

15

Relinquishing the Body to Reach the Pure Land

BUDDHIST ASCETIC SUICIDE IN PREMODERN JAPAN

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RELIGIOUS SUICIDE IN premodern Japan was commonly framed in Buddhist terms. Following Buddhism's introduction to the archipelago in the sixth century, its death rites and concepts of the afterlife steadily took root, first among elites and then across other social levels. During Japan's early medieval period—roughly the late tenth through early fourteenth centuries—growing numbers of people aspired to be born, after their death, in one of the pure realms of the buddhas or bodhisattvas (J. *ōjō*). The most sought-after postmortem destination was the Pure Land of Utmost Bliss (Skt. Sukhāvātī, J. Gokuraku; hereafter, “the Pure Land”), the realm of the Buddha Amida (Skt. Amitābha, Amitāyus), said to lie countless world systems away to the west. Once born in Amida's Pure Land, it was thought, one would never again fall back into saṃsāra, the cycle of deluded rebirth; rather, one was certain to achieve buddhahood. Persons who took their own lives in hopes of reaching a pure land (*jigai ōjō*) sought to expedite this liberative process. This chapter will investigate *jigai ōjō*, or *ōjō*-suicide,¹ in early medieval Japan, with attention to who performed it and how, the controversy surrounding it, its place within the larger repertoire of Buddhist ascetic practices, and its intersections with other traditions of heroic suicide. It will also explore how the theme of suicide to reach the Pure Land was

1. I borrow the term “*ōjō*-suicide” from Blum (153).

developed in early and later medieval literature, giving particular attention to the element of gender. First, let us briefly consider the background of this tradition on the Asian continent.

Continental Precedents

As discussed in Chapter 13 in this volume, “elective death” has been controversial in the Buddhist tradition. Ordinary suicide committed to escape the miseries of one's present existence was condemned as a deluded act that would bring painful karmic consequences in future rebirths. But when performed by spiritual adepts due to lofty motives—as a compassionate self-sacrifice to benefit others, or as an offering to the Buddha or his dharma—it could be seen as admirable, even heroic. Tales of the Buddha's past lifetimes (Skt. *jātakas*) recount how, again and again, he sacrificed body parts, and even life itself, for the sake of living beings, for example, by giving his flesh to feed a starving tigress or stripping the skin from his body on which to record sacred teachings. Similar stories in the Mahāyāna sūtras (scriptures) celebrate bodhisattva heroes who relinquish their lives in sacrifice. These include the famous instance in the *Lotus Sūtra* of Bodhisattva Medicine King (Skt. Bhaiṣajyarāja, J. Yakuō), who in a past life turned his body into a living torch in offering to the buddha of his age, an act praised in the text as “a true Dharma offering” and “the prime gift . . . the most honorable, the supreme” (*Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 262, 9:53b; Hurvitz 271).

Ascetically inclined Buddhist practitioners have sometimes emulated such acts. Hagiographies of eminent Chinese monks and nuns include several examples. Those who performed auto-cremation—self-immolation by fire—seem initially to have been the most numerous, but they were later joined by others who undertook terminal fasts, offered their bodies to wild beasts, or leapt to their deaths from cliffs.² Liang-, Tang-, and Song-dynasty collections of monastic biographies group such acts under the rubrics of “relinquishing the body” (Ch. *sheshen*), “discarding the body” (*yishen*), or “being oblivious of the body” (*wangshen*)—broader categories including not only suicide, but less drastic forms of ascetic practice such as allowing mosquitoes, gnats, or leeches to feed on one's flesh; drawing one's

2. Yoshida 191–96; Kieschnick 35–50. See Benn 2007 for a detailed study of Chinese auto-cremation. While “self-immolation” has been used in the media to describe suicides by fire carried out in protest by Buddhists in Vietnam and Tibet, Benn prefers the more precise “auto-cremation,” using “self-immolation” to denote self-sacrifice more broadly (8).

own blood to inscribe sūtras; and a spectrum of acts involving burning or cutting the flesh, such as burning the head or forearms with incense or moxa (dried mugwort burned on the skin, usually as a therapy) to seal one's ordination vows or branding or incinerating fingers and limbs as dharma offerings. Acts of terminal self-sacrifice were rooted not only in Buddhist canonical sources such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, but also in apocryphal scriptures composed in China, such as the *Sūtra of Brāhmā's Net* (*Fanwang jing*), and the *Sūtra of the Samādhi of the Heroic March* (*Shoulengyan jing*), which extol the merit of extreme ascetic practices, including self-immolation by fire (*T* 1484, 24:1006a, and *T* 945, 19:132b), and in local, non-Buddhist ascetic traditions, such as auto-cremation and branding of the body in connection with prayers for rain (Benn 1998).³ The legitimacy of ascetic suicide was often questioned by external critics and by Buddhists themselves, giving rise to a body of argument both denouncing and defending its practice.

One Chinese innovation in Buddhist ascetic practice was the idea that sacrificing one's body could lead to birth in a pure land, a development possibly influenced by Daoist notions that auto-cremation would provide the purification necessary to achieve the realm of the immortals (Kieschnick 43, 163, n. 166). "Pure lands," a distinctively Mahāyāna concept, are realms created by the vows of a buddha or bodhisattva; they are "pure" in being free of greed, anger, ignorance and other obstructions that hinder practice. Birth in a pure land was thus considered a shortcut on the bodhisattva path that would otherwise take innumerable kalpas (aeons) to complete. By the fifth century, with the rise of Amidist devotion in China, cases of ascetic suicide aimed at birth in Amida's Pure Land of Utmost Bliss began to be recorded. According to the earliest biography of the Pure Land teacher Shandao (613–681), once, when the master preached to an audience of lay people that they could achieve birth in the Pure Land simply by chanting Amida's name, one of his auditors, deeply moved, promptly climbed a tall tree, uttered the name of Amida, and leapt to his death. In a later version of the story, however, it was Shandao himself who flung himself from a tree in his fervent aspiration for the Pure Land (*Xu gaoseng zhan* 27, *T* 2060, 50:684a; *Jingtu wangsheng zhuan* 2, *T* 2071, 51:119b). Though apocryphal, the story of Shandao's *ōjō*-suicide proved influential in Japan.

3. See also Chapter 14 in this volume.

Forms of Ascetic Suicide in Premodern Japan

Buddhist ascetic suicide appears in the Japanese historical record early on. Regulations governing monastics (*sōniryō*) issued by the court in the eighth century forbade monks and nuns from burning their bodies or committing suicide.⁴ While these prohibitions may have been leveled at contemporaneous practices, accounts of specific individuals "relinquishing the body" for explicitly Buddhist reasons appear only rarely before the late tenth century. Yoshida Yasuo⁵ has examined fifty-one "acts of relinquishing the body" (*J. shashingyō*), including thirty-four suicides, between 796 and 1183, as recorded in diaries, chronicles, and hagiographical collections, and found that no fewer than thirty of the practitioners involved, including nineteen of the suicides, were said to have been prompted by aspiration for birth in a pure realm, whether the bodhisattva Kannon's Mt. Fudaraku, the Heaven of Satisfaction (Skt. Tuṣita), where the bodhisattva Miroku (Maitreya) dwells, or—overwhelmingly—Amida Buddha's Pure Land of Utmost Bliss (Yoshida 208–17). This section surveys the major forms of Buddhist ascetic suicide attested in the latter part of the Heian (795–1185) and Kamakura (1185–1333) periods, while showing the predominance of birth in a pure land as a stated motive.

