

The Material Imagination of a Japanese Tendai *Welcoming Descent of Amida* Embroidery

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Abstract: Sanskrit seed-syllables appear with startling frequency on Japanese images embroidered with human hair from the thirteenth century onward. These embroideries evoke one's somatic presence and yet also conflate and materially transform the body into sacred word. This paper disentangles the material fabrication and visual program of a fourteenth-century *Welcoming Descent of Amida Triad* hair embroidery from the Tokugawa Art Museum. In so doing, it seeks to reveal the myriad receptions of this textile that extend beyond Pure Land Buddhist devotion. Turning to the *Zōtanshū* written by the monk Mujū Ichien, this paper illustrates how hair embroidery was considered a suitable medium for attaining Buddhahood in this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏). It then argues that a variety of deathbed rites—chanting the *nenbutsu*, visualizing the Seed-Syllable A, reciting portions of the *Lotus Sūtra* and chanting the mantra of Fudō myōō—could all be performed in front of this single embroidery.

Keywords: Tendai Pure Land thought, Amida Buddha, embroidery, tonsured hair, Mujū Ichien, *sokushin jōbutsu*, *ajikan*, deathbed rituals

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Introduction

Before its designation as a *jūyō bunkazai* 重要文化財 (Important Cultural Property) in 1996, one of the greatest achievements of Kamakura period (1185–1333) embroidery sat quietly rolled up inside a wooden box housed within the storage space of the Tokugawa Art Museum (Fig. 1). Contained within a frame of lotus arabesque motifs, the Amida Buddha 阿弥陀如来 (Skt. Amitābha) stands behind two smaller attendant bodhisattvas of Kannon 観音 (Avalokiteśvara) and Seishi 勢至 (Mahāstāmaprāpta). Touching forefinger to thumb, his hands form the mudra of welcoming descent (Jp. *raigō* 来迎). Positioned frontally, the Buddha faces the viewer directly, allowing the devotee to imagine themselves within the scene. This frontal type was a variation of the more typical three-quarter view presented in *Amida raigōzu* 阿弥陀来迎図 (*Welcoming Descent of Amida*) embroideries and it remained relatively unusual in Japan, slowly gaining in popularity during the fourteenth century.¹ The bodhisattvas, in contrast, face inward, providing a sense of movement in curvilinear posture by shifting their weight onto a single foot. In response to the viewer's devotion, Kannon extends a bejeweled lotus pedestal upon which the devotee will kneel and be transported with the promise of rebirth into the *Gokuraku* 極楽 (Western Paradise).

This embroidery conveying a joyous death is dated to the first half of the fourteenth century based on stylistic evidence and was part of the personal collection of Tokugawa Mitsutomo 徳川光友 (1625–1700), the second lord of the Owari Tokugawa 尾張徳川 family. The *Welcoming Descent of Amida Triad*, an established iconographical type found widely in media such as painting and sculpture, was particularly suitable for display during anxious moments leading up to the final hours of one's life for visualizing the attainment of rebirth in the Pure Land.² The monumentality of the Amida Buddha

¹ On the relationship between the frontal view and three-quarter view of *Welcoming Descent of Amida* images, see Yamamoto, 'Raigōzu no shōmenkan' and Sudo, 'E no uchi to soto', 43–47.

² For more publications on the development of the *Welcoming Descent of*



FIG. 1 *Welcoming Descent of Amida Triad* (*Amida sanzō raigō zu* 阿弥陀三尊来迎図). Japan, Kamakura Period (1185–1333) or Nanbokuchō Period (1336–1392), 14th century. Embroidery completely covering plain weave silk, 105 cm x 40.7 cm. The Tokugawa Art Museum.

distinguished the deity from all other figures in the work, disclosing the posthumous benefits awaiting those who ritually chant his name (*nenbutsu* 念仏) in the formula of ‘Namu-Amida-butsu’. This typology and the final provenance of the image, as it was last housed in the Pure Land Buddhist *bodaiji* 菩提寺 (family mortuary temple) known as Kenchūji 建中寺 for the merit of departed members of Mitsumoto’s family, has led curators to describe the embroidery as a masterpiece of Pure Land Buddhism when it was last exhibited in 2020 at the Tokugawa Art Museum.

