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Just Open Your Mouth and Say “A”: A-Syllable Practice for the Time of Death in Early Medieval Japan

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JAPANESE BUDDHISTS OF THE EARLY medieval period often sought to die in a ritualized fashion that would encourage right mindfulness in their last moments. One's thoughts at the time of death were held to exert a particular force over one's postmortem fate; persons who died with a mind calmly focused on the Buddha were believed thereby to escape the miserable cycle of *samsara* and achieve “birth in a pure land” (*ōjō*, 往生), where one's eventual attainment of buddhahood would be assured. Such exemplary deaths are described in great numbers in *ōjōden* (“accounts of birth in the Pure Land,” 往生傳) and other Buddhist hagiographical literature of the latter Heian period (794–1185), while texts of instruction for deathbed practice (*rinjū gyōgisho*, 臨終行儀書) offer recommendations for how practice in one's last days or hours should be conducted. The most sought-after postmortem destination was the Pure Land of Utmost Bliss (Skt. *Sukhāvatī*; Jpn. *Gokuraku jōdō*, 極樂淨土), the realm of the Buddha Amida (Skt. *Amitābha*, *Amitāyus*), said to lie billions of worlds away in the western quadrant of the cosmos. The scholar-monk Genshin (源信, 942–1017), whose treatise *ōjō yōshū* (Essentials of Birth in the Pure Land) contains the first set of instructions for deathbed practice compiled in Japan, recommended contemplation at life's end of Amida's physical marks; his radiant light, embracing the devotee; and his welcoming descent (*raigō*, 來迎), together with his host of attendant bodhisattvas, to escort the dying person to his pure land. Along with his emphasis on visualization practice, Genshin also considered the chanting of Amida's name to be an important aid to deathbed contemplation and especially efficacious in one's final moments, far more so than at ordinary times.¹ And indeed, the chanted *nenbutsu*, or invocation of Amida's name (“*Namu Amida-butsu*”), quickly gained currency as a deathbed practice. However, as we know from *ōjōden*, biographical notices, court diaries, and tale literature, practice

in one's final days or hours was by no means confined to the chanted nenbutsu; a great range of practices was recommended and employed at life's end, whether to achieve birth in Amida's Pure Land or in some other superior realm. This essay will consider those recommendations surviving from the late Heian and Kamakura periods (1185–1333) for use of the esoteric Buddhist A-syllable contemplation (*ajikan*, 阿字觀) as a deathbed practice. A-syllable contemplation was decidedly a minority practice in the deathbed context, where references to it are short and few. Yet these brief notices introduced into consideration of life's final moments a logic and set of assumptions radically different than those underlying the mainstream discourse of "dying and going to the Pure Land" and thus complicate our picture of early medieval attitudes toward death. Before addressing this topic, however, let us first review the general features of A-syllable practice.

THE A-SYLLABLE CONTEMPLATION

Ajikan, the A-syllable contemplation, has been described by one Shingon scholar as "the most concise and versatile of Mikkyō's hundreds of ritual practices."² Like many esoteric meditations, it is aimed at realizing the unity of the adept with the dharma-body of the cosmic buddha, Dainichi Nyorai (大日如来, Skt. Mahāvairocana Tathāgata). The A-syllable is a *shuji* (Skt. *bīja*, 種子) mantra, a mantra consisting of a single "seed" syllable, and is thus representative of a range of practices employing letters or sounds as objects of meditation and visualization, practices whose origins may be traced to the pre-Buddhist Indian Vedic tradition. The A-syllable appears in a number of Mahayana sutras, where it carries the meanings of primal origin, the universal ground of phenomena, and the ultimately inexpressible nature of reality. As Richard Payne has shown, these meanings derive from the A-syllable's function in Sanskrit phonology and grammar: as the first element of the Sanskrit syllabary, the primordial vibration from which the universe arose, it is associated with the origin of things; as a vowel sound integral to all other Sanskrit syllables, it denotes the universal or all-pervasive; and, as a negative prefix, it suggests the ineffability of the ultimate reality.³ In the esoteric Buddhist tradition (Jpn. Mikkyō, 密教), it is commonly identified with the "originally unborn" (Skt. *ādyanutpāda*; Jpn. *honpushō*, 本不生).⁴

Kūkai (空海, 774–835), revered as the founder of the Japanese esoteric Shingon school, explained that the A-syllable, like all mantras, comprises the three aspects of voice (*shō*, 聲), word or letter (*ji*, 字), and true aspect (*jissō*, 實相). As “voice,” it is the sound produced when one opens one’s mouth and exhales. As “word,” it is the name of the dharma-body buddha, and the meaning of the dharma-body is the unborn, which is the true aspect of all things.⁵ In actual practice, “voice” means intoning the letter A on the outbreath, while “letter” involves contemplating the written form of the A-syllable, usually in the Siddham orthography and often depicted atop a lotus blossom on a white moon disk. The A-syllable may either be written out as a *honzon* (本尊) or icon to be used as an object of contemplation, or it may be visualized internally. And “true aspect” corresponds to contemplating the meaning of A as the originally unborn. Thus, despite the primarily ideational associations of such English words as “contemplation” or “meditation,” *ajikan*, like most esoteric practices, involves all “three mysteries” (*sanmitsu*, 三密) of body, speech, and mind, the three avenues by which the practitioner aligns his or her actions, words, and thoughts with those of the cosmic buddha and thus manifests awakening.⁶

The earliest instructions for A-syllable contemplation produced in Japan are found in the *Ajikan yōjin kuketsu* (阿字觀用心口決, Oral Transmissions Concerning Instructions for A-syllable Contemplation) attributed to Kūkai’s disciple Jichie or Jitsue (實慧, 786–847), which is said to be the basis of subsequent instruction manuals for this practice.⁷ Altogether, there are more than a hundred extant texts concerning A-syllable contemplation, along with a considerable body of commentary, and a number of interpretations and variations may be found.⁸ Some versions of the meditation involve contraction and expansion exercises in which, coordinating one’s visualization with the breath, one envisions the A-syllable alternately contracting and entering one’s breast and then expanding to fill the practice hall and even the universe itself, thus realizing the originally unborn as identical to oneself and all sentient beings.

