

Article

The Esoteric Nenbutsu in Tendai

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Abstract

Until recently, our view of Chinese Buddhist history was overly influenced by sectarian categories inherited by Japanese Buddhism, which clearly distinguished Zen/Chan, Pure Land, and esoteric Buddhism (mostly Shingon 真言). Recently, scholars have begun to study syncretistic trends known as “esoteric Zen” and “esoteric *nenbutsu*.” However, the latter has so far been mostly examined within the framework of Shingon Buddhism. This paper will emphasize the importance of *nenbutsu* in the esoteric Tendai school (Taimitsu 台密), particularly in a secret ritual called “Genshi Kimyōdan” 玄旨歸命壇.

Keywords: Amida; nianfo/nenbutsu 念佛; Tendai; Taimitsu 台密; pure land; “Genshi Kimyōdan” 玄旨歸命壇

Medieval Japanese religion has long been defined by the rise of the Pure Land, Zen, and Nichiren 日蓮 schools, seen as heralds of a “new” Kamakura Buddhism. These schools undeniably played an important role, at least during the late medieval period, but by instilling a sectarian comprehension of Buddhism, they obscured the polytheistic richness of Japanese religion. The study of Pure Land Buddhism, in particular, was dominated by conceptions inherited from the Japanese academic tradition, themselves based on the sectarian visions of Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212) and Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1263), the founders of the Jōdo 淨土 and Jōdo Shinshū 淨土真宗 schools, respectively.

Recently, these conceptions have been challenged, and Japanese and Western scholars have begun to study the relationships between Zen, Pure Land Buddhism, and esoteric Buddhism (See Sanford 2004; Proffitt 2023; Sørensen 2011; Bodiford 2011; Licha 2023; Sharf 2002; Baskind 2008). These studies show that practices have always been diverse, refusing to be contained within the perimeter of a specific school or doctrine. One area of research that has quickly developed is that of the so-called Mikkyō-Zen 密教禪.¹ The same has yet to be done for the so-called “esoteric *nenbutsu*” 秘密念佛, although James Sanford and Aaron Proffitt have begun to bridge that gap (See Sanford 2004, pp. 120–38; 2020, pp. 530–60; Proffitt 2023).

The present article intends to continue that effort, by emphasizing the role played by the esoteric *nenbutsu* in esoteric Tendai (Taimitsu 台密), and most specifically in a current known as the Genshi kimyōdan 玄旨歸命壇.

1. Esoteric Nenbutsu in Shingon

By promising salvation at the end of the present life, the practice of the *nenbutsu* bypassed traditional Buddhism with its idea of numerous rebirths. In this sense, it is a form of esotericism, and the idea of an immanent Amida or pure land, or even a secret *nenbutsu* related to the breath, are only a direct consequence of this—just like the sudden awakening of Zen, the “becoming Buddha in this very body” (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成佛) in Shingon, or the fundamental awakening (*hongaku* 本覺) of Tendai.²



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In his seminal study of Pure Land Buddhism, to which I am indebted, Aaron Proffitt distinguishes different levels of meaning: Amitābha (Ch. Amituo 阿彌陀, J. Amida) as an object of devotion, the Pure Land (Sukhāvāṭi, Ch. Jingtū 淨土, J. Jōdo) as a soteriological goal, and the invocation of Amitābha/Amida (Skt. *buddhānusmṛti*, Ch. *nianfo* 念佛, J. *nenbutsu*) as a form of practice. For each of these aspects, a dual approach—relative and absolute—can be defined.

The radical reinterpretation of these three aspects is essentially the work of two Shingon masters, Kakuban 覺鑊 (1095–1143) and Dōhan 道範 (1178–1252).³ From the ultimate standpoint which Kakuban claims as his own, Amida is none other than Vairocana. He represents one of Dainichi's five Knowledges, the Knowledge of Insight (*pratya-veksanājñāna*, J. *myōkanzacchi* 妙觀察智), whose role is to lead beings to Enlightenment by resolving all doubts.

Kakuban's transformation of the mantra—from a simple method of producing the mind of awakening (*bodhicitta*), through a reduction to the phonic aspect (the sound of the mantra), to the pneumatic aspect (the breath)—is radical, transforming physiological breath into a profound, even ultimate spiritual activity.