The most widely attested method of religious suicide in late-Heian Japan was self-immolation by fire, often inspired by the *Lotus Sūtra* story of Bodhisattva Medicine King. Chronicles and courtier diaries record public acts of auto-cremation in the vicinity of Heian (the royal capital, today's Kyoto) from the tenth through twelfth centuries. For example:

Fifteenth day, [ninth month, 995]. Kakushin, a monk of Rokuharamitsuji, immolated himself in the fire on the north side of the memorial chapel, while Retired Emperor Kazan and other nobles bowed in reverence. (*Nihon kiriyaku* 10, Chōtoku 1 [Kuroita 11:183])⁶

4. *Sōniryō* article 27. For this article and its interpretation in an 834 legal commentary, see *Ryō no gige* 2 (Kuroita part 2, 24B:89). For discussion see Yoshida 202–05. A translation of the *Sōniryō* is available at https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/63/docs/Ritsuryo_Soniryō-Piggott.pdf.

5. Japanese names are given in traditional order, with the surname first.

6. Here and subsequently, years have been converted to the Western calendar, while months and days are given according to the Japanese lunar calendar.

Sixteenth day, [ninth month, 995]. An ascetic (J. *shōnin*) immolated himself in the fire on Amida Peak. Persons high and low gathered like clouds to watch. In recent years, eleven people in several provinces have immolated themselves. (*Hyakurenshō* 4, Chōtoku 1 [Kuroita 11:9])

Fifteenth day, [seventh month, 1026]. Clear skies. Early this morning, a nun immolated herself in the fire at Toribeno. (People are calling her the nun of the “Medicine King” chapter.) While her body burned, her mind was not distracted; she faced west until consumed [by the flames]. (*Sakeiki*, Manju 3 [ST 6:182])⁷

Fifteenth day, [fifth month, 1066]. At midday the monk Mongō, who lived at the Shakadō temple in Shijō, immolated himself in the fire at Toribeno. Monastics and laity gathered as though at a marketplace. (*Fusō ryakki* 29, Jiryaku 2 [Kuroita 12:303])

Fifteenth day, [seventh month, 1174]. An ascetic immolated himself in the field at Funaoka, and high and low gathered. (*Hyakurenshō* 8, Shōan 4 [ST 11:90])

Short as they are, these notices offer significant information. The principals are monastics, often ascetics. The “nun” who burned herself at Toribeno would most likely have been a privately ordained “lay nun” (*ama nyūdō*), given that official ordination for women had lapsed by this time. Still, like the male practitioners mentioned, she would not have been an ordinary lay devotee. One notes also the frequent choice of the fifteenth day of the month for these undertakings. The fifteenth was Amida Buddha’s *ennichi* (“affinity day”), a day deemed especially favorable for forming a connection with a particular buddha or bodhisattva. And the places chosen were all on the outskirts of the capital that were associated with death. “Amida Peak” overlooked Toribeno, a cremation ground in the eastern, Higashiyama area; the temple Rokuharamitsuji stood adjacent to Toribeno. The “field at Funaoka,” to the city’s north, was also a cremation ground. It is as though these practitioners reversed the common order of things and cremated themselves before actually dying. Their acts were highly public and drew many spectators. Witnessing the death of an *ōjōnin*—a person deemed to have achieved, or certain to achieve, birth in a pure land—was thought to establish a favorable karmic connection (*kechien*) that would assist one’s own birth there as well. Those bent on religious suicide sometimes announced

their intentions in advance in order to give others this opportunity, and crowds assembled to watch.

These brief notices tell us little about the intentions of the persons involved. For the motives underlying acts of ascetic suicide—or, more precisely, the motives presumed or expected to underlie such acts—we must turn to didactic tales (*setsuwa*) and hagiographies, especially those known as *ōjōden*, or “accounts of persons born in the Pure Land.” The eleventh-century *Stories of Wondrous Manifestations of the Efficacy of the Lotus Sūtra in Japan* recounts the suicide of the ascetic Ōshō (n.d.), said to have been the first auto-cremation in Japan. A *Lotus Sūtra* reciter (*jikyōsha*), Ōshō acts in imitation of the bodhisattva described in the “Medicine King” chapter of the *Lotus*, offering up his body in sacrifice to the sūtra, the buddhas of the ten directions, and all living beings (*Hokke genki* 1:15 [Inoue and Ōsone 72; trans. Dykstra 38–39]).

More commonly, however, auto-cremation is depicted as undertaken in order to achieve birth in the Pure Land, as in the *ōjōden* biography of the monk Nenkaku (n.d.) of Echizen, who grows weary of life. First he faces west and performs a thousand prostrations; then he chants the *nenbutsu*—Amida Buddha’s name—in a melodic cadence (*gassatsu*); his fellow practitioners and the visiting monks who have come for the occasion all join in. After mounting the pyre, Nenkaku forms a *mudrā* (ritual hand gesture), still chanting the *nenbutsu*. When the fire burns down and the smoke has cleared, purple clouds gather in the skies (*Sange ōjōki* 45 [Inoue and Ōsone 680]). Purple or other colored clouds, a staple feature of Pure Land art and literature, were said to indicate Amida’s descent, together with his holy retinue, to welcome the dying and escort them to his western Pure Land. They numbered among the extraordinary signs said invariably to appear when a newly deceased person had achieved birth in the Pure Land, such as mysterious fragrance, divine music heard in the air, or auspicious dreams had by survivors.

Non-canonical forms of ascetic suicide also made their appearance during the Heian period, such as self-drownings (*jusui*). A preferred spot was in the sea off the temple Shitennojō, or simply Tennōji, on the coast at Naniwa (today’s Osaka), an important pilgrimage site. Popular tradition held that Tennōji’s west gate, which faced the sea, communicated directly with the east gate of Amida’s Pure Land. *Ōjōnin* would sometimes row out from the west gate and throw themselves into the sea. Again, people gathered to watch, and wondrous signs were recorded (Kubota). Like auto-cremations, self-drownings were sometimes conducted in highly dramatic fashion and witnessed by spectators wishing to establish favorable karmic ties. In one *ōjōden* example, an unnamed *hijiri* (“holy man”) bent on drowning himself sets out by boat from Mitsu Harbor on Lake Biwa. Monks from the great Tendai temple on Mt. Hiei climb

⁷ Also mentioned in *Nihon hisyaku* [aohan] 12, Kuroita 11:187.

with local villagers follow him in no fewer than fifty to sixty boats. The *hijiri* dons a clean robe and chants the *nenbutsu*, and all the other monks join in. He announces, "After I sink beneath the water, if I achieve birth in the Pure Land of Utmost Bliss, my body will not decay but will reach the west shore. If, however, I should fall into the evil paths, it will drift up on the east shore." The next day, his body is found on the west shore, sitting in the lotus position with its hands placed together in reverence (*Sange ōjōki* 26 [Inoue and Ōsone 676]). Acts of self-drowning were not always individual affairs. A courtier diary entry for the eighth month of 1176 notes: "Fifteenth day. Eleven ascetics drowned themselves. Among them, the one called Rengejō Shōnin was the initiator" (*Hyakurenshō* 8, Angen 2 [Kuroita 11:92]).