Association of the A-syllable with the sound of the exhaled breath helped to characterize it as a naturally inherent mantra, and thus, a particularly apt representation of the dharma-body that manifests itself as all phenomena. This theme is developed in the work of Kakuban (覺鑊, 1095–1143), the Heian-period systematizer of Kūkai’s thought who

is also known as the founder of the “new doctrine” (*shingi*) school of Shingon. Kakuban writes:

From the moment you are born into this world crying “A!,” whenever you are delighted you laugh “A!,” and whenever you are sad you grieve “A!” There is not a single occasion when you do not say “A!” This A is the seed [mantra] representing the natural principle endowed with the virtue of the dharma nature. Thus all sorts of sounds and voices [produced by] any phenomenal existence, either good or evil, or [by] any non-sentient existence, such as the land, mountains, rivers, the earth, sand, pebbles, as well as the birds and beasts, are nothing other than the natural *dhāraṇīs* of the letter A.⁹

In the late Heian and Kamakura periods, simplified forms of A-syllable contemplation were developed, along with claims that this practice is complete and perfect, containing all merits within itself and enabling the realization of buddhahood within a very short time. Kakuban, for example, who wrote extensively on A-syllable contemplation, says,

The three poisons and ten evils will change into the merits of the maṇḍala. The four *pārājika* offenses and five heinous deeds will transform and return to the secret practices of yoga. The hundred and sixty deluded attachments, without being cut off, will end of themselves; the eighty-four thousand defilements, without being countered, will at once expire. [The practice to achieve buddhahood requiring] three incalculable *kalpas* is condensed into half a thought-moment; the extended practices of the six *pāramitās* are encompassed within [this] single [A-syllable] contemplation. The dark sleep of delusion and samsara is now forever ended; the moon of enlightened wisdom and nirvana here for the first time appears. Those of shallow contemplation and limited practice shall, without discarding their present body, achieve the highest grade of superior birth in the Pure Land, while those of deep cultivation and great assiduity shall, without transforming their mind, become great radiant Dainichi of the realm of Esoteric Splendor. In its ease of cultivation and realization, no path could surpass this practice. But what dharma could be more difficult to encounter?¹⁰

Similarly, the Shingon monk Chidō (智道, fl. latter thirteenth century) writes:

Because all the doctrines preached in the hundreds and thousands of sutras and treatises in their entirety are encompassed by this one syllable [A], reciting this one syllable produces the same amount of merit as reading the entire Buddhist canon. . . . Even the merit produced by reciting without any knowledge is no trivial amount. The amount of merit produced by adding to one's recitation of this syllable even one instant of belief in the principle of the unborn, therefore, could not be explained completely even after infinite *kalpas*.¹¹

Such claims are strikingly similar to those put forth by the so-called "single-practice" movements of the Kamakura period. Hōnen (1133–1212), teacher of the exclusive nenbutsu, and his followers maintained that simply chanting the name of Amida Buddha with faith is alone sufficient to achieve birth in Amida's Pure Land. In similar fashion, Nichiren (1222–1282) and his disciples asserted that the *daimoku* or title of the *Lotus Sūtra* contains all the Buddha's practices and resulting virtues and that chanting the *daimoku*, "*Namu Myōhō-rence-kyō*," enables the direct realization of buddhahood. Nor were such claims limited to the new sectarian movements of the time. Within the Buddhist establishment as well, other practices were in some cases promoted as being perfect and complete, containing all possible merits; easy to perform; and quickly resulting in liberation. One example is the "contemplation of suchness" (*shinnyōkan*), in which the practitioner simply cultivates, in all actions of daily life, the mental habit of regarding self, others, and indeed all phenomena as identical to suchness.¹² A-syllable contemplation was similarly recommended, by Kakuban and others, as a simple, self-sufficient practice. It never achieved the popularity of the nenbutsu or the *daimoku*, in part because it was never institutionalized as the signature practice of a particular sect; in addition, as Payne has argued, although A-syllable contemplation is relatively simple to perform, it still requires some basic knowledge of the logic and ritual forms of esoteric Buddhist practice, which would in effect have placed it beyond the reach of persons not trained in that tradition.¹³ Nonetheless, we can understand it as one among a larger group of practices that, in early medieval Japan, were being promoted as easy, all-encompassing, universally accessible, and offering quick attainment of birth in a pure land or other liberative state. It was in part these qualities that were seen, at least by a few

writers, as particularly suiting A-syllable contemplation for one's final hours.

THE BEGINNINGS OF DEATHBED A-SYLLABLE PRACTICE

The earliest Japanese text to recommend A-syllable contemplation for the time of death is the *Byōchū shugyō ki* (Notes on Practice During Illness) by the monk Jichihan (實範, a.k.a. Jippan or Jitsuhan, c. 1089–1144), which he wrote while ill in the winter of 1134.¹⁴ Regarded as the founder of the Nakanokawa branch of Shingon, Jichihan was versed in Hossō and Shingon teachings and also studied Tendai doctrine, including Tendai Pure Land thought. He was one of the earliest figures in what later became known as Japan's *himitsu nenbutsu* (秘密念佛) tradition, or “esoteric” Pure Land thought, which was first introduced to English-language scholarship by James Sanford.¹⁵ Over and against conventional understandings of the Pure Land as an ideal, transcendent realm posited in contradistinction to this defiled world, and of Amida Buddha as a savior who descends to welcome devotees at the moment of their death, *himitsu nenbutsu* thought regards Amida as immanent in the body and mind of the practitioner, and his Pure Land as inseparable from our present reality. In his *Byōchū shugyō ki*, Jichihan takes the conventions of deathbed practice aimed at birth in Amida's Pure Land as set forth in Genshin's *Ōjō yōshū* and reworks them in this esoteric conceptual frame. The buddha whom the dying person should visualize, according to Jichihan, is indeed Amida—not Amida of the Pure Land located billions of worlds away in the western direction, but the Amida who is “the lord of the lotus section,” one of the five divisions of the “perfected body assembly” of the Diamond Realm Mandala.¹⁶ The emphasis of Jichihan's text is not on Amida's descent to welcome the dying but on realization of the nonduality of the buddha and the practitioner: “Truly we will be born into that [pure] land that is none other than our mind,” he writes. “The one who contemplates and that which is contemplated, the one who achieves birth and the birth that is achieved, are in no way separate from the single great dharma realm.”¹⁷ Jichihan further defines appropriate deathbed practice, not as an invocation of Amida's salvific power, but as an esoteric three mysteries practice, centering on contemplation of the syllable A.