Amida is, as it were, the navel of the breath, its source, the principle of alternation between inhalation and exhalation. Death is exhalation (the last breath, as in the French “expiration”), birth is inhalation, the advent of breath (in French “inspiration”; the polysemy of French couple “expiration/inspiration” is more suggestive). No wonder Amida is sometimes defined as the “intermediate being” (*antarābhava*, J. *chūu* 中有) that exists between death and rebirth, or the basic (“storehouse”) consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*, J. *arayashiki* 阿賴耶識), or again the primordial breath (*yuanqi* 元氣). We are dealing here with a kind of pneumatology. The breath played an important role in Western antiquity (*pneuma*, *spiritus*) and in Asia (See Libbrecht 1990, pp. 42–62). In India *prāṇa* signifies the vital force. From the time of the Vedas to the emergence and flourishing of Tantra, breath control (*prāṇāyāma*) was an essential part of the yoga that leads to liberation. In esoteric Buddhism, it goes hand in hand with meditation (*dhyāna*). *Prāṇa* was identified with air, but also with wind, one of the five Tantric elements. Such conceptions found a fertile ground in China, where *qi* 氣 (a term usually translated as or vapor or energy) was said to be the basic cosmic constituent of all things. A commentary on the *Daode jing* 道德經 attributed to Heshang Gong 河上公 (“The Riverside Elder”) explains that the passage about “opening and closing Heaven's gate” refers to the breathing through the nostrils. The Daoist adept must learn to control the five breaths (*qi* 氣) that circulate through the body. These five *qi* are the vital breaths of the five viscera, and they are conceived of as deities.⁴

The reinterpretation of Amida as breath raises the question of whether the logical sequence from the sound or letter A to the intonation of Amida's name is anything other than a way to link the *nenbutsu* to an older pneumological technique. As a result, inhalation and exhalation become the functions of the primordial sound A, and constitute a spontaneous and permanent form of the “contemplation of the Letter A” (*ajikan* 阿字觀).

Another major aspect of Kakuban's thought is his interpretation of the translation of *namu* 南無 (in *Namu Amida butsu* 南無阿彌陀佛) as *kimyō* 歸命, “hail,” literally “returning to life”, which makes Amida the Buddha of life (as already suggested by his alias, Muryōju 無量壽, “Infinite Life.”

Furthermore, inhalation and exhalation are said to correspond to the two great mandalas of Shingon. But this dualism, with its implicit gendering, led to conceive breathing in terms of sexuality and embryology—as we will see in the case of the Genshi kimyōdan 玄旨歸命壇 in Tendai esotericism.

The esoteric *nenbutsu* further developed with Dōhan, author of a text entitled *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* 秘密念佛鈔, which has been the subject of a detailed study by Proffitt (See

Proffitt 2023). As Dōhan was contemporary of Hōnen and Shinran, he had to consider the emergence of what Sanford has called the “normative doctrine” of the Pure Land. He included the latter in a classificatory system, but at the lowest level. For him, the Amida of the Jōdo schools was simply the lowest of Vairocana’s three bodies, the so-called body of metamorphosis (*nirmānakāya*, J. *ōjin* 応身). He thus identified Amida with Dainichi. After Dōhan, the esoteric nenbutsu seems to have gradually declined in Shingon, particularly after the great “cleansing” of Kōyasan 高野山 performed by Yūkai 宥快 (1345–1416) in 1413, which drove the ascetics known as *hijiri* 聖 out of the mountain, and the destruction of Negoroji 根来寺 by the daimyō Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 in 1585 (See Sanford 2020, p. 550; Proffitt 2023, p. 139).

The Guharijiki Amida

We should mention in this context a little-known form of Amida, the Guharijiki Amida 紅頗梨阿弥陀 (Red Crystal Amida), who was the main deity of a secret Shingon ritual aimed at removing sins). In this representation, a five-pronged vajra is laid on top of an eight-petaled white lotus, a single-pronged vajra is erected vertically on top of that, and Amida sits in a cross-legged position with his right foot up on a red lotus throne placed on top of that. He is depicted in a large moon-shaped circle with a double circle light behind him, wearing a jeweled crown with the five Buddhas of the Vajra Realm, his body and robes both radiating red Lotus light, and making the Amida mudra in front of his stomach⁵ (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Guharijiki Amida. In Kyōto shiritsu geijutsu daigaku geijutsu shiryōkan 京都市立芸術資料館, *Bukkyō zuzō shūsei* 佛教図像聚成, no. 1126.

