstras*, and other commentaries expound the merit of such and explain the causes thereof; you must always consult them.

⁸ A short description of this group by a participant can be found in *Sanbōe*. See KAMENS 1988, pp. 295–98.

⁹ From the Confucian *Analects*, 4.5. LEGGE 1971, p. 167.

When the monk Chia-ts'ai 迦才 (Kāśyapa) from the Hung-fassu of the Great T'ang compiled the *Ching t'u lun* 淨土論, which contains [the stories of] twenty men who achieved rebirth [in paradise], he wrote as follows:¹⁰

First quote [directly] from the sutras and *sāstras*. They prove the existence of such rebirth; they indeed make excellent examples. But the wisdom of [ordinary] sentient beings is shallow and they cannot grasp what wise men say. Unless we record [examples of] those who actually achieved rebirth [in paradise], we shall not be able to encourage them.

True indeed! Among the forty-odd people whose stories are told in the *Shui ying ch'uan* 瑞應傳¹¹ there are examples such as that of the man who killed cattle and the man who sold chickens, both of whom met virtuous friends and after ten thought-moments were reborn in paradise. Whenever I see these [examples of] such people my convictions strengthen. Now, on looking through [various] histories and biographies, I have found [examples of] people whose rebirth was most unusual. I have also asked old acquaintances and I have come across over forty such examples in all. Full of wonder and unable to forget, I have recorded a little of their activities and so now entitle this "A record of Japanese who have achieved rebirth in Supreme Bliss." Those who read this should have no doubts. In the hope that we, along with all other sentient beings, will achieve rebirth in the Land of Peaceful Bliss.

(INOUE and ŌSONE 1974, p. 11)

Genshin

Owing to the popularity of the work *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集 [Essentials of salvation] of 985, Genshin became a household name among the aristocracy in the Heian court, but he was not influential in a political sense. Far from it. The pre-eminent cleric on Hieizan during his early years was Ryōgen, who revived the fortunes of the whole mountain community through the astute use of aristocratic patronage. Ryōgen himself came to prominence largely as a result of prowess at debating.

¹⁰ The *Ching-t'u lun* (T. no. 1963) is a 3-volume work written contra Tao-ch'o's *An-lo-chi* 安樂集. It discusses types of Pure Land and argues the case for salvation for all sentient beings. It is quoted liberally in works by Wōnhyo, Chikō, Ryōgen, and Genshin.

¹¹ This refers to the 往生西方淨土瑞應刪傳, a work in one volume that contains biographies of forty-eight people who achieved rebirth in paradise from Hui-yūan to the early T'ang period.

Fujiwara no Tadahira 藤原忠平 (880–949) and his son Morosuke 師輔 (908–960) asked him to perform rituals for them, particularly in relation to births, deaths, and illness, and in 954 he became Morosuke's official family ritualist (*ichimon no kitōsō*). By the time of Morosuke's death in 960 Ryōgen had persuaded him to put considerable financial resources into new building projects at Yokawa. He chose Yokawa as his base because it was far enough away from the other centers at Tōtō and Saitō to allow for separate development, and also because it had been "opened" by Ennin, in whose religious lineage Ryōgen placed himself. In 966 he was appointed to the position of *zasu*. Determined to eradicate abuses of privilege and to abolish the factions known as *monryū* that had emerged partly as a result of the rise of *goganji*—sub-monasteries created via the personal patronage of a series of emperors and other members of the imperial family—Ryōgen took a number of draconian steps. In 970 he issued a set of twenty-six regulations that were designed to revitalize serious religious practice on the mountain. Gradually the opposing faction, the Gishin-Enchin line, was removed from all positions of power and forbidden to attend major rituals. In 980 all seven hundred of them were expelled from the mountain.

Ryōgen died in 985. He was succeeded as *zasu* by the tenth son of Fujiwara no Morosuke, Jinzen 尋禪 (943–990), who became the first member of the nobility to reach this office. It was with Jinzen that the true aristocratization of the high offices in the Enryaku-ji community really began; all Tendai *zasu* after Myōgu 明救 (946–1220) were either members of the imperial family or of the major branch of the Fujiwara. Ryōgen therefore succeeded in restoring the financial base and the political importance of Hieizan but at the expense of religious independence, and the now unbreakable ties between the aristocracy in Heian-kyō and the Tendai establishment were to cause some soul-searching among monks of a less worldly bent.¹²

Genshin never sought or gained high office. He is known primarily as a scholar monk. Some care is needed when discussing his writings, because a great many works that appear to be by him are in fact of much later provenance and have been attributed to him for purposes of legitimation. In the Kamakura period two competing schools of *hongaku* thought emerged, one of which, the Eshinryū 恵心流, traced itself back to Genshin (who was also known as Eshin). An uncritical acceptance of these texts, which all appear in his "Collected Works," would give a misleading impression of his scholarship. Sueki Fumihiko has in fact identified only about fifteen texts that can safely be attributed

¹² On the subject of Ryōgen and the revival of Hieizan see McMULLIN 1987 and 1989, and GRONER n.d.

to him (SUEKI 1991, pp. 320–26). Apart from the short *Amidabutsu byakugōkan* 阿彌陀佛白毫觀 (981) and *Ōjōyōshū* itself, they mostly concentrate on mainline Tendai doctrinal matters. Of particular note are the following: *Yōbōmon* 要法文 (986), which deals with Buddhist concepts in 100 small sections with quotes from a wide range of sources; *Daijō tai kusha shō* 大乘對俱舍抄 (1005), his longest work, which is a collection of discussions showing Mahāyāna responses to the kind of theories dealt with in the Hīnayāna *Abhidharmakośa*; and *Ichijō yōketsu* 一乘要決 (1006), which is a long discussion of the merits of the Hokke one vehicle versus Hossō three vehicle, a well-worn topic of discussion.