Ascetic suicide also included the practice of "crossing the sea to Mt. Fudaraku" (*Fudarakusen tokai*), in which practitioners known as "sea-crossing monks" or "sea-crossing holy men" (*tokaisō, tokai shōnin*) set out in small boats on one-way journeys bound for the pure realm of the bodhisattva Kannon (Skt. Avalokiteśvara), the mountain island of Fudaraku (Potalaka) said to lie in the southern sea. Ascetics boarded small boats and embarked from Nachi in Kumano, a site closely associated with Kannon, or from other points along the southern coast of western Japan, hoping to reach Kannon's realm (Moerman 271). Unlike Amida's Pure Land, far away to the west across innumerable worlds, Fudaraku was said to lie within this world. Nonetheless, those who set sail for it clearly did not expect to sail there in the same way that one might sail, say, to the Korean peninsula or the coast of China. Some *tokaisha* made no attempt to steer or navigate, but instead entrusted their boats solely to Kannon's guiding compassion. One twelfth-century courtier diary tells of a certain ascetic who vowed to reach Fudaraku. He made a thousand-armed image of Kannon and positioned it so as to hold the helm of a small boat. After worshipping the bodhisattva for three years, he embarked, availing himself of a steady wind from the north, and people said that his vow had been fulfilled (*Taiki* 2, Kōji 1 [1142], 8/18 [ST 23:72]). In a somewhat later account, one Chijō-bō, a *Lotus Sūtra* reciter at Nachi who set out for Fudaraku, provisioned his boat with only a month's supply of food and lamp oil and had the cabin nailed shut once he had entered it, with not even a chink for light to enter (*Azuma kagami*, Tenpuku 1 [1233], 5/27 [Kuroita 32:130]).⁸ Like the *hijiri* described above who drowns himself in Lake Biwa, *tokaisha* were often accompanied at least part way by "fellow

8. Sealed boats of this kind are depicted on Nachi shrine mandalas of the later medieval and early modern periods (Moerman 279–84).

practitioners" who traveled in open boats in order to form karmic ties with them and to share, to some extent, in the merit of their act. Including chronicles, diaries, inscriptions, and literary sources, there are more than fifty notices of individuals who set out for Fudaraku between the ninth and twentieth centuries (Nei 768–69).⁹

A less frequent method of ascetic suicide was self-burial. A courtier diary entry records that on 7/18/1160, southeast of the temple Zenrinji in Higashiyama, an ascetic had himself immured alive in a westward-facing tomb identified as a "side door" to the Pure Land, and spectators, both clergy and laity, gathered at the spot (*Sankiki*, Eiryaku 1 [ST 26:119]). A particularly intriguing instance is that of Sainen (d. 1142). In 1906, excavation near Kenninji in Kyoto unearthed a record made by this monk of his preparations for *ōjō*-suicide. It includes Sainen's list of the meritorious deeds he had performed in his lifetime—vast numbers of Buddhist sūtras copied, images commissioned, rituals sponsored, and amounts of food and clothing donated to monasteries—along with forty-eight *waka* poems that he had composed on the theme of birth in the Pure Land, one for each of Amida Buddha's salvific vows.¹⁰ Sainen had first tried, and failed, to drown himself in the sea; his second attempt, by self-burial in a hole dug at his residence, was successful.

Terminal fasts (*danjiki ōjō*) represented yet another method. In his *ōjōden* biography, the holy man Enkū (d. 1039) becomes ill and, though not in pain, over a period of two or three years repeatedly refuses food and drink for five, six, or ten days at a stretch, passing his time in meditation. Urged to take rice gruel, he politely declines, observing that "food nourishes the body bound to deluded birth and death, and prolongs the life of evil deeds." As his flesh melts away, he becomes withered and shrunken. Clerics and laypeople bent on forming karmic ties with him gather at his gate as though at a marketplace. Enkū dies peacefully after chanting the *nenbutsu*, and someone dreams of him seated on a splendid dais and traveling toward the west, escorted by an assembly of monks (*Shūi ōjōden* 3:29 [Inoue and Ōsone 388–89]). Fasting was not always total, nor was it necessarily terminal. In some cases, it was employed in preparation for other acts of religious suicide, as in the case of the ascetic Gyōhan (d. ca. 1128–1131), who fasted for seven days before drowning himself in the sea off Tennōji (*Honchō shinshū ōjōden* 11 [Inoue and Ōsone 685]). It could be used to induce religious visions, as part of one's ongoing religious

9. See also Moerman 271 and 293n20.

10. Sainen's documents appear in Takeuchi, *komonjohen* 64, 67, and 68 (supplementary), 10: 119–25, 129–34.

discipline, or to hasten a death seen as inevitable. It was also linked to other ascetic traditions, such as the Daoist practice of abstaining from grains. Fasting and self-burial together suggest themselves as forerunners of the "self-mummification" practiced by a small group of ascetics of Mt. Yudono in northeastern Japan during the early modern period (1603–1868). These men offered up their lives on behalf of others by eating only pine needles and other tree products (*mokujiki*) for two or three years, thus reducing their body mass as much as possible, and then had themselves buried alive or immured themselves in underground chambers, seated in the posture of meditation, with the notion that, if their bodies mummified, that would signify their spiritual attainment (Hori).

While acknowledging that suicide to reach the Pure Land as practiced in Heian Japan could entail a resolve to advance on the bodhisattva path, Yoshida sees it as a departure from the paradigmatic forms of bodhisattva self-sacrifice described in the sūtras—such as offering one's flesh to wild beasts—in that it aimed chiefly at furthering one's own salvation rather than benefitting others (Yoshida 208, 212–13, 218).¹¹ However, the distinction is by no means clearcut, as one's own aspiration for the Pure Land could also entail a resolve to promote others' welfare. In the examples above, Sainen, just before his attempted self-drowning at Tennōji, wrote that he dedicated the merit of his act to his deceased parents, his Fujiwara ancestors, and to all living beings, that he and they might together achieve birth in the Pure Land and realize buddhahood (Takeuchi, *komonjohen* 64 [supplementary], 10:124), while the biography of Enkū notes that in the weeks before his death, he daily performed the transfer of merit, directing the benefit of his practices to the enlightenment of all living beings. Yoshida's distinction would seem to be a modern one; medieval commentators, while concerned in other ways about the attitudes underlying religious suicide, do not seem to have inquired whether it aimed at one's own liberation or that of others. Collections of Japanese monastic biographies, like those compiled earlier in China, group together persons who fast to death or perform auto-cremation, whether to reach a pure land or for other soteriologically motivated reasons, along with those engaging in other forms of painful bodily self-sacrifice such as stripping off skin, burning fingers or toes, or offering one's flesh to

mosquitoes. The interpretive category for *ōjō*-suicide, in short, was ascetic practice.¹²

A Question of Intent

While celebrated in hagiographies, acts of religious suicide were not universally approved. In 1174, learning of an ascetic's plans to immolate himself in the fire at the Funaoka cremation grounds, the courtier Nakayama Tadachika (1131–1195) condemned such acts as heretical, no different from the self-mortification of non-Buddhist ascetics. Bodhisattva Medicine King, whose celebrated act of auto-cremation is described in the *Lotus Sūtra*, had already freed himself from attachments, Tadachika said. "But when deluded ordinary worldlings of the past or present have done this, they must surely have experienced [evil] karmic recompense. And if we go by what is written in the legal codes, monks and nuns ought not to immolate themselves or mutilate their bodies" (*Kirei mondō* 139 [Hanawa 9:450]).¹³ Bracketing the issue of legality, which would have been difficult to enforce, Tadachika's criticism hinges on the issue of one's intent or underlying mental state, fundamental to Buddhist karma theory. Ordinary persons, he argues, are simply not capable of the resolve and self-detachment that self-immolation requires, and their attempts to emulate heroic bodhisattvas in the sūtras can only result in painful karmic retribution.