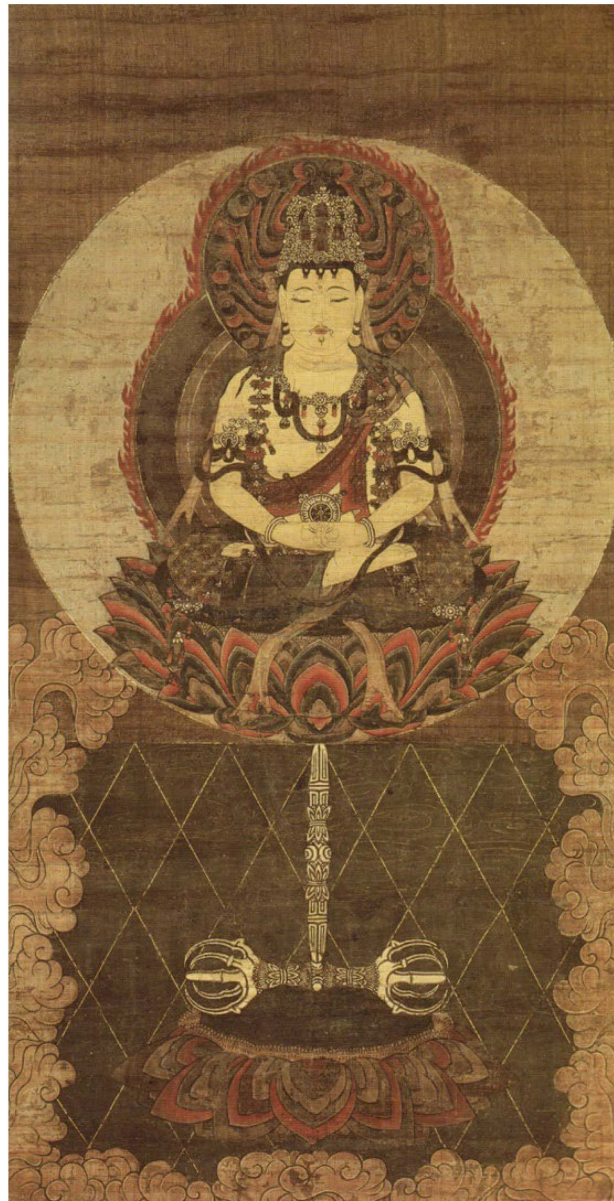


Figure 2. Guharijiki Amida. Tokyo National Museum.

In Indian Tantra, the vajra and lotus are commonly perceived as symbols of the male and sexual organs. In an oral tradition recorded in the *Sanbō-in daiji* 三寶院大事 (in the *Henchi-in ki* 遍知院記), this sexual symbolism is expressly formulated as follows:

“The samaya form of Amida in the lotus flower samādhi has the form of two horizontal [three-pronged vajras], on which is a red lotus flower, the stem of which is a vertical one-pronged vajra. These horizontal [vajras] represent the form of our own father and mother lying in union, actively procreating. The one-pronged vajra is the “root” [i. e. sexual organ] of the father and the [red lotus] flower is the “root” of the mother. This is why it is said that the union of the two roots realizes the great affair of the Buddha.” (Quoted in [Iyanaga Nobumi 2020](#), pp. 183–84)

In the diagrammatic representation of this *honzon*, on top of the vajras is a lotus flower with a full moon, inside of which is a five-colored letter A (which represents then the birth of a new being through the sexual union of man and woman. A commentary explains that

through such ritualized sexual union, one can realize the “great affair” of the Buddha and eliminate at once all the defilements produced by false thoughts (see Figure 3).