Other Texts Related to the Vow of 986

Yasutane and Genshin are important figures at this juncture because they are associated with three other extant documents that directly relate to the vow of 986: a covenant (*kishō* 起請) in eight parts dated 986/9/15 and attributed to Yasutane; a further covenant in twelve parts dated 988/6/15 attributed to Genshin, and a series of *kakochō* 過去帳 or “death registers,” which are not themselves dated but are linked to another text that carries the date 1013 (ESZ 1: 339–58, 671–86). The first of the registers begins with a straightforward list of twenty-five monks, each of whom are given the title *Daitoku* 大德. This is merely honorific and does not denote any particular rank. A note is added that simply reads “the above were founding members.” Oddly neither Genshin nor Yasutane appears in this list. Genshin does, however, appear in the next group of nineteen names, as does retired emperor Kazan 花山, whose sudden (and probably engineered) resignation in 986 allowed the Fujiwara to install Ichijō on the throne. This second register also carries a note, which reads “founding members.” We then find a third register with 80 names, which is of considerable interest in that it includes 16 novices and 24 nuns, together with 7 lay males and 6 lay women. These lists need to be treated with some care and it would be unwise to jump to the conclusion that neither Genshin nor Yasutane was connected with the initial group just because they are both omitted from the first register.¹³ The associated text, carrying the note “begun in 1013/7/18,” takes five names from the previous lists and presents biographies of them. Genshin’s is by far the longest of these. It contains some interesting information about his background (his mother seems to have been the driving force behind his desire to become a monk and his three sisters all became nuns) and, as we shall see, it treats his final illness in considerable detail.

¹³ See the detailed discussions of these matters in HORI 1964 and MIYAZAKI 1964.

The Covenant of 986

Yasutane's covenant of 986 is in eight sections. The first section opens with a statement of how the group is to handle its affairs, urging compliance and diligence and adding a hint of unfortunate consequences for the backslider. This hint is strengthened in subsequent sections, where he who fails to turn up three times is to be subject to inquisition and expulsion.

On the fifteenth day of every month we shall practice the meditation [involving] contemplation of [Amida] Buddha (nenbutsu-zanmai).

This day is a day for observance [of the precepts]¹⁴ as Amida manifests his power in response [to our desire for salvation] and King Enma records good against evil. So we of this fellowship shall be especially mindful of the three activities [of body, mouth, and mind], we shall maintain all precepts to the letter, and not indulge our appetites. Neither must we follow the ways of the world.

So that we may guide the sentient beings of the six paths [to salvation], it is fitting that we read the six scrolls of the *O-mi-t'o ching* and circumambulate [Amida] Buddha in contemplation a hundred times in all. Having transferred the merit [thus gained to all beings], we shall chant in prayer: "Homage to Amida Nyorai [Amitābha Tathāgata], Master of Supreme Bliss. Homage to certain rebirth in Supreme Bliss at the end of our lives." On reaching the last scroll, we shall again chant in prayer: "Homage to the Great Teacher Shaka [Śākyamuni], great in the virtue of benevolence. Homage to Amida Nyorai, Master of Supreme Bliss. Homage to the bodhisattva Kanzeon [Avalokiteśvara], great in compassion and pity. Homage to the bodhisattva Daiseishi [Mahāsthāmaprāpta] great in compassion and pity. Homage to certain rebirth in Supreme Bliss at the end of our lives." Then we shall make three obeisances in the usual manner. Having [shaken] the staff and taken the oath of fellowship, we shall chant this hymn from the *Pao-hsing lun* 寶性論:

Through these meritorious acts // we pray that at our
last hour // we shall be allowed to see [A]mida Buddha,
// with his body of limitless merit. // I and my fellow
believers, // once we have seen this Buddha // pray that

¹⁴ Reading 齋 for 齊. The translation here is based on the text in ESZ 1: 349–58 with reference to KAWASAKI 1972, and emendations suggested by KOYAMA 1997.

we shall gain the vision free from impediment // and be awakened to uttermost enlightenment.¹⁵

Now, the Pure Land is far distant for the indolent but well within reach of the diligent. For this reason, if we ever feel lazy or find ourselves falling asleep, we must reproach ourselves and so prevent it. And when we chant to transfer merit, we should not wait for the encouragement of others but rather spur on ourselves. Only then can we cancel out the heavy burden of the five heinous crimes. How can we afford not to encourage each other to practice austerities for this one night?

Now, if there is one among the fellowship who cannot avoid being absent, he should present his reasons and thereby obtain permission for such absence; but although we do indeed establish this procedure, there must be no seeking of such allowance for matters of a trivial nature. If someone from outside the fellowship offers up good incense, provides lamp oil, warms the room or arranges for the morning gruel, we must chant the treasured name [of Amida] for his present and future life at the concluding prayers at the fifth watch.

Rather unexpectedly, the second section introduces the *Kōmyō shingon* 光明眞言, which reminds one of the degree to which practice on Hieizan had already been heavily influenced by esoteric ritual.

*After the prayers that conclude the contemplation we shall intone the Mantra of Bright Light [Kōmyō shingon] and perform the sand ritual.*¹⁶

According to the Tathāgata: “If there are any sentient beings who have committed sins such as the ten evil deeds, the five heinous crimes, or the four serious offences, and so have fallen into various adverse paths, use this mantra to perform the sand ritual one hundred and eight times. If you spread the sand over the dead man’s corpse or cast it over the grave, then even if that man has been reborn into the realms of hell, hungry ghosts, anti-gods, or animals, by means of the power

¹⁵ The *Pao-hsing lun* is the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, a basic text for the theory of *tathāgatagarbha* and the concept of originary enlightenment. It would be easy to make too much of this, however. This passage comes near the end of the thesis and the context is that of the transference of merit (T. no. 1611, vol. 31.848.a). It also appears at the end of *Ōjōyōshū* and Genshin seems to have taken it from an intermediate source, namely Chia-ts’ai’s *Ching t’u lun*. See ISHIDA 1970, p. 319. The third line in the Taishō edition reads 見無量壽佛 rather than 得見阿彌陀.

¹⁶ This sand ritual, *kaji dosa* 加持土砂, involves “empowering” sand by means of chanting the *Kōmyō shingon* over it. As we shall see, the sand is then used to ensure advantageous rebirth.

engendered in the sand by this mantra of the great *abhiṣeka* of all *tathāgatas*, he will obtain a body of bright light, he will escape retribution for all his sins, and he will be reborn in Supreme Bliss on the lotus seat.”¹⁷

Our sinful acts are so numerous that we do not even know where we shall be reborn. So always have a box of sand placed on the altar in front of the Buddha, and after the prayers that conclude the contemplation, the master of ritual shall separately proclaim the five great vows, and all monks shall perform the three esoteric visualizations,¹⁸ intone the mantra, and perform the ritual as explained above. If, when a member of the group dies, we take this sand and place it over the corpse, he will escape suffering for all his various sins. How much more so for him who has not committed any of the five heinous crimes. If we spread this sand over his corpse, even greater merit will be gained. And if we continuously chant the mantra one hundred times, it is even more effective. We may also share such merit with those who are connected to us.