Yet, closer inspection of the novel imagery reveals a different story regarding the originally intended practices that viewers may have participated in while contemplating the image. Most striking are the forty-eight Sanskrit Seed-Syllables of the letter A, each enclosed within a moon disk emerging like a luminous bulb from intertwined lotus stems among the mandorla’s embossed decorative pattern of lotus blossoms.³ If we extend our gaze further outwards to the threshold of the image, there are two additional seed-syllables denoting Yakushi nyorai 薬師如来 (Skt. Bhaisajyaguru Tathāgata, the Medicine Buddha) and Shaka nyorai 釈迦如来 (Śākyamuni, the Historical Buddha) on the left and right border edges. The mounting above the frame depicts twenty-five Sanskrit seed-syllables to convey the twenty-five bodhisattvas said to descend from the Pure Land to welcome the devotee alongside the Amida Buddha at the moment of death while the base of the mounting depicts Fudō myōō 不動明王 (Acala) on the right and Bishamonten 毘沙門天 (Vaiśravaṇa) on the left standing upright between a lotus pond.

Another striking aspect of the embroidery is its corporeal materiality. Using a basic backstitch technique achievable even by the novice needleworker, each seed-syllable was formed with two or three strands of human hair bundled together as thread.⁴ Moving

Amida Triad imagery, see Chusid, ‘The Miraculous Descent’; Jōji, *Pure Land Buddhist Painting*; Miller, ‘Raigo’.

³ For a discussion on the significance of the Seed-Syllable A, see Payne, *Language in the Buddhist Tantra*.

⁴ To my knowledge, no scientific testing has been conducted to deter-

above and below the mandorla, our gaze discovers that the snail-shell curls of the Buddha, the cascading locks of the bodhisattvas, and the inscription from the *Muryōju-kyō* 無量寿経 [Skt. *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra*; Sūtra of the Buddha of the Larger Pure Land] are all materialized using the same lustrous matter of human hair, as if to impart the powers of its sacred form onto that with which it is made. The sheen and thickness of this material contrasts with the meticulously short stitches of crimson, green, and azurite silk floss that pierces the remaining silk gauze surface. Traces of the human body are thereby refracted and reimagined in this embroidery as a material encasement for the divine: the polluted becoming indivisible with that which is sacred.

The spectacular discovery of this object belies previous claims regarding the inextricable link between hair embroidered images and Pure Land Buddhist practices. In 1964, the Nara National Museum organized the first exhibition on Buddhist embroideries, publicizing over one hundred and fifty objects with the majority dated based on stylistic evidence to the Kamakura and Muromachi periods (1336–1573).⁵ Given the frequency in which the Amida Buddha is portrayed, Ishida Mosaku suggested that the practice of embroider-

mine whether or not human hair was actually used for the Tokugawa National Museum embroidery. At least two tests, however, have been conducted to try to determine the materiality of Japanese embroidered Buddhist images. For instance, a blood type test was performed on a single hair extracted from the Izusan Shrine 伊豆山神社 *Shuji bokke mandara* 種子法華曼荼羅 (Sanskrit Seed-Syllable Lotus Sūtra Maṇḍala) in 1984 to ascertain that its owner had Type O Blood. Cross-section microscopy (CSM) has also been performed to reveal a circular shape which offers further evidence for the use of human hair in embroideries. To the naked eye, the texture of the black fibers appears thicker and glossier than the form of polychromatic threads. Some scholars have suggested the possibility that horse-hair may have also been used since the fibers can at times be quite thick. Itō Shinji has advocated for further scientific testing and received a research grant to study the techniques and material properties of embroidered Buddhist images. These scientific findings from 2017 are yet to be published. Itō, 'Shūbutsu', 93–94.

⁵ Ishida and Nishimura, *Shūbutsu*, 6–7.

ing Buddhist images may have been promoted by the so-called ‘new schools’ of Pure Land Buddhism as another easy practice, like the *nenbutsu*, to assure one’s rebirth in the Western Paradise. Because the teachings of new schools were thought to be well-suited for the needs of commoners, the use of hair was explained away as a convenient material. A strand of hair was simple to access and a stitch or two could be quickly completed, he argued, which may have led to the medium’s appeal to people at large. The problem with this argument, however, is that it approaches these textiles against a misleading rubric, rendering Pure Land Buddhism as a distinct homogenous entity in competition rather than direct dialogue with old schools of Esoteric Buddhism.