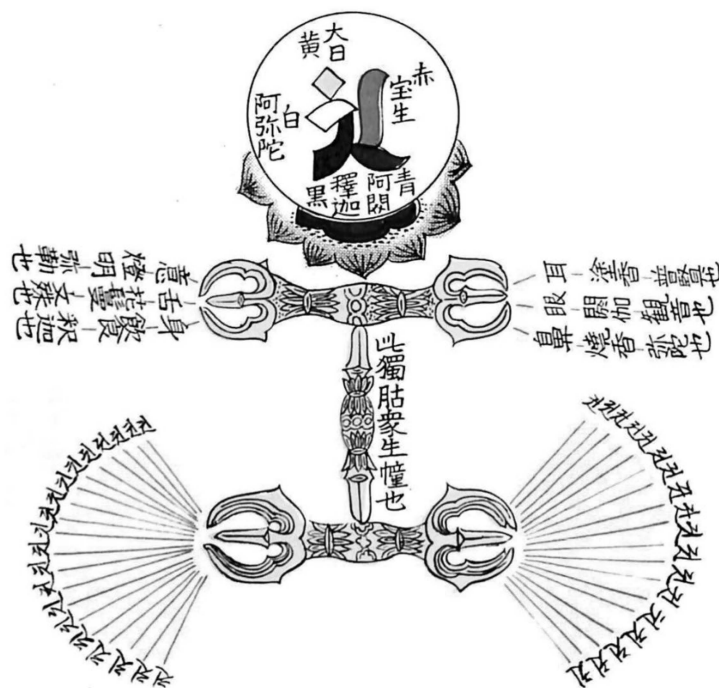


Figure 3. Main deity of the Tachikawa-ryū (symbolic form). In Mizuhara Gyōhei, *Jakyō Tachikawa-ryū no kenkyū*, 1923.

2. The Esoteric Amida in Tendai

The Tendai priest Genshin 源信 (942–1017), the author of the *Ōjō yōshū* 往生要集, is often presented as a precursor of the normative Pure land teaching. Yet he also gives an esoteric interpretation of Amida’s name in terms of the Buddha’s Three Bodies and the contemplation of the letter A (*ajikan*), as well as the Three Truths of Tendai: “A is Emptiness; Mi is the Provisional; Da is the Middle Way.”⁶ In his magnum opus, the *Keiran shūyōshū* 溪嵐拾葉集, Kōshū (1276–1350) also mentions four types of *nenbutsu*, among which the secret *nenbutsu*.⁷ But it is especially in a branch of Tendai known as the Genshi kimyōdan that speculation about Amida and the *nenbutsu* experienced a revival.

2.1. The Genshi Kimyōdan

The name Genshi kimyōdan refers to two initiation rituals, the *genshidan* 玄旨壇 (altar of profound purport) and the *kimyōdan* 歸命壇 (altar of returning to life), that developed based on a radical interpretation of *hongaku* 本覺 dualism in medieval Tendai (See Hazama Jikō [1953] 1977, vol. 2, pp. 133–88; Misaki Ryōshū 1988; Sonehara Satoshi 1996, pp. 57–78; Stone 1999, pp. 130–35; Sanford 2004, pp. 552–53; Bodiford 2006, pp. 309–30). The repression of the Genshi kimyōdan came after the Tendai monk Reikū Kōken 靈空光謙 (1652–1739), a reformer of the Tendai vinaya, wrote his *Repudiation of Heresies* (*Hekija-hen* or *Byakuja-hen* 闢邪篇, 1689), a work in which he denounced the licentious nature of the secret initiations performed on the Genshi kimyōdan altars.⁸ Subsequently all the initiations ceased and most of the texts related to that branch were burned. However, this ritual was arguably perfectly orthodox, and it reflected among other things the importance of Pure Land thought and practice in Tendai. At any rate, because of this, very few sources remain, and the only edited sources are the *Genshidan hishō* 玄旨壇秘抄 (copied ca. 1614) and a collection of related documents annexed by Uesugi Bunshū 上杉文秀 (1863–1936) to his work on the history of Tendai (1935; reprinted 1972).⁹

2.2. Amida and Matarajin

James Sanford describes the Amida triad on the Genshi kimyōdan altar, but notes that the main deity (*honzon* 本尊) is no longer Amida, but Matarajin, a god “considered a form of Amida, in fact possibly the original form.” (See [Sanford 2020](#), p. 552) Actually, while Matarajin is the *honzon* of the first part of this twofold ritual (the *genshidan*), Amida remains that of the second part (the *kimyōdan*). In medieval representations, Matarajin is usually accompanied by two young acolytes whose song and dance are allegedly fraught with sexual meaning.

According to the *Keiran shūyōshū*, while Ennin was aboard ship returning to Japan, this deity spoke to him in empty space, saying, “Those who do not worship me will not be able to achieve rebirth [in the Pure Land].”¹⁰ Matarajin was thus initially a god of obstacles (*shōgejin*), reminiscent of the god Sanbō Kōjin 三宝荒神, who eventually turned into a protector. Yet like Kōjin, Matarajin was eventually placated and enshrined as a protector of the “Hall of Constant Walking” (*Jōgyōdō* 常行堂), a place consecrated to the practice of nenbutsu. According to the *Jōgyōdō raiyuki* 常行堂来由記 of Kōryūji 広隆寺 (Uzumasa, Kyoto): “An image of Matarajin 摩多羅神 was enshrined at the *ushirodo* 後戸 to protect the nenbutsu.” (See [Hattori Yukio 1973](#)). The linkage between Amida and Matarajin is important, because this former demon, having become a protector, fused with Amida and came to represent the ambivalent nature of the latter.