The reference to King Enma at the beginning of the covenant is a little unusual. He is not mentioned again in either covenant and, although there is one reference to the first period of seven days after death, there is no discussion of purgatory as such. Implicit in the sand ritual, however, is the possibility that actions by the living at a crucial juncture might affect a person's eventual rebirth. This is not what one would expect to find in later Pure Land Buddhism, “which denied in principle that the dead could receive any benefit from the living” (TEISER 1994, p. 13). Clearly we are still at an early stage where individual effort can make all the difference. Indeed it could be argued that this was the *raison d'être* of the group and the covenants in the first place. The subheadings for the remaining six sections are as follows:

We shall regulate our thoughts, keep to the [right] path, discriminate among men, and help our fellows to correct their faults.

We shall build a separate building called the Hall of Rebirth [in Supreme Bliss] and when one of the fellowship falls ill we shall move him there.

¹⁷ This quotation comes from a short work commonly known as the *Kuang-ming chen-yen ching* 光明真言經, but whose formal title is *Pu-k'ung-chüan-so p'ì-he-chē-na fo-ta-kuan-ting kuang-chen-yen* 不空羂索毘盧遮那佛大灌頂光真言. See T. no. 1002, vol. 19.606.c.16–27. The Taishō text differs somewhat from that quoted here but is still recognizable as the source.

¹⁸ The 三密觀. This involves trying to identify the three activities of body, mouth, and mind with those of the Buddha, thereby achieving mutual interpenetration (入我我入).

While one of the fellowship is ill, the group shall take turns to watch over him.

We shall decide on where to place the graves for the fellowship. We shall call it the Mausoleum of the Lotus Seat, and in spring and autumn we shall practice contemplating [Amida] Buddha there.

We shall always contemplate looking towards the west and endeavor to accumulate great merit.

The fellowship shall, after such a death, maintain these principles and continue to practice good deeds.

There is much exhortation to work together, and to ensure that when a companion is dying every effort is made to provide the kind of environment where full concentration is possible. He is to be placed in front of a statue of Amida, holding on to streamers attached to Amida's hands. Section 5 places great stress on the need to nurse the sick and to disregard taboos on uncleanness.

The sick must be looked after and protected. The suffering mind must be pacified and consoled. Therefore in the *Vinaya* the Buddha says: "From now on you should establish who will nurse the sick; and if there is one who desires to pay me homage, he should first pay homage to the sick."¹⁹ Much is written of this kind of merit in the sutras and *śāstras*. It is not merely that [such a deed] is the most laudable in all eight fields of merit, it is even [meritorious enough to be] praised though ten rebirths. For this reason, the fellowship must take turns to watch over a member who falls ill, for the whole period from the onset of his illness to his death.

First, two members shall be appointed to watch over him for just one day and one night. One member should devote himself to encouraging contemplation of the Buddha and allowing the sick man to hear the message of the Dharma. The second should busy himself wherever he must, preparing food and other necessities, which, of course, must be provided depending on the severity of the suffering and the number of fellows present. Depending on the sick man's wishes, they should practice meritorious acts according to both the exoteric and esoteric teachings, they should pray for the power of

¹⁹ This quotation comes from the Chinese translation of the *Dharmaguptakavinaya*, the *Ssu fen lü* (Jp. Shibunritsu) 四分律 (T. no. 1428, vol. 22.861.c), but note that the first phrase differs slightly from the Taishō text. The reference to "eight fields of merit" in what follows comes from the *Fan-wang ching* (Jp. *Bonmōkyō*) 梵網經 (T. no. 1484, vol. 24.1005.c), which provided what are known as the "Mahāyāna precepts."

the Buddha, or they should apply medicines. They must wait for the next group to come to take their turn and then be allowed to leave. As in the past when Shaka washed the bodies of sick monks with his hands of purple and gold, so we sons of Buddha now must apply ourselves to the task of physician. How can we not [try to] alleviate the suffering of our virtuous friend? We must serve him just as if we are serving our parents or our masters. We must never shy away from unclean smells or impurities, and every day when the sun sinks we must carry out the usual tasks. And if it seems as if the candle of his life is flickering in the wind, we should all gather and concentrate our minds on [Amida] Buddha. Or, following normal practice, we could chant hymns and dirges as directed in the *Vinaya* of the Sarvāstivādins.²⁰ Or one might ask the sick man what he sees and note it down, as suggested by Tao-ch'ō.²¹

Now whether a man travels the path of goodness or evil depends entirely on his [ability to] concentrate at the last moment 臨終一念, and the relationship formed with virtuous friends is exclusively devoted to this one instant. So if we do not wait until the end but simply leave him to die, the whole significance of the fellowship is nullified. Even if you are called to take your turn without warning, you must still be willing to touch impurities, to see him off at the end, and to put into effect all that needs to be done: this is what is meant by fellowship.

It is on this that we must set our minds. Others rely deeply on us and we, in turn, rely profoundly on them. If we become estranged from others or if others become estranged from us, the original intention to form a group is already thwarted and the main object—to achieve rebirth in Supreme Bliss—may well be lost. No matter how serious the obstacle, the fellowship must faithfully come and keep turn to serve. Even if one of the group falls ill in quite a different place, we must go and ask after him. But if the journey there and back would take a member more than a day, then that member is exempt from this requirement. This is all extremely important and cannot be ignored.

²⁰ The *Shi sung lü* (Jp. *Fūjuritsu*) 十誦律 (T. no. 1435, vol. 23).

²¹ The equivalent passage in *Ōjōyōshū* (ISHIDA 1970, p. 207) in the section entitled “Practices at the moment of death” (*rinjū no gyōji* 臨終の行儀), has Shan-tao as the originator of this suggestion, rather than Tao-ch'ō. For an English translation of the original Shan-tao passage see STEVENSON 1995, p. 378.

The Covenant of 988

Genshin's revision of the Yasutane covenant—for such it seems—covers similar ground but in different fashion. Perhaps most striking is the difference in style. Yasutane's prose is reasonably straightforward; Genshin on the other hand is erudite and makes few concessions. His references are not easy to trace and he makes full use of the more elliptical aspects of Buddhist classical Chinese. The directions for ritual are far more specific. It opens with:

This meditation in contemplation of [Amida] Buddha is to achieve rebirth in Supreme Bliss. From today until the time our lives come to an end, we shall, on the fifteenth day of every month, practice contemplating the Buddha together for a whole night without intermission. We vow to pile up these good roots of unsullied karma session by session so that we may reach the core of enlightenment, pure and clear as the full moon. Thus we sign our names. The result of our deliberations is as follows. We covenant:

We shall, on the night of the fifteenth day of every month, practice contemplation of [Amida] Buddha without intermission.