The *Byōchū shugyō ki* first mentions the A-syllable in connection with repentance (*sange*) carried out as death nears to remove various

karmic hindrances that might otherwise arise to hinder right mindfulness in one's final moments. Rites of repentance performed shortly before death seem to have been widespread in Heian Japan, and various methods were employed. Jichihan recommends the chanting of mantras or *dhāraṇīs*, such as the Superlative Spell of the Buddha's Crown (Skt. *Uṣṇīṣavijayā*, Jpn. *Sonshō Butchō*), the Mantra of Light (*Kōmyō Shingon*), or the Amida Spell.¹⁸ The practice of chanting esoteric spells to remove karmic hindrances at the time of death was already a well established practice but lacked explicit theoretical justification. Jichihan here provides an esoteric doctrinal explanation: all such recitations are to be performed as part of “three mysteries” practice, or ritual union with the body, speech, and mind of an esoteric deity. One should form the appropriate *mudrā* with one's hands, chant the preferred mantra or *dhāraṇī* with one's mouth, and contemplate that mantra with one's mind, firmly believing that its essence is the fundamental syllable A, the originally unborn, and that all sins will thereby be eradicated.¹⁹ Here the A-syllable contemplation is assimilated to the notion of “formless repentance,” the eradication of sin by insight into the empty, unproduced nature of the *dharmas*.

A distinctive feature of the *Byōchū shugyō ki*, possibly Jichihan's innovation, is his synthesis of the deathbed nenbutsu with A-syllable contemplation. In his *Ōjō yōshū*, Genshin had outlined nenbutsu practice for three kinds of occasions: ordinary times, special retreats, and the time of death. The *Byōchū shugyō ki* similarly outlines three kinds of three mysteries practice, focusing on A-syllable contemplation. The first method, for everyday use, is a traditional form of the three mysteries, in which the practitioner forms the basic *mudrā* corresponding to the object of worship—that is, the particular buddha, bodhisattva, or other deity employed as the focus of practice; recites that deity's mantra; and contemplates that mantra as embodying the three inseparable meanings of the syllable A: empty (*kū*), existing (*u*), and originally unborn (*honpushō*), whose oneness constitutes the dharma body that is in turn identical to the mind of the practitioner. “Because of inconceivable emptiness, the karmic hindrances one has created are destroyed in accordance with the teaching. Because of inconceivable existence, the Pure Land toward which one aspires is achieved in accordance with one's vows. What is called the ‘unborn’ is the middle way. And because of the middle way, there are no fixed aspects of either karmic hindrances or the Pure Land.”²⁰ Jichihan's second kind of

three mysteries practice, intended for “when one has extra time, or is physically weak,” begins his assimilation of the nenbutsu to A-syllable meditation. Here, the practitioner’s reverent posture is the paradigmatic “mystery of the body”; in this light, all movements of the body are *mudrās*. Chanting Amida’s name is the paradigmatic “mystery of the mouth” and, on this basis, all words and speech are mantras. The “mystery of the mind” is contemplating the meaning of Amida’s name, both as a whole phrase (*kugi*, 句義) and as three individual syllables (*jigi*, 字義). As a whole, it signifies *amṛta* (*kanro*, 甘露), meaning that the Buddha has freed himself from all hindrances, fevers, and poisons, reaching the cool of nirvana, and causes all beings who bear him in mind to become equal to himself. Individually, the three characters in the name “Amida” are equated with three fundamental esoteric meanings of the syllable A: A indicating the originally unborn, which is the middle way; *mi*, the great self that is without self and enjoys perfect freedom; and *da*, moment-to-moment accordance with suchness, which is liberation.²¹ Jichihan’s third kind of three mysteries practice, to be employed for the moment of death, is considerably simplified: one should form the *mudrā* of the object of worship (Amida), chant his name, and single-mindedly take refuge in the myriad virtues of the middle way. Here, the elements of visualization and contemplation found in conventional three mysteries practice are vastly simplified, while that of invocation is paramount. Thus Jichihan introduced into the deathbed context the logic of esoteric practice for realizing buddhahood in this very body, transforming the deathbed nenbutsu, via its assimilation to A-syllable meditation, from an invocation to Amida as a savior figure into a rite of union with the dharma-body buddha. In this regard, the *Byōchū shugyō ki* is an epochal text.

A-syllable meditation also figures prominently in a set of deathbed instructions composed by Kakuban, mentioned above, in his *Ichigo taiyō himitsu shū* (Collection of Secret Essentials for a Lifetime). Composed sometime between 1134 and 1143, this work draws explicitly on Jichihan’s *Byōchū shugyō ki*.²² Like Jichihan, Kakuban stresses the efficacy of chanting mantras and *dhāraṇīs* as a form of repentance for removing karmic hindrances at the hour of death. Whatever incantation may be employed, “The sick person should contemplate the essence of that mantra as the meaning of the syllable A, believing deeply and without doubt that his sins will thereby be eradicated.”²³ Kakuban also adopted Jichihan’s idea of deathbed contemplation as a form of three

mysteries practice, based on either the A-syllable or the moon-disk contemplation, and the *Ichigo taiyō himitsu shū* includes a detailed theoretical discussion of both. Since the A-syllable is often drawn or visualized against a moon disk, the two contemplations are closely related; Kakuban in particular regarded these contemplations as “two but not two” and often combined them in his thought and practice.²⁴ Here, he says that they enable the practitioner to arouse the *samādhi bodhicitta* (*sanmaji bodaishin*), in which one perfects the three mysteries and thus realizes one’s identity with the cosmic buddha.²⁵ Kakuban goes beyond Jichihan in explicitly identifying Amida with Dainichi Nyorai, the buddha of the esoteric teachings.

Apart from this *sahā* world, there is no Land of Utmost Bliss to contemplate. How could it be separated by tens of billions of other lands? And apart from Dainichi, there is no separate [buddha] Amida. . . . Amida is Dainichi’s function as wisdom. Dainichi is Amida’s essence as principle. . . . When one contemplates in this way, then, without leaving the *sahā* world, one is immediately born in [the Pure Land of] Utmost Bliss. . . . This is the subtle contemplation for realizing buddhahood with this very body.²⁶

Parenthetically we may note that other works by Kakuban—not specifically related to the moment of death—move still farther in the direction of assimilating the nenbutsu to the A-syllable as a naturally inherent mantra. We have already seen that the A-syllable was understood as the primordial sound and associated with the breath, on which sound is carried; A-syllable practice, like a number of esoteric contemplations, involves mindfulness of the breath. Kakuban identified the inbreath with the seed syllable A and the outbreath with the seed syllable HŪṂ, which together he regarded as the fundamental mantra of Amida. Thus the cycle of breathing in and out becomes both the mantra of Amida and Amida himself: “I breathe Amida and Amida breathes me,” as Sanford has summarized it.²⁷ Later commentators would develop this association in a number of directions, asserting, for example, that the inhaled breath is Amida descending to welcome the devotee (*raigō*) and outbreath, being born in the Pure Land (*ōjō*); with this understanding, at each breath, one is welcomed by Amida Buddha and goes to his Pure Land.²