2.3. Amida as Breath

In the *Genshidan hishō*, “returning to life” is understood as realizing the threefold contemplation in a single mind and manifesting oneself as the triple-bodied Tathāgata of original enlightenment. During the initial phase, the *genshidan* initiation, when master and disciple enter the inner ritual area, the master says to the disciple: “The breath that enters through the nose and mouth is the descent of Amida. The breath coming out is the Rebirth [into pure earth] ... Furthermore, think that the breath that enters and leaves through your nostrils is Kannon and Seishi; the breath that enters and leaves through your mouth is Amida.”¹¹

In the second phase of the ritual, the *kimyōdan* initiation, the initiate is led blindfolded into the ritual area and made to sit before the altar. He is instructed to contemplate his breath as Amida:

“On entering the place of practice, [the initiate] should be taught that the breath inhaled through the nose and mouth is Amida’s coming to welcome him (*raigō* 来迎), and the exhaled [breath] his rebirth] into the Pure Land (*ōjō* 往生). He should think that the breath exhaled and inhaled through his nostrils corresponds to [Amida’s attendant bodhisattvas,] Kannon and Seishi; the breath exhaled and inhaled through his mouth, to the Tathāgata Amida. When he grasps this, then at each moment, he is welcomed by the Buddha, and, at each moment, he is reborn into the Pure Land.”¹²

When the blindfold is removed, the initiate is told that he is identical with Amida and that the Pure Land is right here. The identification of Amida with the breath links the *kimyōdan* 帰命檀 ritual to broader streams of esoteric nenbutsu thought and practice that had developed earlier in medieval Tendai, Shingon, and Pure Land lineages, but it pushed them one step further.

Breath is an automatic activity. The nenbutsu, when identified with breath, thus becomes itself a spontaneous activity: it is Amida who breathes into (or through) us (and inspires us), not we who invoke him. This is a far cry from the traditional opposition of Self Power (*jiriki* 自力) and Other Power (*tariki* 他力) in the “normative” Pure Land teaching, emanating from a larger Self, the divinity or Buddha-nature within us.

In Mikkyō, the breath is also related to the vital principle called “human yellow” (*ninnō* 人黄). This human yellow is said to be the *hun* and *po* souls (魂魄) of beings. Either it becomes the in-coming and out-going breath that sustains their life, or it goes down [in the body to become] the seeds of impregnation, which will in turn make the embryo’s body.¹³ In China, the “union of breaths” (*heqi* 和氣) refers to sexual practices that were condemned by Daoists and Buddhists alike, but were nonetheless of great religious importance. Here, we can already see that the breath is linked not only to pneumatology, but also to embryology—a dominant feature of esoteric Buddhism.

2.4. Amida and Embryology

In esoteric Buddhist speculation, the two basic syllables A (symbolizing the female) and HŪM (symbolizing the male), forming the mantra OM, are identified with inhalation and exhalation. An anonymous Edo period text, the *Aun jigi* 阿吽字義, explains for instance that the voice of the newborn infant is nothing but the merging of the two parental breaths:

“The essence of yin and yang, when man (father) and woman (mother) unite, rides the wind or breath and descends from the sun and moon into the mother’s womb. This wind or breath is none other than Amida, who is further defined as the consciousness of the intermediate being (*antarābhava*, J. *chūu* 中有) that descends into the womb at the time of birth.”¹⁴

The practitioner contemplates in his heart the red and white forms of the sun and moon discs and fuses them together. This fusion is imagined as a “clear, round lunar disk” symbolizing the non-duality of principle and knowledge, as well as that of the two sections of the Womb and Vajra realms. But it is also the embryo that has just been created, for these two imaginary red and white discs are also the red and white drops that symbolize female blood and male semen, respectively.