Recent scholarship has endeavored to overturn straightforward interpretations of hair embroidery as a simply plebian practice. With the discovery of these embodied textiles within collections of opulent imperial convents and within Shingon 真言 Buddhist headquarters of Mount Kōya 高野山, Itō Shinji refutes the claim that hair embroideries appealed mostly to commoners who had little access to other materials and posits a much wider viewership extending into circles of the aristocracy, elite warrior monks, and highly learned monks. Such a perspective of embroidery as a simple and dependable path to salvation also ignores the tremendous effort, meditative state, and dexterity of skill required for completing such an undertaking. Indeed, pervasive assumptions of embroidery as unskilled, diminutive, or domestic craft seem to project our own contemporary artificial divisions between paintings and textiles rather than the perception of those from the past.

Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis’ influential publications on hair embroideries have pointed towards a need to reinscribe binary Esoteric/Pure Land oppositions in the study of Japanese Buddhist images. Noting the startling frequency with which Sanskrit seed-syllables appear on embroideries depicting the Amida Buddha, ten Grotenhuis seeks to read this medium as an esotericizing impulse to redefine Pure Land Buddhist imagery.⁶ This perspective aligns with more recent scholarly

⁶ ten Grotenhuis, ‘Collapsing the Distinction’, 889.

models on medieval Japanese religion that perceive Kamakura Buddhist practices and institutional hermeneutical stances as fluid rather than divided in rebellion against old schools of Esoteric Buddhism.⁷ Yet, newly yielded documentary evidence has shed further insight into the soteriological significance of stitching hair into Sanskrit seed-syllables that offer further proof to extend the practice beyond Pure Land Buddhist-centric analyses.

The writings of Mujū Ichien 無住一円 (1226–1312), a monk who allied himself with Rinzai Zen but preached doctrines that transcended sectarian boundaries, attest to the great soteriological interest given to the material of hair. In a collection of Buddhist teachings known as *Zōtanshu* 雑談集 [Casual Digressions; 1305] written during the same century as the Tokugawa Art Museum embroidery's making, Mujū describes the soteriological benefits of hair embroidery. He claims that stitching hair into a Sanskrit Seed-Syllable destabilizes and transforms one's identity in this life and into the next, enabling one to attain the central tenant of esoteric Buddhism of realizing *sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏 (Buddhahood in this very body). Moreover, a close examination of the Sanskrit seed-syllables as well as the guardian figures on the base of the Tokugawa Art Museum embroidery reveals a surface where viewers could act out a myriad of readings extending beyond devotion to the Amida Buddha. Its surface suggests a variety of Tendai Pure Land rites—chanting the *nenbutsu*, *ajikan* 阿観 (visualizing the seed-syllable A), and reciting portions of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the mantra of Fudō myōō—could all be performed in front of the single image. Shifting our attention from narrowly confined typologies to the embroidery's visual program in its entirety uncovers the wider scope of ritual possibilities that more accurately reflect the realities of deathbed practices that took place in fourteenth-century Japan.

⁷ For more on this issue of esoteric Pure Land thought, see Proffitt, *Esoteric Pure Land*; Sanford, 'Breath of Life'; Stone, 'Just Open Your Mouth'.

Hair Embroidery and Mortuary Rites

The earliest known records of hair embroideries reveal the crucial role the medium played in the context of *tsuizen* 追善 memorial services as a marker of grief and as a material reassurance of rebirth for departed family members. The diary of the regent, Kujō Kanezane 九条兼実 (1149–1207), documents in detail the funerary and memorial rites performed after the death of his first-born son, Fujiwara no Yoshimichi 藤原良通 (1167–1188) on the Nineteenth Day of the Second Month of 1188. Buddhist monks made every effort to revive Yoshimichi after his sudden collapse, but it was all to no avail, and at the Hour of the Boar (around 10:00 p.m.), they performed Yoshimichi's tonsure (*teihatsu* 剃髮) and shaved his head as an important first step for preparing the body for the funeral. The monks then administered his precepts and granted him with the posthumous Buddhist name Zōdō 増道. Yoshimichi, the young minister of the centre who had a hopeful future as the leader of the Kujō branch of the prestigious Fujiwara family, passed at just twenty-two years old.