Neither Jichihan nor Kakuban provides much detail about how A-syllable contemplation is actually to be conducted in one’s last mo-

ments. It appears that the dying person is simply to recite the nenbutsu or some other mantra with faith in the ultimate identity of himself, the buddha, and the unborn, represented by the syllable A. However, subsequent writings recommending A-syllable practice for the deathbed indicate that the A-syllable is itself to be intoned, not simply contemplated as the essence of other mantras. One can cite several possible reasons for this. First, Buddhism in the Heian and Kamakura periods was broadly speaking a mantric culture, in which, across sectarian divisions, invocations of all types tended to supercede inner contemplation and visualization practice. The chanting of Amida's name, for example, appears to have been far more widespread at all social levels than was silent meditation on Amida's marks and attributes. Genshin's *Ōjō yōshū*, which recommends internal visualizations of Amida, may have been somewhat anomalous in this regard; most Heian nenbutsu practice was vocalized, in the same manner as esoteric mantras.²⁹ And, among the "three mysteries" of esoteric practice, mantra was often accorded a preeminent place. Kakuban provided what might be seen a doctrinal basis for this vocal emphasis with his teaching of "realizing buddhahood through [performance of] a single mystery" (*ichimitsu jōbutsu*, 一密成佛). That is, if one performs only the "mystery of speech"—mantra recitation—with firm faith in Dainichi Nyorai, the mysteries of the body and mind will be completed by Dainichi's empowerment.³⁰ Especially in death-related contexts, Buddhist incantations of all sorts were deemed efficacious in releasing the dead from the sufferings of the six paths, pacifying vengeful spirits, and bringing about birth in a pure land, whether for oneself or for others. Thus rites related to death, such as "preemptive funerals" (*gyakushu*, 逆修)—services for postmortem welfare performed in advance of an individual's death—as well as funerary and memorial rites usually involved the recitation of spells, including the nenbutsu and esoteric mantras and *dhāraṇīs*.³¹ The same was true of deathbed practice, and in this particular setting, vocalized practice assumed an added significance. For those in pain, or without extensive training in meditation, chanting was deemed more practicable than inward contemplation or visualization. Also, if "right mindfulness at the last moment" were to be understood solely as an inner state, not susceptible to observation by third parties, survivors could never be certain whether or not a given individual had indeed achieved correct mental focus at the end and might be left in some doubt about that person's postmortem fate. Thus right mindfulness at

the time of death quickly came to be interpreted in terms of conformity to proper ritual conduct; those who died calmly with Amida’s name or some other holy invocation on their lips were thereby assumed to have reached the Pure Land or achieved an otherwise liberating death. Vocal practice at the end accordingly achieved the status of a “proof” of that individual’s *ōjō* and was thus reassuring to surviving disciples and family members. Vocalization at death of the A-syllable would have presumably carried a similar assurance.

A-SYLLABLE INVOCATION AS “EASY”

There is some suggestion that the six-character nenbutsu gained popularity at least in part as a deathbed practice, where its relative ease of performance would have much to recommend it. At a time when one might be physically impaired, in discomfort, or even wracked by pain, chanting *Namu Amida-butsu* would certainly have been easier than reciting a sutra, whether in its entirety or in part. *Ōjōden* hagiographies whose subjects recite, for example, a chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* on their deathbed are invariably described as completing their recitation before passing peacefully away; in reality, however, sutra chanting as a deathbed practice would have carried the risk that one might die in mid-recitation, a death that might well have been seen as lacking in aesthetic completeness, if not downright inauspicious. In contrast, someone who died chanting the nenbutsu, whether many times or few, could be said to have died with Amida’s name on their lips.³² Based on scriptural sources, ten nenbutsu in one’s last moments were deemed sufficient to achieve birth in the Pure Land; some medieval Japanese sources say that a single nenbutsu is enough.³³ While chanting ten or even one nenbutsu sounds simple enough under ordinary circumstances, we have evidence that Buddhists in Japan’s early medieval period experienced considerable anxiety over whether or not they would be able to focus their thoughts and utter the Buddha’s name when they faced death. Nothing less than one’s salvation depended on it. Genshin had written that a single reflection on the Buddha at death outweighs in its effect the karmic acts of a hundred years.³⁴ In the liminal potency of that moment, even a sinful person, it was believed, could achieve birth in the Pure Land by the power of his final nenbutsu. By the same token, however, it was thought that even a virtuous person, by a single stray, desultory thought at the end, could thereby short-circuit the

merit of a lifetime's practice and fall back into the samsaric realms. Death could take one without warning, and *in extremis*, even one "*Namu Amida-butsu*" might prove too much for some persons to manage. The ideal of right mindfulness at the time of death thus provided immense hope for salvation but also generated fears, and some individuals offered prayers years in advance for proper mental concentration in their final moments.³⁵

Once the final nenbutsu had been assimilated to the A-syllable, however, the possibility arose that a single utterance of "A" might suffice as a deathbed practice. And indeed, the *Kōyōshū* (孝養集, Collection on Filial Piety), a work attributed to Kakuban but probably from the late Kamakura period, contains this passage:

If [the dying person] concentrates his mind on the Buddha for even a single moment and chants the name [of Amida] even once, then a transformation buddha [manifested by Amida] and attendant bodhisattvas will come to welcome that person [and escort him to the Pure Land]. But if he cannot manage to chant all six characters "*Namu Amida-butsu*," then he should [simply] chant the single syllable "A" of Amida, and thereby, all [requirements for *ōjō*] will be fulfilled.³⁶

The unknown compiler of *Kōyōshū* does not explicitly state here that the "A" to be recited is the A-syllable of Shingon *ajikan* practice, but we may assume this identification, because the association of Amida with the A-syllable was by this time well established and because this work was deliberately attributed to the esoteric master Kakuban, known for his writings on A-syllable contemplation. The claim that chanting the single syllable A fulfills all requirements of deathbed practice may have proved enormously reassuring to those attending the deathbed of fellow practitioners, respected teachers, or beloved relatives. Not only is saying "A" easier than saying "*Namu Amida-butsu*," but one imagines that, since "A" is the sound of the exhaled breath, indeed the essence of all sounds, almost any inarticulate sigh or groan on the part of the dying person, even if unconscious, could have been construed as a final utterance of the A-syllable, and thus as guaranteeing that individual's liberation from samsara.