Then, inside this lunar disk, the practitioner visualizes the “consciousness” that resides there. This consciousness is none other than the eighth consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*), or the ninth consciousness (*amala-vijñāna*), its purified aspect perceived as a distinct consciousness. This consciousness is the unique, non-dual buddha Dainichi who resides at the heart of the two great mandalas of Shingon. The two red and white drops are also identified with the two buddhas Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna 多宝仏 sitting side by side inside the Jeweled Stūpa of the *Lotus Sūtra*. More specifically, the moment when Śākyamuni enters the stūpa to join Prabhūtaratna is perceived as that of conception, and the Jeweled Stūpa itself is thus likened to the maternal womb.¹⁵

Embryological symbolism spread to the Pure Land school, through a trend known as *hiji hōmon* 秘事法門 (“Gate of the Law of Secret Affairs”), which Rennyo 蓮如 (1415–1499) denounced as a “fearsome heresy”. But unlike the Tachikawa-ryū and the Genshi kimyōdan, the *hiji hōmon* survived repression and continued well into the Edo period (See Sanford 2020, pp. 555–58).

2.5. Amida and the Stars

Another characteristic of the Genshi kimyōdan initiation is its linkage of the seven stars of the Northern Dipper 北斗七星 (our Ursa Major) with the worship of Amida and Matarajin. The latter is sometimes represented with the seven stars above him. The final phase of the *kimyōdan* ritual was conducted outside at dawn, when the morning star (Venus) appears. A large mirror was placed on a round altar. The master took it up to reflect the seven stars and then had the initiate do likewise.¹⁶ The *Genshidan hishō* reminds us that it is when Venus appeared to him at dawn that the Bodhisattva obtained ultimate awakening and became the Buddha. This ritual thus reflects the importance of the Northern Dipper in Tendai. According to Genshi kimyōdan texts, the spirits of the seven stars

descend to animate the union of male and female fluids during the sexual act, thereby allowing the conception of a new person, and return to the heavens at the time of that person's death.¹⁷

According to the *Genshidan hishō*, “The seven stars are called the ‘stars of the Three terraces.’”¹⁸ The seven stars of the Northern Dipper are identified here with the so-called Three terraces (Santai 三台), a neighboring constellation made of six stars forming three pairs (the upper, middle and lower terraces). The toponym Tiantaishan 天台山 that gave its name to the Tiantai/ Tendai school is said to be that of the mountain where this Santai constellation descended.

The Three terraces were also identified with the three *hun* 魂, the souls that make up the “celestial” part of the human psyche. They are finally identified with the three asterisms: the sun, the moon and the stars (a collective term represented by the planet, or more accurately the planetary deity) Venus (Myōjō 明星).¹⁹ The three asterisms are in turn identified with the Three Truths (*santai* 三諦) of Tendai (Emptiness, the Provisional, and the Middle 空諦, 假諦, 中諦). In this scheme, the sun (*yang*) corresponds to the truth of the Void, the moon (*yin*) to the truth of the Provisional, and the stars (or Venus) to the Middle.²⁰ Thus, human beings are born from the fusion of Three terraces and the seven stars of the Northern Dipper. When they die, their three *hun* souls 三魂 and seven *po* souls 七魄 return to the stars. As the *Genshidan hishō* puts it, “all beings are born from the stars and return to the stars.”²¹ The sun, moon and Venus are thus identified with the Amida triad (Amida, Kannon, and Seishi), as well as with the Matarajin triad formed by Matarajin and his two young acolytes.

The Middle Way symbolized by Venus is illustrated by the exegesis of the planet's name, Myōjō 明星, (“shining star”), whose first character 明 breaks down into “sun” and “moon”, giving the reading of its name as “star of the sun and moon.” It implies that the sun and moon are encompassed by Venus, which thus comes to symbolize the non-duality of the Middle Way.²² This duality of the sun and moon is also represented by the two buddhas Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna in the Jeweled Stūpa, a nondual stūpa that is in this way implicitly identified with Venus (and Amida).²³ In the view of the Genshi Kimyōdan, therefore, returning to the Three Terraces and the Seven Stars is the same as returning to the Buddha of Infinite Life (Muryōjūbutsu 無量寿佛, that is, Amida) who is our “fundamental ground” (*honji* 本地).