The first reference to hair embroidery appears forty-one days after Yoshimichi's death among a variety of rites performed over the coming days and weeks to memorialize him and to pray for his auspicious rebirth. The memorial rite took place on the Second Day of the Fourth Month at the Fujiwara clan temple of Hosshōji 法性寺 in front of an Amida Buddha painting with offerings of the *Lotus Sūtra* copied on the back of Yoshimichi's letters. During the ceremony, the hair of Yoshimichi was stitched into the lotus pedestal of the central deity in an image of a *Shaka sanzō zō* 釈迦三尊像 (Śākyamuni Triad), likely the same hair that was cut to mark his renunciation on the day of death.⁸ The second reference to embroidering with human hair appears ninety-seven days after Yoshimichi's death on the Twenty-Ninth Day of the Fifth Month.⁹ Kanezane's diary describes Hachijō'in 八条院 (1137–1211), the aunt of Yoshimichi and the daughter of Emperor Toba 鳥羽天皇 (1103–1156), stitching her

⁸ *Gyokuyō*, vol. 3, 506.

⁹ *Gyokuyō*, vol. 3, 515.

nephew's hair into an image of the *brīh* Seed-Syllable of the Amida Buddha. The dates in which these hair embroideries were made—forty-one days and ninety-seven days after death—are significant as they imply preparations for the consequential forty-ninth day and one-hundredth-day memorial services when the soteriological fate of the deceased is decided.¹⁰ The living forged contact with the absent dead during these memorial rites by lecturing on sūtras, reading *ganmon* 願文 (votive texts), and chanting dhāraṇī, but the quantity and quality of their offerings played another crucial role in enacting their auspicious rebirth.¹¹

Indeed, Kanezane's diary offers a window into the rich material culture dedicated in Yoshimichi's memorial rites which can be associated with his physical traces. The bereaved wore Yoshimichi's court cap and garments for a sūtra chanting ritual. They copied sūtras on papers with his handwriting. They even etched an image of the Amida Buddha on the reverse of his personal mirror. In an analysis of palimpsests and the reuse of handwritten letters in mortuary rites, Halle O'Neal argues that this practice sought to unite the original text of the dead with the numinous presence of the Buddha.¹² The brushed characters, she writes, contain the 'somatic signature' of the departed. Handwriting became a visible point of access for the living to reach the beloved, transforming the letter from a missive to a memorial artifact. By offering the departed's letter, mirror, clothing, or hair, the bereaved sought to unite these material objects of the deceased loved one with that which is sacred.

While all these objects may have had similar ritual functions and ignited similar responses to grief and mourning, the poetic associations of its materiality differed. To borrow from Gaston Bachelard's account of material imagination, he explains that while the form

¹⁰ If these dates were deemed inauspicious in the calendrical system, the memorial service would take place at an earlier date. See, Gerhart, *The Material Culture*, 38–39.

¹¹ For a discussion on Heian period (794–1185) memorial rituals, see Tanabe, 'The Lotus Lectures'.

¹² O'Neal, 'Inscribing Grief and Salvation', 5–9.

of an image plays ‘on the surface of an element without giving the imagination time to work upon its matter’, material imagination recognizes matter as the ‘mother substance of all dreams’.¹³ That is, the tangible bits out of which an object is assembled—silk thread, hair, or paper—he claims, project the propensity of the object far more deeply than form ever could. As O’Neal indicates, personal letters are bound with poetic associations of its writers’ identity and personhood, a material imagination that is not identical to that of personal mirrors, clothing, or hair.

Expanding beyond a repertoire of death rituals, Paul Copp observes in the study of dhāraṇī in later medieval China the potent efficacy of incantations through their very own materiality as amulets worn or syllables engraved on memorial stelae.¹⁴ Dhāraṇī-inscribed mortuary pillars, he argues, were thought to transmit the enchanted wind, dust, and shadows cast off the monument to the bodies of the beloved deceased buried below. Denoting these objects as ‘material incantations’, Copp notes that distinct forms of sacred power manifest through the matter and use of said image. Buddhist bells cast in bronze with Sanskrit seed-syllables, for instance, may manifest and reverberate the textual relics of each inscribed deity after the physical action of ringing the bell. In the case of embroideries, the action of stitching hair into a Sanskrit seed-syllable enacted an embodied transcription allowing the maker to somatically and corporeally connect with the textual signifier of the body of the Buddha. Sacred word then is animated in different ways not despite, but by its very own materiality.