While *Kōyōshū* identifies the A-syllable with the nenbutsu, as Jichihan and Kakuban had done, we also find works that argue the superior ease of deathbed A-syllable invocation by placing the two

practices in opposition. For example, the *Buppō yume monogatari* of Chidō, mentioned above, contains this passage:

[The Pure Land practice of] chanting *Namu Amida-butsu* involves many words and is prone to distraction. Because the breath that comes out when one simply opens one’s mouth always is the sound “A,” even in the midst of distraction, there could be no easier practice. . . . At the very last, when facing the end in death, one should [simply] open one’s mouth, place one’s attention on the “A” breath, and experience the end.³⁷

This passage is representative of a number of arguments occurring in Kamakura-period Buddhist writings that attempt to counter the growing influence of the chanted nenbutsu, specifically the exclusive nenbutsu advocated by Hōnen, by appropriating Hōnen’s claims for the nenbutsu as an “easy practice” in order to promote in its place a different practice altogether—in this case, the A-syllable contemplation—that is said to be easier still. For example, Nichiren (日蓮, 1222–1282), who advocated exclusive devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra*, wrote:

For those who have faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*, in the hour of death, even if they do not mentally contemplate the Buddha, verbally recite the sutra, or [physically] enter the practice hall, they will without intent illuminate the dharma realm and without making an utterance, recite all sutras; without taking up the scriptural rolls, they have the merit of clasping all eight scrolls of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Is this not a vastly easier practice than attempting—as devotees of the provisional teaching of the nenbutsu do—to chant ten nenbutsu on one’s deathbed in the hope of achieving right mindfulness?³⁸

A-SYLLABLE CONTEMPLATION AS “NATURAL”

Some references to deathbed practice in Shingon writings of the Kamakura period recommend A-syllable contemplation, not merely as easy, but as natural, in the sense of conforming to the inherent nature of reality. An example occurs in the *Kakukai Hōkyō hōgo* (覺海法橋法語, Bridge of the Law: Kakukai’s Discourse on the Dharma), a short sermon-like tract (*hōgo*) recording the teachings of the Shingon master Nanshō-bō Kakukai (南勝房覺海, 1142–1223), who served from 1217 to 1220 as the thirty-seventh superintendent of Kongōbuji at the Shingon monastery on Mt. Kōya.³⁹ In this essay, his sole extant work,

Kakukai argues—very much against the prevailing attitudes of his day—that aspirations for birth after death in any particular pure land arise from deluded attachment and are inconsistent with the insight that the whole universe is Dainichi Nyorai’s realm. “Those who truly aspire to unexcelled enlightenment (Skt. *bodhi*) in accordance with this [Shingon] teaching do not consider in the least where they will be reborn or in what form,” he asserts. This is because, for one awakened to the originally unborn nature of the dharmas, all places are the pure land that is Dainichi’s Practice Hall of Esoteric Splendor (Mitsugon Dōjō, 密嚴道場). From this perspective, Kakukai argues that the entire notion of fixing one’s aspirations on a particular postmortem destination is misconceived:

When we thoroughly contemplate the arising and perishing of the *dharmas*, in truth we cannot be one-sidedly attached to [Maitreya’s] Heaven of Satisfaction, nor to [Amida’s land of] Utmost Bliss. . . . If we simply purify the mind, we shall feel no distress, even if we should assume the forms of such [lowly] creatures as dragons and *yakṣas*. . . . Our partiality for the human form and our bias against the strange forms of other creatures are due to our lack of understanding. Regardless of transmigration, we shall suffer no discomfort. . . .⁴⁰

This position leads Kakukai also to reject formalized conventions of deathbed practice designed to control the liminal possibilities of the last moment and ritually direct one’s passage to the next life:

Nor do I consider what kind of *mudrā* to make at the moment of death. Depending on my state of mind, I can abide [in right mindfulness] in any of the four postures [walking, standing, sitting, or lying down]. What kind of action is not *samādhi*? Every thought and every utterance are meditations (*kannen*) and mantras (*shingon*) of attainment (*siddhi*, *shitsuji*). . . . [At death] the practitioner should simply chant the A-syllable with each breath and mentally contemplate the true aspect, [that all things] arise in accordance with conditions.⁴¹

Kakukai here suggests that A-syllable contemplation is the practice that conforms to the way things truly are—that is, dependent upon conditions, empty, and nondual—and that mindfulness of this reality will free one from attachment and lead to the liberating insight that all places are equally the realm of the cosmic buddha. Death, he implies, is not a critical moment of transition that needs to be ritualized in some

special fashion; the practice sufficient in life is sufficient at the last moment as well.

A stronger, more explicit statement to this effect appears in the *Rinjū yōjin no koto* (臨終用心事, Admonitions for the Time of Death) by the esoteric master Dōhan (道範, 1178–1252), who was Kakukai's disciple.⁴² Dōhan writes:

The syllable A as existence arising through conditions corresponds to birth. The syllable A as the emptiness of non-arising corresponds to death. Thus dying in one place and being born in another is nothing other than the syllable A. . . . This is why Vairocana takes this single syllable as his mantra. . . . Birth and death are nothing other than the transformations of the six elements transmigrating in accordance with conditions. Buried, one becomes dust and is no different from the great earth of the syllable A. Cremated, one becomes smoke and is equal to the wisdom fire of the syllable RA. In contemplating the non-transformation of the six elements, there is no longer arising and perishing, only the naturally inherent four mandalas that are the buddha essence.⁴³

Here a subtle but crucial shift has occurred. Where Jichihan, Kakuban, and Kakukai had seen A-syllable contemplation as a practice for realizing the true nature of things as conditioned and empty and thus offering liberation at the time of death, Dōhan suggests that living and dying *in and of themselves* constitute A-syllable practice and thus naturally conform to true reality. In other writings, he would develop Kakuban's associations of Amida with the breath, equating the out and in of the breath with the name and essence of Amida, with the Diamond and Womb Realm mandalas, with wisdom and principle, and with outward manifestation and inner enlightenment; simply breathing in and of itself becomes the uninterrupted nenbutsu. In fact, Dōhan argues, it is only in this secret, esoteric sense that the conventional ideal of uninterrupted nenbutsu practice can be realized.⁴⁴ This argument does not occur in his *Rinjū yōjin no koto*; like Kakuban, Dōhan seems to have reserved his most radically immanentist views of the nenbutsu for doctrinal writings not specifically related to deathbed practice. His *Rinjū yōjin no koto* does not altogether reject the notion of death as a perilous transition to be ritually negotiated, as Dōhan also advises the practitioner to seek the empowerment (*kaji*, 加持) of the Shingon founder Kūkai in order to attain birth in a pure realm.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, in the passage

just cited, by assimilating both birth and death to two aspects of the syllable A, Dōhan moves toward redefining A-syllable contemplation—not in Kakukai's sense, as a practice for realizing that birth and death are inseparable from the true aspect of the *dharmas*—but as already naturally embodied in the mere facts of being born and dying.