2.6. Amida Outside the Monastery Walls

The esoteric Amida did not remain confined to monastic speculation; its image soon spread beyond the monastery walls into Japanese culture, often through Shugendō 修験道, a mountain cult strongly influenced by Mikkyō. This form of Amida is also found in a text by the Nō theorist Konparu Zenchiku 金春禅竹 (1405–1468), the *Meishukushū* 明宿集. Zenchiku describes “the ultimate essence of Okina” in terms of the three bodies of the Buddha, symbolized by the three buddhas Dainichi, Amida, and Śākyamuni, and by the three Okina performances known as Okina shikisanban: “As for the Okina dance, one sounds out the drums and shakes the tinkling bells. These are the actions of Amida coming to welcome the souls. [The] sounds of the bells are the seed-syllables of Amida and his two accompanying bodhisattvas. They must not be performed carelessly.”²⁴

Okina's dance is identified with Amida's coming to welcome the faithful at the time of death and lead them to his Pure Land. However, despite references to Dainichi and the esoteric Amida, it is the exoteric Amida that comes into play here. This passage, a mixture of esoteric and exoteric Buddhism, reflects the growing influence of the Pure Land school at the time of Zenchiku. But this Okina is an ambivalent character, whose dark, demonic aspect is identified with the god Kōjin 荒神 and with a rather mysterious astral divinity,

Shukujin 宿神, who is said to reside within every being.²⁵ This Amida of the “reverse” (*ura no Amida* 裏の阿弥陀), symbolized by the “black” Okina, Sanbasō 三番叟, gives Tendai doctrine a bifocal depth, a concrete ambivalence that neither Shingon metaphysics nor the normative doctrine of the Pure Land school had.

In Shugendō, particularly at Mount Gassan 月山, one of the three sacred mountains of Dewa (Dewa sanzán 出羽三山), Amida was the original ground (*honji*) of a particular form of Kōjin named Kanayagogami 金屋子神, a god of blacksmiths. The relationship between Amida and metallurgy is overdetermined, since in the analogical thinking of esoteric Buddhism, Amida is the buddha of the western direction, and Metal is the element corresponding to that direction. This identification seems linked to the theories of the Genshi kimyōdan. The process of refining raw metal into steel for swords was compared to the ritual process that transformed the demonic Sanbō Kōjin (as expression of the Three Poisons: greed, anger, and delusion) into a Tathāgata-Kōjin (Nyorai Kōjin 如来荒神) identified with Amida. In other words, forging swords was the materialization of the Tendai teaching according to which “Sanbō Kōjin is the three truths.” (See Suzuki Kenkō 2023, p. 145). This could be interpreted as the purification of a demonic activity (forging swords, instruments of death) by Buddhism under the aegis of Amida, but more precisely the Amida of the Genshi kimyōdan.

In many respects, the Genshi kimyōdan simply reiterated ideas initially developed by Kakuban and Dōhan. However, while clearly placing Amida at the center of its doctrine, it did not adopt, as Dōhan did, a polemical attitude towards the “normative teaching” of Hōnen and Shinran. It was part of a broader movement centered on the secret *nenbutsu*, but it contributed to it in an original fashion, by introducing embryological and astrological aspects, as well as the worship of an ambivalent deity, Matarajin. The development of that cult outside Tendai led to the emergence of a new figure, that of the astral deity Shukujin, in the work of Zenchiku. With Zenchiku, Amida as astral deity (*shukujin*) became a supreme Janus-faced deity manifested in the dual form of Okina and Kōjin.²⁶

While taking up the esoteric notion of Amida as breath, esoteric Tendai has added astral and embryological elements. Linking a physiological discourse inherited from tantric yoga, an astrological discourse largely inherited from Daoism, and the new deities of a “medieval mythology” (*chūsei shinwa* 中世神話) that combined the classical myths of the *Kojiki* 古事記 and *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 with esoteric Buddhist ideas, Tendai esotericism, as expressed through the Genshi kimyōdan, touched a deeper phenomenological vein beyond the history of medieval Japanese ideas and practices. By emphasizing both the physical and metaphysical character of breath (symbolized by Amida), it revealed a fundamental dimension of our being: namely, that the air we breathe, by becoming our life-breath, constitutes our very interiority, while it is also the element we share with other living beings. Breathing opens us up to the outside world, yet it is also through breathing that the world penetrates us. It thus characterizes our reciprocal imbrication with the world (See Coccia 2023). In this way, breath precedes any distinction between mind and body, subject and object, and it is a perfect symbol of non-duality. Amida, as the primordial breath identified with the “intermediary being,” is thus both the breath beyond the (last) breath and the breath prior to the (first) breath, the link between one life to the next.