A contrasting view appears in the *Tales of Religious Aspiration* compiled by the literary recluse Kamo no Chōmei (1153/1155–1216). Chōmei had ties to circles of *hijiri*, that is, monks practicing outside formal temple organizations, often living in semi-reclusion and engaged in austere disciplines. Chōmei offers his views on religious suicide in his editorial comment on an account of a *Lotus Sūtra* reciter (*jikyōsha*) of Mr. Shosha in Harima province, a major site for ascetic practice. The story is worth examining in some detail for the light it sheds on contemporaneous attitudes toward "relinquishing the body." In the narrative, the *jikyōsha* confides to a senior monk: "My deep wish is to meet death with right mindfulness and so achieve birth in the [land of] Utmost Bliss, but it is impossible to know how one will die. So I am resolved to cast

11. In fairness, Yoshida tries to approach *ōjō*-suicide in Heian Japan on its own terms, contra earlier Japanese scholarship that had dismissed it as a degenerate practice.

12. See the biographies of ascetic practitioners in *Genkō shakusho* by Kokan Shiren (1278–1346) (*DBNZ* 62:133–34) and in *Honchō kōsōden* by Mangen Shiban (1626–1710; *DNBZ* 63:368–70), which reproduces several of Shiren's examples.

13. Tadachika's criticism may have been prompted by the auto-cremation mentioned last in the list of chronicle and diaries entries given on page 284, above.

aside this body now, while no particular deluded thoughts are troubling me and I am free from bodily illness. But to burn my body or drown in the sea would be too ostentatious, and the pain would be severe. So I have decided to make an end quietly, by fasting" (*Hosshinshū* 3:7 [Miki 143]). He also vows to maintain silence when not actually reciting the sūtra.

The *jikyōsha's* concerns reflect the importance assigned to underlying mental states. On one hand, he is concerned with "meeting death with right mindfulness" (*rinjū shōnen*), an issue of considerable anxiety not only for ascetics, but for premodern Japanese Buddhists in general. One's last thought at the liminal moment of death was held to exert a determinative influence on one's rebirth destination, exceeding even the cumulative acts of a lifetime. By dying with one's mind fixed calmly on Amida Buddha, it was said, even a sinful person might obtain birth in the Pure Land. Yet by the same token, the most devout practitioner, by a single stray desultory or misguided thought at the end, might in effect negate a lifetime of meritorious deeds and tumble down into the evil realms. Hence preparatory practice was deemed essential, and anxieties over whether or not one would be able to focus one's mind correctly at the end prompted many persons, clerics and lay devotees alike, to enlist the service of adepts who could chant Amida's name or other salvific mantras together with them at the end and help guide their dying thoughts appropriately.¹⁴ The *jikyōsha's* intended suicide, then, is motivated by a desire to direct the circumstances of his death to soteriological advantage by taking his own life before illness or senility might interfere with his mental concentration at the crucial last moment. At the same time, given the fact that spectators often gathered to witness acts of self-drowning and self-burning, he is aware of the danger that, in undertaking such an act, one might become preoccupied with one's performance and the desire to be seen as holy, an egocentric consideration that in itself would obstruct birth in the Pure Land. Thus he decides to die quietly by fasting and entreats his mentor to tell no one.

After a week, the senior monk visits the *jikyōsha* in his small hermitage and finds him reciting the sūtra. "How you must be weakened and suffering!" he exclaims. The *jikyōsha* responds in writing that at first he suffered terribly and feared that his determination would waver, but for the last two or three days, divine boys have appeared in his dreams and moistened his mouth with water so that he feels refreshed and confident that he can die with a focused mind. Trouble starts, however, when the elder monk, deeply impressed,

decides there can be no harm in telling his close disciples about the *jikyōsha's* experience. Soon reports spread of the *jikyōsha's* extraordinary resolve; first monks of the mountain start visiting him to form auspicious karmic ties, and then laypeople begin arriving from throughout the district. Night and day they gather to venerate the *jikyōsha* or throw rice (to ward off malign spirits); bound by his vow of silence, he is unable to object. Driven beyond endurance, he eventually disappears and is never seen again (*Hosshinshū* 3:7 [Miki 142-46]).

Possibly angry at being cheated, as they saw it, of the opportunity to form a superior karmic connection with this holy man, some people evidently began to circulate rumors that his presumed death by starvation was a punishment for having denied food to others in a previous life. Here Chōmei launches a passionate defense. All ascetic practices, he says, are based on restraining desire, mortifying the body, and subduing the mind. Are they all to be dismissed as painful retribution for evil deeds? Buddhas and bodhisattvas, in order to attain awakening, have carried out such austerities because they value the dharma but hold their own lives lightly. Our inability to follow their example is due to the baseness of our minds, Chōmei argues. Simply because we cannot emulate them, there is no need to slander those rare individuals who can. Shandao, he adds, flung himself to his death, and surely Shandao's *ōjō* cannot be in doubt. Chōmei then cites a passage from the "Medicine King" chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* to the effect that burning a finger or toe in offering to the Buddha surpasses the giving of realms, cities, wives, children, or countless precious objects (*Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 9:54a; Hurvitz 273). He comments that burning one's body or peeling off one's skin might appear to be of less use to the Buddha than offering a single flower or pinch of incense, but because relinquishing the body demands profound resolve and endurance of suffering, it constitutes a noble offering and eradicates the sins of prior lifetimes. Whether by fasting, auto-cremation, or drowning, the few persons capable of it are sure to achieve the Pure Land. The legitimacy of their sacrifice, Chōmei continues, is borne out by the appearance, even in the present, degenerate age, of wondrous confirmatory signs, such as mysterious fragrance or purple clouds. Weren't the Mt. Shosha ascetic's repeated dreams of divine youths who moistened his mouth just such a proof? "We should reverently believe [that he attained the Pure Land]," Chōmei concludes (*Hosshinshū* 3:7 [Miki 146-48]). Here Chōmei invokes the power of auspicious signs, widely accepted at the time, to establish that any particular individual had indeed achieved *ōjō*.