The six fasting days²² are occasions when we show pity for sentient creatures. The night of the fifteenth is when we contemplate the Buddha of Measureless Life. To contemplate the Buddha and to read sutras on that day and night can be termed “activities [designed to ensure] rebirth in Supreme Bliss.” Is this not the [best] way to arrive directly at the [correct] path? For this reason, we shall break our dreams at the fifth watch [at dawn] and awaken ourselves from slumber by intoning the sounds of the *samādhi*. Thus shall we invite good roots for our present and future. We shall then all gather together in the early afternoon and at about four o'clock begin our reading of the sutras. Having transferred that merit, we shall then read out the text of this our covenant. At about seven o'clock in the evening we shall start our contemplation of the Buddha and complete our vows at seven [the next morning]. Together we shall then read the sutra in twelve scrolls and together intone the name [of Amida] two thousand times or more. Every time we reach the end of a scroll, we shall pray for the merit to be transferred. And once that is done, we shall return to the raised seat before the altar and all chant the

²² These were the eighth, fourteenth, fifteenth, twenty-third, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth of each month.

name of [Amida] Buddha one hundred and eight times. This may help mediate [for us] in the hundred million [buddha] lands. Then we shall all cast our bodies on the ground and pay obeisance to [A]mida Nyorai. And we shall pray for our certain rebirth in Supreme Bliss at the end of our lives. If one of the group has a commitment that forces him to be absent, the fellowship shall discuss the matter and, depending on the circumstances of the case, that person may be expelled.

Yet again, we find that practice is not purely devoted to Amida. The *kōmyō* mantra and the sand ritual are invoked as before (section 4) and the group is to gather to hear a monk expound on the *Lotus Sutra* the morning before they enter contemplation (section 2). The control of all passions is enjoined on the whole group with great seriousness (section 6). Stress is placed on the need for self-sacrifice and for showing compassion through one's deeds, especially nursing a sick or dying colleague. After death occurs, all members of the group are to be interred in a common burial ground (section 10). There is no mention of cremation.

We shall choose an attractive place to set up the Mausoleum of Peace and Care. We shall erect a stupa there, and we shall make this our joint burial ground.

One lifetime soon passes. [The lifetime of] an ordinary man resembles dew on the leaf of the banana tree, and the two deaths are difficult to avoid.²³ Even the saint [eventually] meets smoke from sandalwood. When pleasure is done, sadness arrives. As the wind fans the blossoms and scatters them, glory passes and is followed by decline; like water becoming muddied or a jewel becoming cloudy. In the end it comes down to this. When corpses lie out on the dewy earth, the birds gouge out the eyes with their beaks; when bones are cast out into the misty countryside, beasts devour the flesh with their teeth. What passerby does not feel his heart turn to ice and suddenly crack? What traveller's eyes do not suddenly shed rivers of tears? Even though our spirits may dwell in the moon of the Lotus Womb, our bodies are still hopelessly mired in the dirt of the grave.

So let us choose an attractive site and erect a stupa there.

²³ The "two deaths" refers to a distinction made in the *Śrīmālāsīghanāda Sutra* between the death of an ordinary man 分段死 and that of the enlightened ones 變易死. See T. no. 353, vol. 12.219.c.20–21, which reads 有二種死. 何等爲二. 謂分段死. 不思議變易死. WAYMAN (1974, p. 82) calls these "[The ordinary] discontinuous passing away" and "the inconceivable transference."

We shall call it the Mausoleum of Peace and Care, and it will be our permanent burial ground. But we shall [first] ask a master of the law to choose the site by divination, make the mudra signs to divide the plots, and pacify the area by means of mantra. Then, even though the spirits of the [four] directions may block our way and the gods of the land be still present, through the virtue of the Buddha we may occupy the land. Such superior influence is surely to be honored. So if one of our group dies, we shall ignore the suitability of the particular day and we shall bury him in this place before three days have passed.

Finally, the desire to find out where the companion has gone, to check if the ritual and the concentration has been successful, is retained.

If one of us dies, we request burial and contemplation of [Amida] Buddha.

None of us are children from marvellous mansions or splendid palaces. Our parents were rather from poor families with rough houses. In our boxes there are no rare jewels, and on our beds there are no sumptuous spreads. Our servants are few and our friends and relatives even fewer. When we reach the time for us to die, who will come and visit us in our sea of suffering? So [when one of us dies], we should all gather together and go to the Mausoleum of Peace and Care, practice contemplation of [Amida] Buddha, and so lead the dead man [to the Pure Land]. And after the contemplation, we should throw ourselves to the ground and each of us should chant [the name of] his soul, so leading him to Supreme Bliss. This should be completed twenty-one times. And we should pray to [A]mida, to Kannon, and to Seishi, asking that within seven days we be shown where he has been reborn. And depending on whether it is a good or an evil place, our hearts and sympathies should reach out to him.

Demanding Proof of Success

Common to both these covenants is a strong concern for fellowship. There is a constant reiteration that rules are important and that backsliders will be expelled on very little provocation. This suggests that the members are being asked to do something highly unusual, something that runs counter to common sense. Death and disease were normally to be shunned and it took a good deal of pressure to persuade otherwise. At first sight it seems curious to find a strong sense

of exclusivity being introduced just at the moment that Mahāyāna universalism is being extolled, but this was needed so that a threat of excommunication would have the desired effect. The whole enterprise smacks of insecurity. Despite the apparent reliance on the *Kuan Wu-liang-shou ching* and protestations of faith and concentration being the key, there is clearly a strong residual fear of what the individual might face, a fear of death, that was dealt with by dissipating it within the group. The covenants tied them into a series of obligations that were meant to increase the chances of success for the individual when his turn came. Dropping everything to go and nurse another would increase one's own store of merit, and mutual support was necessary in the face of an intensely personal struggle.²⁴

Since activities and practices carried out either alone or with the group during one's lifetime were only a help and not a guarantee of success, what happened in the very last moments was of crucial importance. One might expect a desire to produce an atmosphere that was comforting for the dying, but, on the contrary, the whole procedure was imbued with tremendous tension. Yasutane's covenant, for example, suggests the extraordinary scenario of fellows keeping a verbatim record of the dying man's last moments, constantly urging him to concentrate on Amida but at the same time pestering him to tell them what he could see and where he was heading, as if one might not only measure success in this way but thereby learn to adjust one's behavior to maximize the chances when one's own time came. Genshin and his fellows were clearly not ready for simple acts of faith, and we are still some way from later Pure Land Buddhism. This obsession with proof is prefigured in the initial vow of 986, where members are made to promise that they will indicate *after death* where they have gone, and a good example of how this might work in practice can be found in Genshin's biography, where his death and rebirth in paradise is recorded in some detail. The last section is worth quoting in full.