Ever since Edmund Leach published his influential essay ‘Magical Hair’ in 1958, scholars have written about hair as a symbol: a productive site of diverse and contradictory forms of social, political, and cosmological meaning.¹⁵ Leach notes that haircutting, as a ritual act and a public symbol, can be identified with unconscious meanings of castration and by extension, chastity and renunciation. But hair is

¹³ Bachelard and Farrell, *Water and Dreams*, 2, 10–11, 22.

¹⁴ Copp, *The Body Incantatory*, 195–96.

¹⁵ Leach, ‘Magical Hair’.

also a material and tactile thing. It is haptically experienced, stimulating vision and touch, to viscerally connect the subject viewing the work to that of its material. In medieval Japanese Buddhism, memorial locks of hair were buried at Mount Kōya and other sacred sites as material traces of a departed loved one, deposited inside wooden statues to activate and animate the image, and bound together in ropes at Higashi Honganji 東本願寺 to signify renewal, rejuvenation, and generative power.¹⁶

Though the poetic associations of hair are numerous—rejuvenation, animation, material trace, sexuality—in the context of Yoshimichi's death rituals, we are describing a very particular type of hair: that which has been ritually cut as part of the tonsure. The cutting of hair, in medieval Japan, was a marker of transition distinguishing an abstract 'before' from an abstract 'after', that is, the liminal states from adolescence to adulthood, from laymen to monk, and from life to death itself. Not surprisingly, vignettes of men and women taking the tonsure by shaving or cutting their hair were represented in numerous handscrolls including the *Ippen hijiri-e* 一遍聖絵 (1299), *Kōbō Daishi Gyōjō emaki* 弘法大師行狀絵巻 (fourteenth c.), and the *Haizumi monogatari emaki* 掃墨物語絵巻 (fourteenth c.). The visual emphasis on this act of taking the tonsure expresses its karmic significance and the impact that it had on the individual and the larger world.¹⁷ In addition to a marker of transformation, haircutting was a material act of origination that could guard against *mononoke* 物怪 (evil spirits) and prolong life. *Murasaki Shikibu nikki* 紫式部日記 [The Diary of Lady Murasaki; 1008–1010] describes the experience of a difficult childbirth for the eldest daughter of Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 (966–1028), Empress Shōshi 藤原彰子 (988–1074). The author portrays a traumatic scene of the birthing mother near death until monks intervened and cut a lock of Shōshi's hair. The author pronounces this act of haircutting as a method of protecting

¹⁶ For more on the use of hair in medieval Japanese Buddhism, see Brinker, *Secrets of the Sacred*; Curley, 'Dead Matter and Living Memory'; Fister, 'Creating Devotional Art'; and Nishiguchi, 'Where the Bones Go'.

¹⁷ On the *Ippen hijiri-e* scroll, see Foxwell, 'The Pulled Back View'.

Shōshi against evil and jealous spirits and shares her relief of seeing the emergence of the healthy first son and future emperor, Prince Atsuhiro 敦成親王 (1008–1036).¹⁸

Whether stitched in remembrance of one's ordination or to mourn the loss of a loved one, these embodied embroideries commemorate the ritual act of the tonsure which served as a liminal marker of transformation from one of the *ie* 家 (household) to that of the *saṅgha*, from the liminal position between death to that of new life. Kamakura-period widows performing memorial rites for their husbands also took the tonsure and cut their hair as an act of mourning. Hōjō Masako 北条政子 (1157–1225), the widow of the pivotal warrior, Minamoto no Yoritomo 源頼朝 (1147–1199) who established the Kamakura bakufu also performed the role of bereaved wife by cutting her hair to become a nun.¹⁹ On the thirteenth day of the first month of 1200, *Azuma kagami* 吾妻鏡 [The Mirror of the East] describes Masako stitching her devotionally trimmed locks into a seed-syllable and dedicating the object for the one-year memorial service of Yoritomo.²⁰

Further evidence of haircutting's transformative role can be gleaned from the ordination practices of nuns. While the act of cutting hair causes little pain to the body, its removal had significant social consequences especially for women as hair length was an important indicator of social status. Katsuura Noriko has observed that many medieval women followed a two-part pattern of ordination throughout their lives, often beginning with partial cutting of shoulder-length hair to full ordination by shaving the head to express

¹⁸ Katsuura, 'Amasogi kō', 25–26.