14. For an extended discussion of this topic see Stone, from which substantial sections of this chapter have been drawn.

Chōmei did not uncritically endorse religious suicide, a point made clear in the very next tale in his collection, which offers the negative example of a *hijiri* named Rengejō (*Hosshinshū* 3:8 [Miki 148–53]).¹⁵ Like the Mt. Shosha ascetic, Rengejō initially decides upon suicide to ensure correct mental focus at the time of death. He confides in the monk Tōren: “With the passage of years, I feel myself growing weaker, and there is no doubt that death approaches. Since my greatest hope is to die with right mindfulness, I intend to drown myself [now,] while my mind is clear.” Tōren is shocked. “Such a thing is not to be done. You should rather seek to accumulate the merit of chanting the *nenbutsu*, even by a single day. Such acts are the conduct of foolish people.” One imagines that Tōren’s reaction represented a common argument against religious suicide. But his admonitions have no effect, and when he sees that Rengejō is determined, Tōren promises to help with the arrangements. At length, Rengejō stands on the bank by a deep place in the Katsura River. He chants the *nenbutsu* in a loud voice and, after a moment, plunges into the water. Learning in advance of his act, a crowd has gathered to witness the *ōjō* of this holy man; their admiration knows no bounds. But sometime afterward, Tōren falls ill with symptoms that suggest possession. The possessing spirit appears and announces itself as Rengejō. He explains that he had changed his mind at the last moment but had been ashamed to back out in front of so many spectators. In his last thoughts of regret and resentment, he fell into the demonic realm. Chōmei comments:

This is a warning to people of this latter age. The human mind is hard to fathom; pure and honest thoughts will not necessarily arise [at the end]. One may desire to be thought superior to others or, out of pride or jealousy, foolishly make a lamp of one’s body or enter the sea on the assumption that one can thus be born in the Pure Land, performing such acts on a whim. This is no different from the painful austerities of [non-Buddhist] heretics and represents a great false view. The pain of entering fire or water is no ordinary thing, and if one’s resolve is not deep enough, how can it be endured? When one is in pain, the mind will not be settled. Without the Buddha’s aid, it will be impossible to maintain right mindfulness [in this situation]. (*Hosshinshū* 3:8 [Miki 151])

15. *Hosshinshū* 3:8 (Miki 148–53). This could be the same Rengejō mentioned as one of eleven ascetics who drowned themselves in the 1176 entry from *Hyakurenshō* cited on page 286, above.

Medieval didactic tales contain several examples like Tōren’s about suicides carried out to reach the Pure Land that fail due to a wrong attitude at the final moment.¹⁶ Sometimes they are paired with stories of practitioners who “get it right” by carefully testing their physical limits in advance. In one such case, an unnamed monk bent on drowning himself to reach the Pure Land worries that, under the stress of drowning, delusive thoughts may arise and impede his salvation. He prevails on a companion to row out with him on a lake and tie a rope to him, instructing that he will jerk on it if he changes his mind. Once in the water, his resolve wavers; he tugs on the line and is hauled out, dripping. On subsequent days, he makes a second and even a third unsuccessful attempt. Finally the day arrives when he leaps in and does not tug on the rope. “In the sky, celestial music was heard and a purple cloud trailed over the waves. When his friend beheld these auspicious signs, tears of gratitude fell with the water dripping from the oars.” Here, dignity of performance is humbly sacrificed to achieving correct mental focus, and the monk achieves the Pure Land (*Shasekishū* 4:8 [NKBT 85:192–93; trans. Morrell 149–50]).¹⁷

Chōmei, in his defense of ascetic suicide, also inveighs against the common view of “foolish people” who think that drowning is less painful than auto-cremation. He quotes “a certain *hijiri*” who reported, “When I was drowning in the water and on the point of death, I was rescued and barely survived. At the time, I thought the suffering of the hells could hardly be worse than the pain of the water forcing itself in through my nose and mouth. Those who think drowning is an easy death just don’t know what it’s like!” (*Hosshinshū* 3:8 [Miki 151–52]). In contrast to Tadachika, Chōmei clearly believed that, even in a latter age, some people were still capable of achieving liberation through ascetic self-sacrifice and were worthy of reverence. But he fully agreed that, unless rooted in proper intent, such acts could only be delusive.

This ambivalent potential of religious suicide is succinctly stated by Ippen (1239–1289), founder of a mendicant order known as the Jishū. According to his biography, three weeks before his death, Ippen admonished:

After I die, there will surely be some [among my followers] who fling their bodies [into the sea to follow me to the Pure Land]. If their minds are firmly established [in faith], then no matter what, there can be no impediment [to their *ōjō*]. But when one has not exhausted

16. See for example *Uji shū monogatari* 133 (NKBT 27:323–25; trans. Mills 349–50) and *Shasekishū* 4:7 (NKBT 85:190–92; trans. Morell 148–49).

17. For a similar case, see *Hosshinshū* 3:5 (Miki 137–38).

ego-attachments, [suicide] is something that should not be done. To discard in vain the body of a human being, difficult to obtain, [with which one practices] the Buddhist Way, is a wretched business indeed. (*Ippen hijiri-e* II [Tachibana and Umetani 107-08; trans. Brown 58, modified])¹⁸

Here Ippen makes clear that the very same act can be either liberative or delusive, depending upon one's mental state. Performed with firm faith and a complete lack of self-attachment, ascetic suicide cannot obstruct one's birth in the Pure Land; by implication, it would hasten that attainment. But if undertaken with any lingering egoistical concerns, it would entail, not only wrong thoughts at the determinative final moment, but the sin of vainly discarding the rare conjuncture of opportunities that makes escape from saṃsāra possible: birth as a human being and a connection with the Buddha-dharma. As Mark Blum has noted, "The problem lies not in the morality of the act but in the ability of the actor to complete it in the proper frame of mind" (156).

Half a dozen Jishū monks and lay followers did indeed drown themselves after Ippen's death in their desire quickly to rejoin him in the Pure Land.¹⁹ Strikingly, however, after the Jishū became institutionalized, these acts, which had been praised in hagiographies of Ippen, were condemned by the sectarian leadership on doctrinal grounds. According to mainstream understanding, birth in the Pure Land might be achieved via any number of good practices—chanting *nenbutsu* or other mantras, performing esoteric rites, reciting sūtras, commissioning buddha images, and performing charitable acts—and directing the merit of those practices toward *ōjō*. Jishū teachings, however, drew on the exclusive *nenbutsu* doctrine first articulated by the monk Hōnen (1133-1212), who had taught that people of this degenerate age are too ignorant and sinful to achieve liberation through traditional practices that depend upon one's own efforts (*jiriki*, literally, "self-power"). Rather, he said, they should single-mindedly chant the *nenbutsu*, entrusting themselves to "the power that is Other" (*tariki*), that is, the salvific workings of Amida's original vow to welcome to his Pure Land all who place faith in him. From this perspective, committing suicide to reach the Pure Land reflected an egoistic reliance on *jiriki*, the power of one's own acts, to bring about one's salvation.

18. See also Brown 58-59.

19. *Ippen hijiri-e* 12 numbers these individuals at seven; *Yugyō Shōnin engi-e* says there were six (Tachibana and Umetani 118, 142).

Jishū leadership a century later accordingly condemned those bereaved disciples of Ippen who had drowned themselves and denied that they had reached the Pure Land (*Yugyō jūrokudai Shikoku kaishinki*, cited in Ōhashi 113). Although articulated in the particular doctrinal terms of "self-power" versus "Other-power," this polemic, too, ultimately centered on one's mental stance.

The Expansion of Ōjō-Suicide

Up until now we have considered suicide carried out to reach the Pure Land within the context of ascetic practice. From around the thirteenth century, however, we find intersections with other traditions of heroic suicide, as well as novel developments of the *ōjō*-suicide theme in literature. As a result, the category expanded to include actors other than ascetic practitioners and, especially in literature, motives quite different from those legitimated by Buddhist orthodoxy. This section surveys some of those developments.