From the second day of the sixth month he stopped taking food or drink. On the fifth he said, "In a dream I saw a monk appear and someone next to him asked 'Who are you?' and

²⁴ There was in fact a Chinese precedent for this kind of thing. In 402 the monk Hui-yūan 慧遠 (334–416), who had settled at the Tung-lin-ssu 東林寺 in Lu-shan 廬山, gathered together a group of 123 monks and laymen. They called themselves the White Lotus Society 白蓮社 and together made a vow to help one another be reborn in Amida's Pure Land. The text of the vow and a description of the occasion can be found in Hui-yūan's biography in *Kao-seng chuan* 高僧傳 (T. 2059), compiled c. 530 by Hui-chiao 慧皎. For a translation see ZÜRCHER 1972, pp. 240–53. The wording of the 986 vow shows an occasional slight similarity, as one might expect, but there is no overt reference to the White Lotus Society and no obvious textual correlation.

the monk replied 'I have come because I wish to show him correct contemplation.' Is this a sign of the end?"

On the ninth, early in the morning, he attached cords to [A]mida's hand and grasped the ends.²⁵ He chose two *gāthā* from the Buddhist teachings, chanted them himself and asked others to do likewise.

The clear pure gates of compassion are as numberless as
grains of dust;
We are all born in the wondrous aspect of the Tathāgata
Whose each and every aspect is perfect
So he who looks upon it will never tire.

And he also chanted:

His face is good, perfect, and pure like the full moon,
A marvellous light like a thousand suns and moons;
His voice is as loud as a drum, as beautiful as the song of
the kokila bird,
So thus I bow before [A]mida Buddha.

And he chanted "Homage to the paradise in the west, to the marvellous Pure Land, to Amida, great in compassion and pity." Then he made obeisance again and placed his ends of the cords in front of the Buddha. He ate as normal and urged the others to do likewise. Then he asked them, saying "Will you know whether I have escaped the death of the fifteen evils by just looking at my face?" And they replied "Your body shows no sign of suffering; your expression is quite normal. There are no signs that your death will be unpleasant. This shows that all will be well."

Then they cleaned all the dust and dirt away from where he lay, and they washed stains from his body and clothes as if they were preparing [for the final hour].

On the morning of the tenth he ate and drank as usual, then plucked the hair from his nose and cleaned his body and his mouth. He grasped the cords again and concentrated his thoughts on the Buddha; it was as if he had fallen asleep. Those serving him, although close by, merely thought he was resting and so paid no more attention. But then, because he had made no sound for a while, they examined him and found that he had died, his head to the north, his face looking west, lying on his right side. His face looked beatific; his expression

²⁵ Note that the Amida who comes for the dead is always standing, not sitting deep in *samādhi* as he is at the Byōdōin at Uji. Either his right hand is raised and his left hand down and open, or both hands are level with his chest as he gazes down. Paintings of Amida in the latter pose are extant that still have cords attached to the fingers.

like a blossoming flower. In his hand he held the cords and his beads. His hands were together in prayer but had slipped slightly apart.

He had always admonished his students saying “When I die, you should ask me about important matters: about the production of good and the arising of evil—I will reveal the truth to you.” And on the ninth he had spoken to one of the monks closest to him, saying “I see many things but I do not speak of them to others. [I see] young monks come and sit in groups, now three to a group, now five. They all look composed and they are beautifully clothed. Things like this I can see as soon as I close my eyes. But if I explained it to you in detail, I fear it would sound like madness. At the very moment of death you should ask [me what I see],” he said. “And other things that occur to me, if you ask, I will tell you of them. Make sure you ask about these final moments, but ask me softly.”

But then no one knew when he had died, so who could ask these vital things? For men and for the Dharma, this is deeply to be regretted.

Now there was a student of his called Nōgu, who for some time had been in charge of the Iwakuradera in the county of Kōga in the province of Ōmi. He came in the tenth month in the previous year and announced “I am now too old and cannot walk. This is the last time that I will be able to pay my respects to my master,” and he returned to his temple. Then Genshin sent a note to him saying “I must see you [again] either next spring or summer.” But something stopped him from coming and in the end he never fulfilled his master’s wish. On the tenth day of the sixth month last year about four in the morning he saw a dream. He saw himself entering his master’s room. The master was just disappearing into the distance. To the left and right of the path were lines of monks. [Beyond them] stood four young boys, fair of form and garment. The way they stood there to the left and right seemed just like the “Yokawa welcoming ceremony.”²⁶ Genshin gestured, saying “Let the smaller ones line up in front of the taller ones,” and they arranged themselves as he had ordered. Then they marched off to the west. Nōgu, in his dream, thought to himself: “This is strange. They are walking on the ground.” But in that instant they rose up slowly and trod on air as they went. And they chanted “crossing beyond the three worlds,” “crossing beyond the three worlds,” twice and thrice as they

²⁶ The *Yokawa no mukae-kō*, said to have been inaugurated by Genshin, was a ceremony open to all at which the coming of Amida from the west was enacted in a kind of pageant.

left towards the west. Awakening from his dream, he told it to the monk Hōgu and the nun Kenmyō and others, and they said “Surely this was the master dying, wasn’t it?” On the eighteenth a Yokawa monk called Juson arrived. They asked him why he had come and he replied that the master had passed away on the tenth of that month. All were amazed that the dream had been true.