This radically nondual perspective is explicitly introduced into the deathbed setting in writings such as Chidō's *Buppō yume monogatari*, cited above. To cite the relevant passage more fully:

At the very last, when facing the end in death, one should [simply] open one's mouth, place one's attention on the "A" breath, and experience the end. In that moment, because all affairs also come to an end, no matter how one may ponder, one can reach no conclusion. If one tries to contemplate the meaning [of the A-syllable] too intently, it will become a hindrance. Merely ending one's life on the single A syllable without any intense contemplation is attaining self-realization beyond thought [i.e., perfect awakening without delusion or mental effort].⁴⁶

Here the equation of A-syllable with the breath as a naturally inherent practice seems to have fused with, indeed virtually replaced, the ideal of right mindfulness at the time of death. In his discussion of the esoteric *nenbutsu*, James Sanford has noted that, once the *nenbutsu* is identified with the breath, "to live at all, simply to produce the two-part instinctual rhythm of breathing in and out, becomes a constant intoning of the *nenbutsu*."⁴⁷ In the passages from Dōhan and Chidō just quoted, something similar is happening with the A-syllable. Once the A-syllable is identified with the breath and with inherent principle, the two-part alternation of being born and dying in and of itself becomes A-syllable practice and the expression of innate enlightenment. Whether or not such arguments carry ideas of innate enlightenment so far as in effect to deny the very need for Buddhist practice is an important question, although one that exceeds the scope of this essay.⁴⁸ At the very least, one imagines that these claims may have greatly obviated the need for concern about achieving correct mental focus at the time of death: simply to exhale and die is itself liberation.

Equations of birth and death with the true aspect of reality—the rise and fall of phenomena in accordance with conditions—were by no means limited to interpretations of A-syllable contemplation or to Shingon tradition. The so-called "oral transmission" or *kuden* literature

produced across schools and lineages during Japan's medieval period, which were shaped by esoteric sensibilities and notions of original enlightenment (*hongaku hōmon*, 本覺法門), are full of such statements: "Unproduced birth and death are without beginning or end . . . birth and death are originally blissful, but people are deluded and perceive them as suffering. Remove this [false] view immediately and you shall reach the state of buddhahood."⁴⁹ "Our red color at birth indicates the wisdom of suchness that accords with conditions, while our white bones after death indicate the principle of suchness that is unchanging."⁵⁰ "To become white bones is to see the dharma nature. . . . [Dead and abandoned in the cemetery ground,] one produces neither a single thought of deluded attachment nor cherishes the slightest desire. This state, without suffering or joy, is called the direct path to buddhahood, the true pure land. Those ignorant of this teaching think that buddhahood is distant and seek the dharma apart from their own mind."⁵¹ However, such statements tend chiefly to appear in doctrinal works concerned with promoting insight into the nonduality of samsara and nirvana or with advocating the position that enlightenment is not the end result of a linear process of cultivation but inherent from the outset, having only to be realized. They do not address the concrete facts of how one should face death, nor do they usually occur in protocols for deathbed practice, where the last moment typically figures as a critical transition, pregnant with soteriological potential but also danger, and in need of ritual control. It may not be too much to suppose that the assimilation of deathbed nenbutsu to the A-syllable contemplation, associated as that contemplation was with the breath and with inherent principle, enabled some slippage between the two discourses, allowing some thinkers to reconceive deathbed practice, not as ritual control over a perilous transition on which one's postmortem liberation depends, but as a paradigmatic expression of innate enlightenment that, once recognized, or even accepted on faith, finds expression in the natural utterance of "A" on the last outbreath.

In conclusion, it should be noted that all the passages discussed above recommending A-syllable contemplation at the time of death are drawn from prescriptive literature. It is difficult to know how widely they may have been carried out, let alone with what mental attitude on the part of the practitioner. Compared to records of people chanting the nenbutsu, the Mantra of Light, the Superlative Spell, or other *dhāraṇī* or passages from the *Lotus* or other sutras, one finds very few

historical notices of A-syllable practice at the time of death.⁵² Enkyō (圓鏡), abbess of Hokkeji, writing in 1304 about the nuns active in the Kamakura-period revival of her temple, names several women who passed away while doing A-syllable contemplation, though she provides no details.⁵³ The monk Ryūgyō Hōin (隆暁法印) of Ninnaji, out of pity for those who died during the great famine of the Yōwa era (1181–1182), is said to have organized a number of *hijiri*, or semi-reclusive ascetics, who wrote the A-syllable on the forehead of each corpse they encountered to establish a karmic bond between that person and the Buddha, performing this service for more than 42,300 deceased over a two-month period.⁵⁴ This act seems to have been based less on a non-dual understanding of the A-syllable as a naturally inherent practice than on its perceived mantric power to pacify the dead and lead them to liberation. Nonetheless, however limited actual use of the A-syllable contemplation as a deathbed practice may have been, the intriguing possibility remains that its occasional adoption in this context, if only at the level of prescription, helped some individuals to rethink “right mindfulness at the last moment,” not in terms of exercising control over a potentially dangerous transit from this defiled world to a remote pure land, but as a natural expression of innate enlightenment.