¹⁹ *Azuma kagami*, vol. 32, 581.

²⁰ Widows from all classes of society took the tonsure and became nuns for religious devotion and for economic reasons in Kamakura period Japan. It guaranteed access to property for themselves and children and, in the context of Masako, it displayed loyalty to Minamoto's lineage. After the act of tonsure, many nuns returned to secular forms of life while others lived among a community of women and participated in monastic learning in convents. On tonsure and kinship, see Glassman, 'Chinese Buddhist Death Ritual'.

varying levels of worldly abandonment. Completely shaving the head—as Fujiwara no Senshi 藤原詮子 (962–1002) had done a few months prior to death and Fujiwara no Seishi 藤原成子 (972–1025) had done a few months after her partial tonsure—was described as an act that could also transform their gendered identities, as court diaries referred to each woman as turning into a monk (*sō* 僧) and turning into a Buddhist priest (*hōshi* 法師) respectively.²¹

Mujū Ichien and Stitching Sanskrit Seed-Syllables with Hair

The strongest evidence that reveals a preoccupation with hair embroidery outside of Pure Land Buddhism comes from the writings of Mujū Ichien. Mujū describes the merits of hair embroidery in a text that has received little scholarly attention—the *Zōtanshū*—which was completed in 1305 more than two decades after his noteworthy anthology of Buddhist tales called the *Shasekishū* 沙石集 [A Collection of Sand and Pebbles]. Mujū's early study of Buddhism was eclectic, ranging from Ritsu, Pure Land, and Shingon Buddhism before turning to Rinzai Zen at the age of thirty-six and becoming the student of Enni 円爾 (1202–1280) at Tōfukuji 東福寺 in Kyoto. After his ordination, Mujū lived a life of seclusion as the head priest of a rural temple Chōbōji 長母寺 located in Owari Province along the Eastern Sea Route connecting the imperial centre of Kyoto with the military government of Kamakura.²²

Zōtanshū is infused with doctrinal citations, autobiographical anecdotes, and stream-of-consciousness prose giving us a glance into the preoccupations, life, and reveries of an eighty-year-old monk looking back in time. Through short comedic and quotidian anecdotes unfolding around didactic messages, Mujū sought to make Buddhist teachings accessible to his congregation consisting mostly of travelers and lower-ranking parishioners with limited education, literacy, and understanding. With obtuse fascicle titles such as 'Jiriki

²¹ Katsuura, 'Amasogi kō', 25–26

²² Morrell, 'Mujū Ichien's Shinto-Buddhist', 447–54.

tariki no koto' 自力他力之事 [Concerning Self-Power and Other-Power] and 'Sotoba no koto' 卒塔婆之事 [Concerning Stūpas], however, the intended audience for *Zōtanshū* were likely fellow rural monks, who would have then narrated the fascicles to a listening audience. In comparison to Shasekishū, very few manuscripts of *Zōtanshū* exist, suggesting that these writings did not have the same extensive appeal as his *setsuwa* 說話 (spoken stories) narratives of Buddhist lore. Moreover, the *Zōtanshū* seems to have served as a kind of reference book, repeating specific lines word for word from the Shasekishū and citing passages from teachings including the *Daichido-ron* 大智度論 [Mahāprajñāpāramitā Commentary] attributed to Nāgārjuna, the *Makashikan* 摩訶止觀 [Great Calming and Insight] on the lectures of the Tiantai patriarch Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597), and the *Sugyōroku* 宗鏡錄 [Mirror of Sectarian Differences] compiled by Yongming Yanshou 永明延壽 (905–975) and promoted in Japan by Mujū's teacher, Enni.²³