And there was another monk who was a student of the master. After the master’s death, he wished to know where he had been reborn and so for months he prayed and concentrated. Eventually he saw the master in a dream and asked him whether he had been reborn in Paradise. The master replied, “I could say yes and I could say no.” “Why do you say this?” asked the monk. The master replied, “Because I only just managed to avoid suffering.” The monk said, “What you say is not clear to me. Have you in fact been reborn [in Paradise]?” “Yes,” replied the master. “Are you not then overjoyed that you have already achieved your original intention?” “Yes, I am overjoyed.” “So if you have achieved rebirth [in paradise], then why did you just tell me ‘I could say no’?” The master replied, “When the sainted ones gather like clouds and surround the Buddha, I am furthest away [from him]. That is why I said I might say no.” And the monk asked about himself, saying, “Can I achieve rebirth in the Pure Land or not?” “You cannot,” was the reply. “What have I done wrong that I cannot achieve it?” asked the monk. “You are too lazy.” “Is it absolutely impossible?” asked the monk. “Although you are lazy,” said the master, “you have taken the vow to become a buddha. That is a good thing. You are like a man trapped in a deep dungeon. If he has knowledge, he can escape by himself. The vow to become a buddha is just like this. Although you are sunk in [the cycle of] birth and death, it is possible to escape.” “In that case,” said the monk, “can I or can I not achieve Paradise by means of this vow?” “If you have the vow but do not practice, it will still be difficult.” “If I repent of my past mistakes and now redouble my efforts, can I then achieve my vow?” At this question, the master held back from replying immediately. He thought awhile and then said, “It will still be difficult...to be reborn in Paradise is an extremely difficult thing. That is why I myself am only on the outer margins.” Hearing this, the monk was very ashamed of himself.

This dream reminds one of something that happened some time ago. The master read the sutras with care and then created a picture of [A]mida’s welcoming. The picture contained many

ordinary monks but few bodhisattvas. Someone asked him why there were so few. He replied that he had ambitions for only the lowest lotus [seat]. So why did he not have higher ambitions? asked the man. “Because that is where I calculate I belong” was the reply.

And if we enquire further into his last moments, he turned to those who were looking after him and said, “My end is nigh. Ask someone to read the passage about the upper and middle levels of the lowest [third] rank of rebirth from the *Wu-liang-shou ching*.” This must mean the same thing...now perhaps he has achieved his aim and is sitting on the lowest lotus seat.

Accounts like this, of his appearing and communicating with students, are many; but dreams are difficult to trust and so we should not spread these stories too widely. The master’s wisdom and diligence had no peer in this world. The Buddhist Dharma benefits all sentient beings and its concepts are marvellous. The Buddha’s words are not empty. Cause and effect is clearly apparent. So how can we doubt that the master obtained the fruit of peace and bliss? Let us hope that through the power of our relationship we will soon receive his guidance.²⁷

There is some textual justification for the act of asking questions of a dying man and recording the answers, but underlying this practice is a view of death that could be described as rather “un-Buddhist.” What is happening here is a re-emergence of the central problem of Buddhism: if there is no self, what is it that is reborn? As usual, when Buddhism “opens up” to a wide audience in this fashion the first casualty is the concept of *anātman*; it is too difficult to grasp. Both covenants make it quite plain that the members were thinking in terms of a soul being reborn, and in the section that deals with the sand ritual in the 988 covenant (section 4) there is in fact explicit use of the term “dead spirit” (*bōrei* 亡靈). The creation of a death register is another clear indication. The act of listing members and commemorating them with biographies kept alive a link between the living and the dead that was important for the group and that could only make sense if one assumed some form of contact across the barrier between life and death.

Visions of Heaven and Hell

One surefire way of persuading people of the importance of preparing for rebirth in the Pure Land was to show them the dire conse-

²⁷ From the biography of Genshin in *Shuryōgon'in nijūgo zanmai kechien kakochō*, c. 1013. Translation based on the text in ESZ 1: 680–82.

quences of inaction or failure. This was the strategy chosen by Genshin in his work *Ōjōyōshū*, which was completed in the fourth month of 985. It is sometimes claimed that *Ōjōyōshū* was composed as a manual for those who signed the vow of 986; he may indeed have had this group in mind, but the work itself is wide-ranging and immediately had an impact beyond the confines of Yokawa, an impact partly due to its vivid descriptions of the terrible hells, which come right at the beginning and are clearly meant to catch both eye and imagination. Life in Japan in the tenth century was as dangerous and precarious as anywhere else, but even so it is not easy to persuade people to turn away from this world en masse and concentrate solely on the next. A visceral fear and disgust with the present is needed, and this does not just happen, it has to be manufactured, invented. In the Japanese cultural context this turning away from the here-and-now is not entirely a natural reaction and it needed considerable effort before these alien concepts, so basic to Buddhism, could be successfully implanted at the personal level.

It is not for nothing, therefore, that *Ōjōyōshū* begins with a long section entitled "Aversion to this unclean world," which strikes all who read it with such force. Genshin's description does not in fact begin with the horrors of this world, but with the various hells into which one might easily be reborn. But to evince true fear in the reader or listener one needs to tie the vision as closely as possible to human experience; so the human body with its susceptibility to pain and hurt becomes the central reference point. The horrors of multiple hells are then evinced through a description of pain inflicted on the sentient body in a long series of unending repetitions. Unspeakable tortures are continued for eons without respite and there is a constant reiteration of extreme violence. In this sense, hell is a magnification of pain as felt in this present life. This then forces us back to read the present world in terms of hell and allows us to see where the crucial weakness lies: desire and the human body itself. There is only one redeeming feature of this human condition: salvation is only possible from this particular state, because it is only here that we ever have a chance of hearing the message of the Buddhist Dharma. And now that that chance in a million has been offered, it must be taken.

And what of paradise? It is a curious but well-proven fact that paradises are far more difficult to describe than hells, for they are mostly insubstantial states of mind. As we have already seen, Amida's Pure Land was described as a kind of static ecstasy of light and jewels; but to make it real and truly desirable to his audience Genshin is forced to use language, and language by definition is tied to this world. So in

the process of being described, the Pure Land turns into something again “un-Buddhist,” a perfect land where the nonexistence of desire can only be explained in terms of desire fulfilled. If all desire is instantaneously gratified, it becomes not so much annihilated as rendered impotent and so inconceivable. But desire presupposes the senses, and for senses to exist at all, there must be a body. This is why, for all the talk of nothingness, Mahāyāna Buddhism is full of bodies. In fact the body, in its pure, pristine form, full of light, becomes itself the object of worship, and visualization of the body (of Amida among others) becomes the path to salvation.