Dying to Rejoin Others

According to the Pure Land sūtras, people are born into Amida's land without the mediation of parents. Rather, one appears there spontaneously, seated inside a lotus blossom; when the lotus unfolds, one finds oneself in the Buddha's presence. By scriptural account, inhabitants of Amida's realm are uniformly gold in color, identical in their physical splendor. Presumably they are of a single gender or no gender at all; being free from desire, they do not have sexuality, nor do they reproduce.²⁰ They would seem to be undifferentiated, perhaps representing the impartial wisdom and compassion of enlightenment. Yet wherever Pure Land teachings have spread, practitioners have assumed that, in Amida's realm, they would be reunited with specific persons: their deceased teachers, relatives, or friends. Prayers for reunion in the Pure Land were often expressed as a desire to be born with another "on the same lotus pedestal" (*rendai*, or lotus calyx). Ideas of the Pure Land as a place of reunion facilitated a confluence of notions of *ōjō*-suicide with taking one's life to accompany or rejoin someone who had died before.

Loyalty suicide (Ch. *xunsi*, J. *junshi*) as a heroic display of fealty to one's lord was practiced in China and is also attested in Japan from early on. The third-century *Book of Wei* records of Himiko, a shamanic ruler in the ancient

20. Scholastic orthodoxy held that there are no women in Amida's realm; female practitioners are born there as men. This pronouncement was often ignored on the ground (Stone 102-04).

Japanese principality of Yamatai, that more than a hundred male and female attendants accompanied her in death (Chen 3:858).²¹ A 646 edict issued by Emperor Kōtoku forbade people from following a deceased person by hanging themselves or strangling others that they might follow him (*Nihon shoki* 25 [NKBT 68:294]). As these examples indicate, *junshi* could include the sacrifice of others on the death of a powerful person, and whether such deaths were truly “voluntary” or dictated by social expectation remains ambiguous. *Junshi* could also refer to a woman’s suicide following the death of her husband. During Japan’s medieval period, the *junshi* ideal was incorporated into the warrior ethos.

In some cases, loyalty suicide merged with suicide to reach the Pure Land. We have already mentioned the half dozen followers of Ippen who, after his death, drowned themselves in order to realize quickly “their aspiration to follow their *chishiki* [that is, their spiritual leader], their pledge to share a seat [i.e., a lotus calyx] with him, and the karmic affinity [that would allow them] to be born with him [in the Pure Land]” (*Ippen hijiri-e* 12; *Yūgyō Shōnin engi-e* [Tachibana and Umetani 117–18, 142; trans. Brown 50]).²² One of Hōnen’s followers, Saburō Tamemori, a warrior turned lay monk, is said to have committed *seppuku* in the hopes of rejoining his deceased teacher Hōnen and his feudal lord, Minamoto no Sanetomo.²³ Following the death of the Honganji leader Jitsunyo (1458–1525) of the Jōdo Shinshū or True Pure Land sect, some thirty-three people slit open their bellies or drowned themselves in a river or the sea.²⁴

In literature, suicide to reach the Pure Land expands to include persons who take their own lives in hopes of rejoining deceased lovers. The war epic *Tale of the Heike* tells how, when the Echizen governor Taira no Michimori is killed fighting against the Minamoto, his widow, the lady Kozaishō (d. 1184), resolves to follow him in death. Kozaishō’s former wet nurse and companion urges her instead to take Buddhist vows and devote herself to prayers for her deceased husband: “You must long to share one lotus throne with him [in the Pure Land], but you cannot know where in the six realms and four modes of birth your own rebirth will take you. Drowning yourself would mean

nothing, since you cannot count on reunion with him.” But the lady will not be dissuaded; she chants the *nenbutsu* a hundred times and, before casting herself into the sea, implores Amida,

O honor your Original Vow,
lead me hence to your Pure Land,
restore to me the love I lost,
seat us both on one lotus throne! (*Heike monogatari*
9 [NKBT 33:231; trans. Tyler 513]).

Cases like Kozaishō’s prefigure the theme, found in the early modern theater, of double suicides (*shinjū*), in which the Pure Land is envisioned as a place where lovers, unable to be united in this world, finally can be together (Heine).

As Lori Meeks has noted in examining the Kozaishō episode, the nurse’s argument was supported by Buddhist thinking: Michimori’s death in the heat of battle would hardly have been conducive to a Pure Land birth, and Kozaishō, not being a religious adept, would have likely found it hard during the ordeal of drowning to maintain the mental focus needed for her self-destruction to result in *ōjō*. The memoirs of a contemporary, one Lady Daibu, far from praising Kozaishō’s act, describe it as “an unparalleled tragedy” born of her excessive love for Michimori (*Kenreimon’in Ukyō no Daibu shū* [Itoga 79–80; trans. Harries 167–69]). But with the growth of warrior influence, over the century and more between the historical Kozaishō’s death and the compilation of extant versions of the *Heike*, her act came to be seen as a female equivalent of a warrior’s loyalty suicide. *Heike* praises her in terms drawn from Chinese classics as a chaste wife who does not serve two husbands (Meeks 152–54).

Mothers who Drown

Kozaishō’s drowning is thematically related to several stories about women who drown themselves in order to reach the Pure Land following the loss of a child. An early example, again from Chōmei’s *Tales of Religious Aspiration*, concerns a noblewoman and her daughter, who serve together at the court of Emperor Toba (r. 1107–1123). The daughter dies, and the mother is inconsolable, weeping continually even after a year or two has passed. Eventually, people lose sympathy and reproach her, saying, “You are not the first person to lose a child!” In the third year after her daughter’s death, without telling

21. Blum gives further examples (148–49).

22. Brown quips, “Presumably the calyx of a religious celebrity like Ippen would have been quite crowded with clerical disciples, lay followers, and assorted beneficiaries and hangers on” (50 n. 6).

23. For discussion of this episode see Blum 154–57.

24. For discussion see Blum *passim*.

anyone, the lady sets out for Tennōji—as we have seen, a major pilgrimage site for *nenbutsu* practitioners. She rents lodgings nearby and engages in intense *nenbutsu* recitation for twenty-one days. Gradually her mind clears. Telling her landlord that she wishes to see the famous coast at Naniwa, she persuades him to row her out to sea, where she faces west, chants the *nenbutsu*, and flings herself into the waves. “Ah, how dreadful!” her companion cries. He tries to pull her from the water, but she sinks like a stone.

Chōmei includes this tale, together with those discussed above, in a section of his collection devoted to religious suicide. The woman’s choice of Tennōji, a favorite location for *ōjō*-suicide, together with her focused *nenbutsu* chanting just prior to ending her life, are indeed consistent with this practice. But the narrative suggests that this woman’s act could well have been rooted in grief—a valid motive, from a normative perspective, to renounce the world, but not to take one’s own life. Buddhist orthodoxy maintains that “relinquishing the body” is liberating only when prompted by religious aspiration; to kill oneself out of sorrow or emotional attachment can only be seen as sinful. Up until the point in the narrative when the woman leaps into the sea, there is little to separate her act from the tragic suicide of a mother unhinged by grief over the loss of a beloved child. But then, at that very moment, purple clouds appear in the sky, witnessed by people on the beach, and fragrance envelops the boat. These incontrovertible signs alert the reader that, however deluded this woman’s conduct might outwardly appear, the appearance is misleading; in reality, hers is a case of *ōjō*. Subsequent discovery of her dream diary confirms this verdict, revealing that she had dreamt of being welcomed into the Pure Land by the bodhisattvas Jizō (Skt. Kṣitigarbha), Ryūju (Nāgārjuna), Fugen (Samantabhadra), Monju (Mañjuśrī), and finally, by Amida Buddha himself (*Hosshinshū* 3:6 [Miki 139–42]).