In the tenth fascicle entitled *Bonji kudoku no koto* 梵字功德ノ事 [Concerning the Merit of Sanskrit Seed-Syllables], Mujū begins by explaining the merits accrued from visualizing Sanskrit seed-syllables. He describes Sanskrit seed-syllables as the language of the heavenly realm now descended from India and argues that understanding the true meaning of these syllables allows one to attain mastery of *hōben* 方便 (Skt. *upāya*; skillful means). He praises the practice of contemplating the Seed-Syllable A, in particular, as a method of revealing true forms as they are (*jissō* 實) and illuminating Mahayana teachings on nonduality. Seed-syllable recitation multiplies these benefits, he argues, as chanting can be done while walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. Chanting the *hrih* Seed-Syllable of the Amida Buddha, in particular, he writes, allows one to attain rebirth in the Pure Land. This is because it is a single letter that combines the four characters of Ha-ra-i-a (賀羅伊惡), and thus it removes the three factors of human experience while bringing purity, autonomy from material and mental constraints, and a recognition of no origination and no destruction.²⁴

²³ Yamada and Miki, eds., *Zōtanshū*, 24–29.

²⁴ The *Guanzizai pusa dabeizhiyin zhoubian fajie liyi zhongshengxuanzhen-*

Interestingly, Mujū concludes the fascicle not with a discussion of writing, but of stitching seed-syllables using human hair as thread.²⁵ He argues that this action brings forth the most auspicious results which include the goal of realizing *hongaku* 本覚 (original inherent awakening), attaining union with the body of the Vairocana Buddha, and enacting the ultimate goal of Esoteric Buddhism which is achieving Buddhahood in this very body.²⁶ Kūkai 空海 (774–835), the illustrious founder of Shingon Buddhism, was the first to conceptualize the possibility of attaining Buddhahood in *Sokushin jōbutsu gi* 即身成仏義 [Transforming One's Body into the Realm of Enlightenment], discerning the recitation and materialization of Sanskrit seed-syllables as the kernel of enlightenment that could cultivate union with the Vairocana Buddha and help one actualize this condition of non-duality.²⁷ Influenced by Kūkai's texts, Mujū also attributes the soteriological power of Sanskrit seed-syllables to its embodied material qualities over phonic or graphic ones, writing that, 'since one became the likeness of the Buddha's seed-syllable' through hair embroidery, 'whichever of the six realms of the soul the deceased finds itself in, [they] can obtain these benefits' (如此仏ノ種子ニ成シヌレバ、亡魂何レノ趣ニ有トモ、因縁冥ニ薫ジテ得益可有).²⁸

rufa 観自在菩薩大悲智印周遍法界利益衆生薰真如法 [Kannon the Bodhisattva of Compassion and Wisdom Offers Benefits to Sentient Beings throughout the Dharma Realm] describes the seed-syllable of the Amida Buddha as a mantra that combines these four ideas together. This is a text attributed to Amoghavajra which describes instructions for rebirth in the Pure Land.

²⁵ *Zōtanshū*, 298.

²⁶ *Hongaku* thought is the belief that all sentient beings are already awakened just as they are and therefore enlightenment is not a state to be attained or achieved through arduous religious cultivation, but instead, is realized as is. For more on *Hongaku* thought see Stone, *Original Enlightenment*.

²⁷ Although the *Sokushin jōbutsu gi* has been traditionally attributed to Kūkai, its authorship remains uncertain. For more on Kūkai's doctrinal thoughts on Buddhahood, see Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, 281–98; Rambelli, *A Buddhist Theory of Semiotics*, 125–27.

²⁸ *Zōtanshū*, 299.

To illustrate how one's eschatological fate is transformed when sacred word comes into contact with the materiality of the human body, Mujū tells the story of a wicked brahmin from the *Zuikyū dhāraṇī-kyō* 隨求陀羅尼經 [Incantation of Wish Fulfillment].²⁹ A brahmin bound to a life of evil karma dies and falls into a great hell. One day, a bright light shines on the brahmin and other evil doers in hell who are suddenly reborn into a heavenly realm. Astonished by this sight, Taishaku 帝釈, one of the four Deva Kings, and Bonten 梵天 (Skt. Brahmā) ask the Buddha: What is the reason for this sudden change? The Buddha responds that the brahmin achieved birth into a heavenly realm because a single letter of the Wish Fulfillment dhāraṇī, transmitted by an enchanted wind, attached itself to his cremated remains.