Another reason for the success of *Ōjōyōshū* was that it represented a new kind of Buddhist text, one far more accessible to the layman. The monks had available to them sutras that had to be studied in the light of commentaries that took the form of scholastic discussions, often of the question-and-answer type, devoted to teasing out the meaning of a word or a passage with the help of liberal quotations from eminent scholastic forebears. But what was there for the layman at court who wished to know at first hand how and why Buddhism might be of importance for him personally? It is here in the late tenth century that a small revolution in attitudes occurs. We notice an increase in texts designed to open up Buddhism for the layman, texts that were obviously written in response to a demand. Yasutane’s *Nihon ōjō gokuraku ki* and Tamenori’s *Sanbōe* are perfect examples. A few years previously the monk Senkan 千觀 (918–984) had produced the first extant series of *wasan* 和讃, Buddhist hymns composed in Japanese rather than Chinese (INOUE 1971, p. 149), and Genshin’s *Ōjōyōshū* fits well into the same mould. It was above all well-organized, breaking with the usual pattern of simply following a line of a sutra with commentary. Part description, part manual, full of practical advice about how one set about a difficult but ultimately rewarding task, it imposed its own distinctive pattern on the material. At times, admittedly, it reads like a patchwork quilt of quotations and examples from previous writings, but one glance at the list of contents shows a new sense of organization.²⁸

1. Aversion to this unclean world
2. Seeking the Pure Land
3. Evidence for the Pure Land
4. The correct practice of *nenbutsu*
5. Aids to *nenbutsu*
6. *Nenbutsu* on particular occasions

²⁸ For a fuller account see ANDREWS 1973.

7. The benefits of *nenbutsu*
8. Evidence for *nenbutsu*
9. Sundry other practices
10. Question-and-answer session

The importance of *Ōjōyōshū* can be said to lie in the way that it marks the true beginning of the spread of Buddhism in Japan beyond the sangha. Not that aristocrats had been unaware of Buddhism: far from it. But Buddhism had been introduced from the very top down and was for a long time largely a matter of state sponsorship and ritual, impersonalized for all but the odd monk. There were, of course, exceptions, but by and large it had not filtered into the consciousness of the individual until this juncture, when, as we have seen, there was an increase in the private sponsorship of temples and Buddhist art, not simply for personal aggrandizement but with a definite eye to the possibility of salvation. It was to take two more centuries before “all” really meant “all,” but the principle was at least established. Both the texts of Amidism and the Chinese example had been known in Japan for two centuries, but it needed an internal impulse for such materials to be activated.

Why at this juncture? The causes of such a development are, of course, varied. It was generally accepted that the world was about to enter the Latter Days of the Law during which the Buddhist message would fade and the ability of people to respond would weaken. It was even given the specific starting date of 1052. But it could also be seen as the result of economic necessity: a response by religious organizations themselves to replace lost state support. Sponsorship was needed from private sources and such support would never have been forthcoming unless the Buddhist message had included clear reference to an offer of personal salvation in return. It would not be the first or the last time that the message was designed to fit economic conditions and demands.

After Chapter Three, *Ōjōyōshū* moves from description to manual. Although one occasionally finds Genshin being compared to Dante, it is important to note that the description of the various hells is not presented as a personalized vision, but as a truth that drew its authority from the textual tradition. The real heart of *Ōjōyōshū* lies in the practical chapters that deal with being mindful of Amida Buddha (*nenbutsu*) and how to ensure the best form of rebirth possible. Chapter Four deals with the five “gates” or methods. (i) Veneration (*reihaimon*) 禮拜門, which is little more than an act of sincere devotion performed in front of an image of Amida; (ii) Praise (*santanmon*) 讚歎門, which involves singing hymns and songs of praise; (iii) Making Vows (*saganmon*) 作願門, which is the arousal of *bodhicitta*, the desire to find

enlightenment, without which the process cannot really begin; and (iv) Visualization (*kansatsumon*) 觀察門. It is here that we are given detailed instructions as to how to practice mindfulness, interpreted as an act of contemplation very much in the fashion of Chih-i's *Mo-ho chih-kuan*. One tries visualizing the distinguishing marks of the Buddha and then one proceeds to Amida sitting on his lotus throne, flooding the universe with light. For those who cannot reach this stage, Genshin introduces a series of simpler visualizations; of the Buddha's *uṣṇīṣa* or mark on the forehead, for example. Finally, for those who cannot manage any form of visualization at all, there is the activity of constantly "calling on and keeping in mind" (*shōnen* 稱念) Amida. This is the *nenbutsu*. The use of the term *nenbutsu* in *Ōjōyōshū* is not entirely consistent: at times the context demands that it signify all activities of body and mind devoted to Amida; at times it seems reduced to the simple intoning of "Namu Amida Butsu." Genshin clearly saw this latter technique as a last resort for those who were incapable of anything else. The last gate (v) is Transference of Merit (*ekōmon* 回向門), when whatever merits have come from these practices are dedicated to the rebirth of all sentient beings rather than restricted to oneself.

Chapter Five describes various practical ways in which contemplation is to be practiced. There are seven subheadings with many quotations. Subjects covered include choosing the place for devotions, how often one should practice, the seriousness with which one should approach the exercise, how to combat sloth, and how to practice repentance. The source texts quoted here are a mixture of Pure Land texts and the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*.

Chapter Six is the section closest to the texts of our two covenants. It is subdivided into (a) intensive meditation sessions that could take anything from one day to ninety days in duration, and (b) meditation as someone is dying. This practice at the point of death is based on Amida's Vow 19 and the formula follows that suggested in the *Kuan Wu-liang-shou ching*. The rest of the chapters deal with other less important elements.

Lay Involvement in Devotionalism

Inoue Mitsusada's research has stood the test of time. In particular, he was correct in arguing that it is in this period that Buddhism finally begins a decisive shift from being a state religion imposed from above to something far more personal. One might almost speak of the "privatization" of Buddhism. This occurred at all levels, as the natural tendency to universalism within Tendai gave rise to a much greater

involvement of people other than monks. At the “street” level, of course, we have very little information, but, judging from what we know of the figure Kōya 空也 (c. 903–972), there must have been a good deal of activity. Kōya, popularly known as a “bodhisattva,” was an unofficial monk-priest who used a combination of entertainment, prayers, music, and dance to spread the message of salvation through devotion to Amida to all and sundry. It is known that he took his message through the streets of the capital and, given that he started his activity in Heian-kyō in 938, it may well be that aristocratic interest in Amidism emerged partly as a result of hearing about his activities. He eventually became properly ordained on Hieizan, but his main concern was still with the people in the city. Certainly Tamenori was sufficiently impressed to write an encomium at his death entitled *Kōya-rui* 空也誄 that praised his work and transformed him into a near-legendary figure.