Birth in the Pure Land was believed to depend on right mindfulness in one’s final moments, but the content of a dying person’s mind was not something others could know. For survivors, the positive determination that a teacher, fellow practitioner, relative, or friend had indeed reached the Pure Land could only be made through the appearance of signs, such as purple clouds massing in the west or mysterious lights or fragrance. Dying with Amida’s name or some other holy invocation on one’s lips was similarly deemed a proof of *ōjō*. Where no positive indications were in evidence, they were sometimes produced, often in the form of auspicious dreams revealing someone to have achieved the Pure Land. The fortuitous “discovery” of auspicious signs seems to have occurred particularly with deaths that were tragic or untimely, thus encompassing them within the rubric of “*ōjō*” to give them

a salvific closure (Stone 211–18). Chōmei’s story suggests how the use of purple clouds or similar signs as a narrative device might, from the perspective of the living, transform a suicide prompted by grief into a soteriological achievement.²⁵

A similar story occurs in a biography of Hōnen relating his encounter in Harima province with a female entertainer called Tokurai, who is grieving over the death of her young son. With his spiritual insight, Hōnen perceives that the boy is suffering in hell for the sins of a prior life, and he encourages Tokurai quickly to achieve *ōjō* herself so that she can save him. Unlike Kōzaishō’s nurse, Hōnen does not urge her to offer memorial prayers for the boy’s sake. His advice as given here would seem to presume a strict reading of “Other Power” that differentiated his doctrine from the Buddhist mainstream. Because salvation, Hōnen taught, is achieved solely through reliance on Amida and not by one’s own good deeds, as a deluded ordinary worldly one cannot assist others’ liberation through rites of merit transfer but can aid them only by achieving birth in the Pure Land oneself and then returning from that realm as a bodhisattva. The sorrowing mother, however, takes Hōnen’s words more literally than he intended:

“How sad what you have told me, that my child is in hell. But how happy I am to learn that I will be able to save him by saying the *nenbutsu* at the time of my death [and thereby going to the Pure Land]!” So saying, she left his presence and boarded a boat; she had her women board as well and row her far into the offing. She chanted “*Namu Amida-butsu*” just ten times.²⁶ Then exclaiming, “May my child and the one buddha [Amida] meet me in the Pure Land!” Tokurai, age thirty-one, leapt into the depths of the sea. At that time, purple clouds gathered in the west. Her body was never recovered, just as though it had been taken up by [Amida’s] welcoming host. (*Hōnen Shōnin hiden* 3 [JZ 17:312–33])

25. This can be also be seen in the *Genpei seisui* 47 episode of the “nun with the skull” (*dokuro no ama*) (Kondō 33:663–73). A Taira noblewoman, crazed with grief after the victorious Minamoto have beheaded her young son, is persuaded to take religious vows but refuses to relinquish her son’s head, which she wears in a bag around her neck. She becomes a ragged mendicant and eventually drowns herself in the sea off Tennōji. Where most versions of the text depict her death as the tragic suicide of a distraught mother, one recension, the Chōmonbon, undercuts that impression by the addition of purple clouds, music, and fragrance that manifest at her drowning, firmly establishing her as an *ōjōnin* (673).

26. Ten earnest recitations of Amida’s name at the moment of death were considered sufficient to reach the Pure Land.

Tokurai's example illustrates a recurring trope in Pure Land literature of an exceptionally pure-hearted individual who, on being told but once of the promise Amida's Pure Land, immediately discards bodily life in the resolve to go there.²⁷ Here, too, as in Chōmei's narrative, the gathering of purple clouds in the west is deemed incontrovertible proof that the woman has not been dragged down by delusive emotional attachment, but has indeed achieved *ōjō*. These stories suggest how a discursive veil of "birth in the Pure Land" may have been drawn over suicides that, being prompted by grief, would otherwise have been seen as tragic or even sinful. Tales of this kind push back, as it were, against doctrinal orthodoxy by assimilating the proofs of *ōjō* to acts driven by deep human emotion, which is thereby valorized, undercutting normative soteriological demands for non-attachment.

At the same time, these stories undeniably reflect a gendered ethos of maternal self-sacrifice. As seen in the diary entry, cited above, about the "nun of the 'Medicine King' chapter" who immolated herself in the fire at Toribeno in 1026, female practitioners sometimes did commit suicide as an ascetic act, if not as frequently as their male counterparts. In literature, however, this rarely happens. Men perform religious suicide either to reach the Pure Land themselves, or for abstract universal principles: as an offering to the dharma or to benefit living beings. For women, suicide to reach the Pure Land is an extension of devotion to a particular person, usually a husband or child. The ideal grief suicide is female.

Ōjō-Suicide and War Tales

The thirteenth through sixteenth centuries saw the production of war tales (*gunki monogatari*) celebrating the heroic exploits and noble deaths of warriors who fought in the many local insurrections and widespread civil strife of Japan's medieval period. In these tales, heroic death on the battlefield—including the practice of warrior suicide to erase the shame of defeat and avoid capture by the enemy—merge with elements of suicide aimed at reaching the Pure Land. In an account of the 1391 Meitoku uprising, the warrior Namera Hyōgo, fighting to the point of collapse in defense of his lord,

27. Examples include the layman in *Xu gaoseng zhan* 27, mentioned above, who flings himself from a tree following Shandao's sermon, and the warrior Ajisaka Nyūdō, who drowns himself in aspiration for the Pure Land after hearing Ippen's teaching (*Ippen hijiri-e* 6 and *Yugyō Shōnin engi-e* 2 [Tachibana and Umetani 50–51, 128–29]).

fends off his assailants and calls out, "I'm exhausted with fighting; let me lie down in peace! I entrust myself to Amida's welcome. People, watch me achieve *ōjō*!" And turning west, he places his palms together and dies on the spot, while foes and allies alike marvel (*Meitokuki* [Tomikura 79]). "Watch the self-destruction of a man of courage!" Satō Tadanobu, ally of the doomed Yoshitsune, calls out to his enemies. He then calmly chants the *nenbutsu* thirty times and recites a prayer transferring the merit he has generated to others; then he slashes open his belly and continues chanting *nenbutsu* as he waits for death (*Gikeiki* [NKBT 37:251; McCullough 1971, 205]). In a narrative of the fall of Sasako castle in Kazusa, the lord, Tsurumi Nobunaka, seeing that the battle has turned against him, seeks out the monk Chōyo, who is in service to his family. Chōyo confers on him the ten *nenbutsu*—usually recited by a dying person but here ritually bestowed upon a warrior headed for battle. Chōyo also counsels Tsurumi that he should envision Amida's name as a sharp sword to sever the bonds of birth and death and regard the enemy as ignorance (*mumyō*), which he now has the opportunity of a lifetime to dispel. "In the space of a moment, you will realize supreme awakening. And I shall not be long [behind you]. Together we shall be born on a lotus blossom in the Pure Land." Tsurumi returns to the battle and fights bravely, but the outlook is hopeless. Just as he faces west and draws his dagger, ready to commit *seppuku*, an enemy warrior bears down on him. Tsurumi bursts into laughter. "Take my head quickly!" he cries. His voice continues chanting the *nenbutsu* even after his head is severed, and all who witness or hear of his death praise him ("Sasako ochi no sōshi" [Chiba-ken Kyōdo Shiryō Kankōkai 1:142–43]).