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Notes

- ¹ This development has been permitted by the publication of the Zen-related texts from the Ōsu Bunko collection in Nagoya, in particular works by Yōsai 榮西, Enni Ben'en 圓爾辯圓 (1202–1280) and Chikotsu Daie 癡兀大慧 (1229–1312), in Abe Yasurō 2013–2018. On this collection, see (Sueki Fumihiko 2022, pp. 69–91). On Esoteric Zen, see (Licha 2023); on Yōsai specifically, see (Dolce and Mano 2011, pp. 827–34).
- ² On Tendai *hongaku* thought, see (Stone 1999).
- ³ On Kakuban, see (van der Veere 1998, 2000; Sanford 2004; Andreeva 2019). On Dōhan, see (Proffitt 2013, 2023; van den Broucke 2002). Kakuban and Dōhan were influenced by the Shingon priest Jichihan 実範 of Nakanokawa Temple 中川寺. On Jichihan, see (Buijsters 1999) and (Satō Tetsuhei 1979, pp. 500–24).
- ⁴ See *Daode jing*, ch. 10, “Heaven’s gate opens and closes”; and *Laozi Heshang gong zhangju* 老子河上公章句: “Heaven’s gate corresponds to the nostrils. To take in a deep breath is ‘opening.’ To rest after this is ‘closing.’ This refers to exhalation and inhalation.” See (Reid 2016). On Heaven’s gate, see also (Fabrizio Pregadio 2008, pp. 978, 994–95).
- ⁵ See (Tomabechi Seiichi 1995); on the esoteric Amida, see also (Inagaki Hisao 1992, pp. 1104–95).
- ⁶ See (Reischauer 1930; Rhodes 2018). The term “*mikkyō*” (esoteric Buddhism) is applied mainly to a type of ritual involving an identification of the practitioner with a buddha or a deity, using special sounds (*mantra*, *dhāraṇī*), gestures (*mudrā*), visualizations, and implements (*mandala*, *vajra*).
- ⁷ T 76, 2410: 551a3.
- ⁸ Woodblock edition published by Taishū shodō 台宗書堂, 1694; reprinted in 1698; owned by Taishō University Library, Tokyo. See also (Bodiford 2006; Kawamura Minato 2008, pp. 174–80).
- ⁹ See *Genshidan hishō*, in (Mitamura Genryū 1915, pp. 18–122); and (Uesugi Bunshū 1973, vol. 2, pp. 830–911).
- ¹⁰ *Keiran shūyōshū*, T 76, 2410: 632c. See also (Faure 2015, pp. 299–310).
- ¹¹ See *Kimyōdan denju no koto*, in (Kushida Ryōkō 1965, pp. 222–23).
- ¹² See *Kimyōdan denju no koto* 婦命壇伝授事, in (Kushida Ryōkō 1965, p. 221).
- ¹³ On this question, see (Iyanaga Nobumi 2015, pp. 344–419).
- ¹⁴ See (Mizuhara Gyōhei 1968, p. 17). On the *antarābhava*, see (Bareau 1979, pp. 558–63). On the identification of the intermediary being with Amida, see the *Saigo kanjō jōgyō shin'yō hō* 最後灌頂常行心要法, a text attributed to the Shingon priest Shōkaku 勝覚 (1057–1129), in (Ogawa Toyoo 2014, pp. 249–50).
- ¹⁵ *Genshidan hishō*, *ibid.* 63b–64a.
- ¹⁶ *Genshidan hishō*, 92b; see also *Kimyōdan denju no koto*, in (Uesugi Bunshū 1973, pp. 865b–66a).
- ¹⁷ *Genshidan hishō*, 90b–91a; and *Kimyōdan denju no koto*, in (Uesugi Bunshū 1973, p. 866a).
- ¹⁸ *Genshidan hishō*, *ibid.* 95.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 78b.
- ²⁰ In the *Kimyōdan denju no koto*, however, the star [Venus] is identified with the truth of the Provisional, and the moon with the Middle Way. See (Uesugi Bunshū 1973, p. 865).
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 78b–79a.
- ²² *Genshidan hishō*, 92b, 94b.
- ²³ *Genshidan hishō*, 79a.
- ²⁴ See *Meishukushū*, in (Omote Akira and Itō Masayoshi 1969, p. 279); and translation in (Pinnington 1998, p. 510).
- ²⁵ *Meishukushū*, 104a.
- ²⁶ On this question, see (Faure 2025).

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