At the level of the courtier, there is, of course, increasing involvement with the sponsorship of religious buildings and services as an expression of wealth and power, but there are also signs of interest at a far more personal level. Tamenori’s *Sanbōe*, which we have already used more than once, is an introduction to Buddhism for a former priestess at the Kamo shrines who had just taken a nun’s vows. Volume One deals with the Buddha, and in particular his previous lives (*jātaka*); Volume Two is ostensibly about doctrine, the second “jewel,” but in fact is a series of biographies of influential Japanese Buddhists; Volume Three, on the sangha, is a run-through of the major ceremonies throughout the year, together with a good deal of historical background information. *Sanbōe* constitutes an excellent example of the kind of fundamental knowledge, basic doctrine, and basic stories that was being asked for by members of the aristocracy *qua* individuals.

How did the emergence of Amidism affect those at court? It is important not to overstate the case. There were many other beliefs and devotions to turn to and interest was by no means exclusive, but there is good evidence to suggest that devotion to Amida, with its unusual emphasis on the need to prepare for the future and its vision of this life as a hell, became the main source of consolation on an individual level and played a central role in the process by which Buddhism finally reached inwards to affect the personal lives of each and every Japanese.²⁹

²⁹ Mimi YENGPURKAWAN (1994) warns against the dangers of equating Pure Land beliefs with the “Fujiwara style” *tout court*. Admittedly, the *Lotus Sutra*, Maitreya, and the whole panoply of esoteric figures were all objects of devotion and worship, but the emphasis in this case was nearly always on obtaining protection *in this life*. Amidism at this stage is clearly

Perhaps three examples from court circles will help. The first is Princess Senshi 選子 (964–1035), who was long tied to her duties at the Kamo shrines but who found little personal solace in Shinto ritual. We know from her collection of poetry entitled *Hosshin wakashū* 發心和歌集 (compiled in 1012, the earliest known example of such a collection) that she was a committed Buddhist who constantly fretted at not being able to increase her stock of merit through devotion. The bulk of *Hosshin wakashū* is devoted to poems that are linked to lines from the *Lotus Sutra*, and it was this sutra that gave her hope that she might achieve salvation even as a woman. But there are enough references to Amida to make it clear that his Pure Land was her ultimate goal, best symbolized by her poem: “*Omoedo imu to te iwanu koto nareba, sonata ni mukite ne o nomi zo naku*” “Though I think about it, it is taboo, a thing not to be said, and so all I can do is turn in that direction and weep.” “It” is the invocation to Amida, and the direction, of course, is west (KAMENS 1990, pp. 16–17).

At almost exactly the same time as Senshi was writing her collection, Murasaki Shikibu finishes off a letter to a friend with a note of resignation: “Why should I hesitate to say what I want to? Whatever others might say, I intend to immerse myself in reading (reciting?) sutras for Amida Buddha [*Tada Amidabutsu ni tayuminaku kyō o narai-haberamu*]. Since I have lost what little attachment I ever had for the pains that life has to offer, you might expect me to become a nun without delay. But even supposing I were to commit myself and turn my back on the world, I am certain there would be moments of irresolution before Amida came for me riding on his clouds. And thus I hesitate” (BOWRING 1996, pp. 58–59).

And lastly we have Michinaga himself. For most of his life he was clearly catholic in his observances and saw no reason to be exclusive in his devotions. The reason why he buried the sutra cylinders on Kōyasan in 1007 was so that having been reborn in Amida’s Pure Land, he would be able to return to this world in the future and listen to Maitreya expounding the *Lotus Sutra* that he (Michinaga) had buried for the express purpose; he would then become a Buddha himself. By 1019, however, as his illness grew worse, the specific references in his diary to Amida increase in frequency as he takes vows and starts to build what was to become Hōjō-ji with its magnificent Amida Hall. He died in 1028, but the very last entries in his diary are for 1021. For the first five days of the ninth month, he records nothing

marked by a fascination with death and an assumption that life is to be abjured. How the idea developed that the Pure Land lay in the here-and-now is another story.

but the number of invocations to Amida that he managed: they range from 110,000 up to a fantastic 170,000 per day (HÉRAIL 1987-91, p. 625). We know that he eventually died in terrible pain and distress, but the romanticized account of his death in *Eiga monogatari* 榮花物語 has him peacefully lying down facing west, holding onto the cords that came from a large statue of Amida, as if to reassure the reader that salvation was indeed possible.³⁰

What of ordinary men and women? We noted earlier on that the later *kakochō* contains the names of 16 novices, 24 nuns, 7 lay males and 6 lay women. Not enough is known about these people and what they represent. Paul Groner has recently shown that the category of “nun” at this time is extremely difficult to define since nunneries had changed drastically since the Nara period and there does not seem to have been an official order at all (GRONER n.d.). Women were ostensibly not allowed onto the mountain, so where did they meet? Was this the reason for placing the burial site in the western foothills? Scholars with axes to grind tend to assume these lists prove an egalitarianism of the kind we meet in later Pure Land Buddhism, but this is hard to accept. Genshin certainly continued to encourage these kinds of groups and is said to have inaugurated the *Yokawa no mukaekō*, a ritualized performance in which the coming of Amida was enacted in front of an audience and which was open to “all”; but how egalitarian could he have really been?³¹ The tightly knit nature of the covenants shows us that there was still some way to go before preparing for the Pure Land would be reduced to repeated formula and a guarantee of salvation could be offered to all. At this stage it was clearly very hard work indeed.

ABBREVIATION

ESZ *Eshin sōzu zenshū* 恵心僧都全集. 5 vols. Hieizan Senjuin Eizan Gakuin, ed. Kyoto: Shibunkaku, 1971.

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³⁰ McCULLOUGH and McCULLOUGH 1980, vol. 2, p. 763. The McCulloughs note that the description of Michinaga's final moments in fact quotes almost verbatim from the relevant passage in *Ōjōyōshū*. See also HURST 1979. Michinaga had ordered a copy of *Ōjōyōshū* for himself as early as 1005.

³¹ For the description of another such group, dedicated not to Amida but to Shaka, see HORI 1983.

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