Heroic death by *seppuku* or in doomed resistance, aimed at winning honor and leaving one's name to posterity, represents a vastly different ethos from ascetic suicide aimed at achieving birth in a pure land. Nonetheless, they share notable similarities. Both idealize mental control in one's final moments over physical pain and the fear of death. And, especially as celebrated in literary accounts, the adept's sacrifice of his body to reach the Pure Land and the glorious suicide of a warrior choosing death over defeat were in effect both public performances that might be judged by specific criteria and be told and retold by admiring survivors; both offered admission to a transcendent community, whether of *ōjōnin* in the Pure Land or of great heroes of military tradition.

A gendered distinction also plays out in war tales. In these epics, women take their own lives, and sometimes those of their children, to avoid capture, rape, or murder by the enemy. Drowning is the most commonly employed method, and the female suicides in these narratives are often thematically

related to the tales of women who fling themselves into the sea to rejoin a lost husband or child in the Pure Land. The most famous of such episodes is the *Heike* account of the Nun of the Second Rank (Lady Nii, 1126–1185) or Taira no Tokiko, grandmother of Emperor Antoku, who drowns herself together with the eight-year-old sovereign when the Taira ships are overtaken by their enemies, the Minamoto, at the battle of Dan-no-ura. This was of course a real historical incident; Tokiko did indeed drown herself with the child emperor and several attendants. But in the *Heike's* literary retelling, she is going to Amida's land:

For some time Lady Nii had expected what she now saw.
 She threw her two gray nun's robes over her head,
 lifted high her beaten silk trouser-skirts . . .
 and lifted the Emperor in her arms.
 "I may be a woman," she said, "but I will not let the enemy take me.
 No, Your Majesty, I shall accompany you.
 All those loyal to our sovereign, follow me!" . . .
 "First, Your Majesty, if you please,
 Face east and say goodbye to the Grand Shrine of Ise²⁸;
 then, trusting Amida to welcome you into his Western Paradise,
 face west and call his Name.
 This land of ours . . . is not a nice place,
 I am taking you now to a much happier one, the Pure Land of
 [Utmost] Bliss." (*Heike monogatari* 11 [NKBD 33:336; trans.
 Tyler 610]).²⁹

In the *Heike* narrative, Lady Nii's resolute act unites to the rhetoric of *ōjō*-suicide both loyalty to a doomed sovereign, and a resolve not to fall into enemy hands.

Similar episodes involve less exalted personages. The fourteenth-century *Chronicle of the Great Peace* tells of the warrior Aikawa Tokiharu, sent to Echizen to put down an uprising. When it becomes clear that Tokiharu's forces are outnumbered and cannot hold out, he sends for a monk to tonsure himself, his wife, and their two sons. (It was common to administer the

28. Shrine of the sun goddess, the divine imperial ancestor.

29. See also Meeks 156–61.

tonsure to adults just before death, so that one might die as a monk or nun.) Since the boys are certain to be killed by the enemy, Tokiharu resolves that they should accompany him in death. He urges his wife to live on and remarry, but she refuses. "Were our prayers to be united for a thousand lifetimes in vain? . . . Rather I will die with the one I love and be true to our vow to share the same moss-covered grave." Tokiharu then orders that the boys be drowned in the Kamakura River. Their mother escorts them to the riverbank, together with their two nursemaids, and tells them: "This river is called the lake of eight virtues in the Pure Land of Utmost Bliss, a place where children are born to play. Say the *nenbutsu* just as I do, and then let's go into the river." The boys sit facing west, joining their palms together like their mother, and loudly chant Amida's name. The two nursemaids each take one of the boys in her arms and jump with them into the green depths, and their mother flings herself in after them (*Taiheiki* 11 [NKBT 34:378–80; see also McCullough 328–30]).

"Going to the Pure Land" is clearly not the driving motivation for this woman's suicide. Her story conveys a complex mixture of grief, loyalty, honor, and the harsh demands of a military culture in time of war. Episodes like hers represent a female parallel to the male warrior's defiant self-disembowelment in the face of defeat. We have already seen how the rhetoric of *ōjō* may have been deployed to soften the tragedy of suicides committed out of despair, as in stories of women who drown themselves to rejoin deceased husbands or children in the Pure Land. Episodes in war tales such as that of Tokiharu's wife suggest that notions of "going to the Pure Land" may have similarly been extended to aestheticize and legitimate other violent and untimely deaths, thus domesticating the horror of war.

Conclusion

In Japan, taking one's life to reach a pure land initially developed in a Buddhist renunciatory context and was performed chiefly by monastics, especially *hijiri* or other practitioners of an ascetic bent. Debates over its propriety centered, not on the morality of the act itself, but on whether the actors were capable of the requisite detachment and resolve. As an idealized model of noble death, *ōjō*-suicide eventually overlapped other, non-Buddhist traditions of heroic self-destruction, such as suicide to accompany one's lord in death or a warrior's act of *seppuku* to avoid disgrace in defeat. In literature, especially, it assumes a gendered dimension, constructing as "*ōjō*" the suicides of women

following the loss of children or to avoid capture by the enemy in wartime. These stories suggest how rhetoric of “going to the Pure Land” may have been deployed to recast in a salvific light suicides that would otherwise be seen as sinful or unbearably tragic. In so doing, they ironically open the category of *ōjō*-suicide to include actors whose intense emotional bonds of obligation and affection would have been seen, from a purely doctrinal perspective, as insurmountable hindrances to salvation.


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CHAPTER I

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Martyrdom,
Self-Sacrifice, and
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Religious Perspectives on Suicide



Edited by

MARGO KITTS

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Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	vii
1. Introduction: On Death, Religion, and Rubrics for Suicide—MARGO KITTS	I
2. To Die For: The Evolution of Early Jewish Martyrdom—SHMUEL SHEPKARU	18
3. Performing Christian Martyrdoms—GAIL P. STREETE	40
4. Collective Martyrdom and Religious Suicide: The Branch Davidians and Heaven's Gate—CATHERINE WESSINGER	54
5. Martyrdom and its Contestations in the Formative Period of Islam—ASMA AFSARUDDIN	85
6. The Death of Mūsā al-Kāzīm (d. 183/799): Knowledge and Suicide in Early Twelver Shī'ism—NAJAM HAIDER	106
7. Apologia for Suicide: Martyrdom in Contemporary Jihadist Discourse—MOHAMMED M. HAFEZ	126
8. Hindu Ascetic Death—MARY STORM	140
9. Sati—DAVID BRICK	162
10. Dying Heroically: Jainism and the Ritual Fast to Death—ANNE VALLELY	182
11. The Tropics of Heroic Death: Martyrdom and the Sikh Tradition—LOUIS E. FENECH	205