NOTES

1. *Ōjō yōshū* 往生要集, *Genshin, Nihon shisō taikēi* 6, ed. Ishida Mizumaro (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1970), 296 (hereafter NST). Genshin’s instructions for death-bed practice are found at 206–217 and have been translated in part by James C. Dobbins, “Genshin’s Deathbed Nembutsu Ritual in Pure Land Buddhism,” in *Religions of Japan in Practice*, ed. George J. Tanabe, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 166–175.
2. Taikō Yamasaki, *Shingon: Japanese Esoteric Buddhism*, trans. and adapted by Richard Petersen and Cynthia Petersen (Boston: Shambala, 1988), 191.
3. Richard K. Payne, “Ajikan: Ritual and Meditation in the Shingon Tradition,” in *Re-Visioning “Kamakura” Buddhism*, ed. Richard K. Payne (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 222–224.
4. Scriptural sources for A-syllable contemplation include *Darijing* 3, *Taishō* 848, chap. 6, 18:19c–24a, and *Putixin lun*, *Taishō* 1665, 32:574a–b; see also the discussion of the A-syllable in *Darijing shu* 7, *Taishō* 1796, 39:649a–657c.
5. *Shōji jissō gi* 聲字實相義, *Kōbō Daishi zenshū*, ed. Mikkyō Bunka Kenkyūjo, 8 vols. (Wakayama Prefecture, Kōyasan: Mikkyō Bunka Kenkyūjo, 1965–1968), 1:524; *Kūkai: Major Works*, trans. Yoshito S. Hakeda (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 239.
6. As Payne has noted, the modernist assumption that ritual and meditation constitute two different, opposing categories simply does not apply to A-syllable contemplation, an observation that applies to esoteric Buddhist practice in general. See “Ajikan,” 221.
7. *Taishō* 2432, 77:415a–416a.
8. Sawa Ryūken and others, eds., *Mikkyō jiten* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1975), 6–7. For a description of some forms of A-syllable contemplation, see Yamasaki, *Shingon*, 190–215, and Payne, “Ajikan,” 228–231.
9. *Ajikan gi* 阿字觀儀, in *Kōgyō Daishi zenshū*, ed. Tomita Kōjun, 2 vols. (1935; repr., Tokyo: Hōsenji, 1977), 2:999–1001 (hereafter KDZ), and *Kōgyō Daishi senjutsu shū*, ed. Miyasaka Yūshō (1977; rev. ed., Tokyo: Sankibō Busshorin, 1989), 1:226–228 (hereafter KDS). The KDZ version preserves the original *kanbun*; KDS has been rendered into Japanese and includes notes. The English translation is from Ryūichi Abé, “From Kūkai to Kakuban: A Study of Shingon Buddhist Dharma Transmission” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1991), 394, slightly modified.
10. *Ichigo taiyō himitsu shū* 一期大要秘密集, KDZ 2:1210–1211; KDS 1:169–170.
11. *Buppō yume monogatari* 佛法夢物語, in *Kana hōgo shū, Nihon koten bungaku taikēi* 83, ed. Miyasaka Yūshō (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1964), 223–223 (here-

after NKBT); William M. Bodiford, trans., “Chidō’s *Dreams of Buddhism*,” in *Religions of Japan in Practice*, ed. Tanabe (see note 1), 243, slightly modified. A virtually identical text, the *Yume no ki* (夢記 or 由迷能起) attributed to Hakuun Egyō (白雲慧暎, 1223–1297), a disciple of the Zen teacher Enni, appears in *Dai Nihon bukkyō zensho*, ed. Suzuki Gakujitsu Zaidan, 100 vols. (Tokyo: Suzuki Gakujitsu Zaidan, 1970–1973), 48:269b (hereafter DNBZ).

12. On *shinnyokan* (眞如觀), see Jacqueline I. Stone, *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 191–199, and “The Contemplation of Suchness,” in *Religions of Japan in Practice*, Tanabe (see note 1), 199–209.

13. “Ajikan,” 236–237.

14. *Byōchū shugyō ki* 病中修行記, *Shingonshū anjin zensho*, ed. Hase Hōshū (Kyoto: Rokudaishinbōsha, 1913–1914), 2:781–785 (hereafter SAZ). I am indebted to James Sanford for introducing me to this text. For discussion, see Ōtani Teruo, “Jichihan *Byōchū shugyō ki* ni tsuite,” *Bukkyō bunka kenkyū* 13 (1966): 43–58; Marc Bunjisters, “Jichihan and the Restoration and Innovation of Buddhist Practice,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 26, nos. 1–2 (1999): 65–70; and Jacqueline I. Stone, “The Secret Art of Dying: Esoteric Deathbed Practices in Heian Japan,” in *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations*, ed. Bryan J. Cuevas and Jacqueline I. Stone (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 144–151. I have followed Bunjisters in adopting the pronunciation “Jichihan.”

15. James H. Sanford, “Breath of Life: The Esoteric Nenbutsu,” in *Esoteric Buddhism in Japan* (1994), repr. in *Tantric Buddhism in East Asia*, ed. Richard K. Payne (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 161–189, and “Amida’s Secret Life: Kakuban’s *Amida hishaku*,” in *Approaching the Land of Bliss*, ed. Richard K. Payne and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 120–138.

16. The “perfected body assembly” (*jōjinne*, 成身會) consists of Dainichi Nyōrai in the center, surrounded by four directional buddhas: Ashuku (Akṣobhya) to the east; Hōshō (Ratnasambhava) to the south; Fukūjōju (Amoghasiddhi) to the north; and Amida (known also as Muryōjubutsu, 無量壽佛) to the west. Each of the five buddhas is surrounded within a moon disk by four attendant bodhisattvas; Amida and his attendants compose the “lotus section” (*rengebu*, 蓮華部). Scholars for some time assumed that a reference in *Byōchū shugyō ki* to Amida’s land as located “in the western direction” (SAZ 2:783) reflected Jichihan’s uncritical incorporation of conventional, exoteric understandings of the Pure Land as lying apart from this world. However, as Ōtani has noted, such assumptions overlook the identification of Amida in the very same passage as “lord of the lotus section,” a clear reference to the Diamond World Mandala (“Jichihan *Byōchū shugyō ki* ni tsuite,” 50).

17. *Byōchū shugyō ki*, SAZ 2:784.

18. There exist both a longer and shorter version of the esoteric Amida Spell, or Amida Dhāraṇī, based on the *Wuliangshou yigui* (*Taishō* 930). Their recitation is said to eradicate sins and bring about worldly benefits as well as birth in the Pure Land.

19. *Byōchū shugyō ki*, SAZ 2:782.

20. *Byōchū shugyō ki*, SAZ 2:784. This interpretative structure is very close to that of the Tendai threefold truth, in which the extremes of “emptiness” (*kū*) and “conventional existence” (*ke*) are simultaneously affirmed and negated by the middle (*chū*), and may reflect the influence of Jichihan’s Tendai studies.

21. This passage bears some structural similarity to the equation in medieval Tendai thought of the three characters A-mi-da with the threefold truth of emptiness, conventional existence, and the middle. See for example Sueki Fumihiko, “Amida santai-setsu o megutte,” *Indogaku bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 28, no. 1 (1979): 216–222. Correlations of the three syllables of Amida’s name with esoteric meaning are further developed by Kakuban in his *Amida hishaku*. See Sanford, “Amida’s Secret Life,” 132–133.

22. *Ichigo taiyō himitsu shū* is included in *KDZ* 2:1197–1220 and *KDS* 1:157–176. Some scholars have maintained that the *Ichigo taiyō himitsu shū* was composed not by Kakuban but by Butsugon (佛嚴, fl. late twelfth century), himself in Kakuban’s lineage. See Stone, “The Secret Art of Dying,” 171–172n63 for a summary of the scholarship on this issue, and 151–159 for a discussion of deathbed protocols described in the text. I have treated the *Ichigo taiyō himitsu shū* here as Kakuban’s work.

23. *KDZ* 1:1201; *KDS* 1:160.

24. See Ryūichi Abé, “Bridging Ritual and Text: Kakuban’s Writing on Meditative Practice,” in *Kōgyō Daishi Kakuban kenkyū*, ed. Kōgyō Daishi Kenkyū Ronshū Henshū Iinkai (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1992), 1076–1073 (reverse pagination) (hereafter *KDKK*), and Hendrik van der Veere, *Kakuban Shōnin: The Life and Works of Kōgyō Daishi* (Tokyo: Nombro, 1998), 161–164.

25. *KDZ* 2:1201–1213; *KDS* 1:160–172.

26. *KDZ* 2:1214; *KDS* 1:172.

27. Sanford, “Breath of Life,” 172. For Kakuban’s understanding of Amida and of the nenbutsu, see 169–175.

28. For example, on medieval Tendai transmissions concerning Amida as the breath of life, see Hazama Jikō, *Nihon bukkyō no kaiten to sono kichō*, vol. 2: *Chūko Nihon Tendai no kenkyū* (1948; repr., Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1975), 275–297. For the broader influence of this idea, see Kushida Ryōkō, *Shingon mikkyō seiritsu katei*

no kenkyū (Tokyo: Sankibō Busshorin, 1964), 219–227, and Sanford, “Breath of Life,” 180–188.

29. Hayami Tasuku, *Jōdo shinkō ron* (Tokyo: Yūzankaku Shuppan, 1978), 117–121.

30. Matsuzaki Keisui, *Heian mikkyō no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2002), 599–604.

31. Hayami Tasuku, *Heian kizoku shakai to bukkō* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1975), 183–196.

32. Takagi Yutaka, *Heian jidai Hokke bukkōshi kenkyū* (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1973), 451–463, esp. 462.

33. Amida’s famous eighteenth vow promises birth in his pure land to all who aspire to this goal with sincerity and call him to mind “even ten times” (*Wuliangshou jing*, *Taishō* 360, 12:268a); in addition, the *Meditation Sūtra* claims that even an evil person, if he encounters a good friend (*zenchishiki*, 善智識) who instructs him at the hour of death so that he is able to sustain ten thoughts of Amida, shall, with each thought, erase the sins of eight billion *kalpas* and be born in Amida’s Pure Land (*Guan Wuliangshou fo jing*, *Taishō* 365, 12:346a).

34. *Ōjō yōshū*, *NST* 6:214.

35. On the moment of death as the focus of both hopes and anxieties, see Jacqueline I. Stone, “By the Power of One’s Last *Nenbutsu*: Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan,” in *Approaching the Land of Bliss*, ed. Payne and Tanaka (see note 15), 77–119.

36. *DNBZ* 43:30b.

37. *NKBT* 83:222–223; trans. Bodiford, “Chidō’s *Dreams of Buddhism*,” 243, slightly modified.

38. *Shugo kokka ron* 守護國家論 (1259), *Shōwa teihon Nichiren shōnin ibun*, ed. Risshō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo, 4 vols. (Minobu-chō, Yamanashi Prefecture: Minobusan Kuonji, 1952–1959; rev. 1988), no. 15, 1:111 (hereafter *Teihon*).

39. In *Kana hōgo shū*, *NKBT* 83:55–58; trans. with commentary by Robert E. Morrell in his *Early Kamakura Buddhism: A Minority Report* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1987), 89–102.

40. *NKBT* 83:57; trans. from Morrell, *Early Kamakura Buddhism*, 99–100, slightly modified.

41. *NKBT* 83:57; trans. from Morrell, *Early Kamakura Buddhism*, 100, slightly modified.

42. SAZ 2:792–775. I am indebted to James Sanford for introducing me to this text. For more on Dōhan’s esoteric nenbutsu thought, see his “Breath of Life,” 175–179.
43. SAZ 2:793. Dōhan alludes here to A VI RA HŪṂ KHAM, the root mantra of Dainichi.
44. *Shoshin tongaku shō* 初心頓覺鈔, cited in Kushida, *Shingon mikkyō seiritsu katei no kenkyū*, 217–218. See also Sanford, “Breath of Life,” 178–179.
45. SAZ 2:792.
46. NKBT 83:223; trans. Bodiford, “Chidō’s *Dreams of Buddhism*,” 243, slightly modified.
47. Sanford, “Amida’s Secret Life,” 121.
48. For discussion of this issue in the context of medieval Tendai thought, see Stone, *Original Enlightenment*.
49. *Tendai Hokkeshū gozu hōmon yōsan* 天台法華宗牛頭法門要纂, *Tendai hongaku ron*, NST 9, ed. Tada Kōryū and others (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1973), 38.
50. *Ongi kuden* 御義口傳, *Teihon* 3:2691.
51. *Mongu ryaku taikō shikenmon* 文句略大綱私見聞, *DNBZ* 5:150b–c.
52. A more detailed study of this subject might investigate the possibility of A-syllable deathbed practice in other Buddhist cultures. Raoul Birnbaum, for example, notes a passage from the *vinaya* compendium of the Chinese master Jianyue Duti (見月讀體, 1601–1679), which advises monastic practitioners to prepare for sleep—and thus ultimately, one might assume, for death—by first chanting Amitābha’s name and then visualizing the character “A” within a disk, reciting it twenty-one times in a single breath (*Pini riyong qieyao*, *XZJ* 106:135a). See Birnbaum’s “Deathbed Image of Master Hongyi,” in *The Buddhist Dead*, ed. Cuevas and Stone (see note 14), 195.
53. *Hokke metsuzaiji engi* 法華滅罪寺緣起, *Yamato koji taikan*, ed. Iwanami Kojirō (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1976–1978), 5:143a. I am indebted to Lori Meeks for providing me with this reference. The relevant passage is translated in her “Nuns, Court Ladies, and Female Bodhisattvas: The Women of Japan’s Medieval Ritsu-School Nuns’ Revival Movement” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2003), 142–144.
54. *Hōjōki* 方丈記, in *Hōjōki*, *Hosshinshū*, ed. Miki Sumito (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1976), 24.