Mujū continues to explain how the arrangement of the material remains of the deceased can persist in mediating their fate by describing an apocryphal anecdote from the life of Emperor Go-Shirakawa 後白河天皇 (1127–1192). For many years, Mujū writes, the emperor suffered from painful and debilitating headaches. Though Emperor Go-Shirakawa was sent the most renowned and excellent physicians who instructed him to ingest the best medicines, the headaches persisted. One day, Emperor Go-Shirakawa received a vision in a dream and discovered the cause of his ceaseless headaches. The apparition informed the emperor that, in a previous life, he, the emperor, had been a Buddhist monk at Enryakuji 延暦寺, and the apparition then showed him the gravesite where his skeletal remains of the past were interred. The root of a pine tree, twisting and entangling itself within the buried skull of his previous life, he learned, was the source of

²⁹ The long title of this sūtra is *Fuhen kōmyō seijō shijō nyoī hōin shin munō shō daimyōō daizuiyū darani kyō* 普遍光明清淨熾盛如意宝印心無能勝大明王大隨求陀羅尼經 translated by Amoghavajra. Mujū Ichien's version, however, is slightly different from this sūtra so it is likely a mistaken reference. The actual tale Mujū discusses comes from a different sūtra translated by Amoghavajra entitled *Kongōchō yuga saishō himitsujōbutsu zuigusokutoku jinpen kaji jōju daranigiki* 金剛頂瑜伽最勝祕密成佛隨求即得神變加持成就陀羅尼儀軌 [Ritual Manual on the *Mahāpratisarā-dhāraṇī*].

these headaches. Emperor Go-Shirakawa then resolved to travel to the cemetery atop Mount Hiei. He excavated the spot from his vision and completely severed the root of the pine tree. This action, Mujū remarks, finally cured the emperor of his migraines.

Mujū concludes the fascicle by reiterating that entangling the hair of the deceased with the form of a Sanskrit seed-syllable—while chanting the sounds of sūtras, dhāraṇī, and the *nenbutsu*—causes the attainment of deliverance from *tokudatsu* 得脱 (the world of transmigration).³⁰ Using the verb *taiyou* 体用 to refer to the non-duality of essence and function, Mujū implies that this merit of hair embroidery extends to both the person whose hair is incorporated into the image and the person participating in the action of stitching.³¹ From this perspective, hair embroidery can be understood as a practice extending beyond a performance of bereavement. It was affective, transforming, and salvific allowing the living to repurpose one of the few remaining corporeal traces of a departed family member to intercede on their behalf. In the case of Hachijō'in or Hōjō Masako who participated in the stitching of the hair embroidery, it also enabled them to realize original inherent awakening and to achieve Buddhahood in this very body.

Stitching the Sanskrit Seed-Syllable A within the Amida Buddha

Returning to the Tokugawa Art Museum embroidery, its exceptional materiality and subject matter negotiate the lines between outward manifestation of rebirth and attainment of Buddhahood. The inscription in *sōsho* 草書 cursive script of the Eighteenth Vow from the *Muryōju-kyō* positioned at the corners of the composition proclaims: 'If beings of the ten quarters believe in me with serene thoughts and

³⁰ サレバ昔ノ髪種字ニ成テ、経陀羅尼念仏ノ音モ、此梵字ヲ髪ニ薫ゼバ、体用ノ徳用、神魂定テ得脱スベシ. *Zōtanshū*, 300.

³¹ For a discussion on essence-function thought in Buddhism, see Muller, 'The Emergence of Essence-Function'.

wish to be born in my land, they shall be born there if they repeat the thought (say my name) ten times.’³² Designating this Eighteenth Vow as the original pronouncement, Hōnen selected it to justify rebirth simply through the recitation of the *nenbutsu* alone. The mounting above the lotus arabesque frame depicts the twenty-five bodhisattvas as Sanskrit seed-syllables descending alongside the Amida Buddha to aid the deceased in achieving rebirth into the Pure Land.³³ Rather than reading the textile as an attempt to singularly celebrate Amida’s descent to welcome the dying, however, the visual program affirms the non-duality between the Amida Buddha and the Vairocana Buddha. The seed-syllables of the Letter A, signifying the Vairocana Buddha, are concealed within the ornamental pattern of the Amida Buddha’s mandorla.³⁴ Indeed, the embroidery rewards the observant viewer, prioritizing absorptive contemplation to draw our attention to otherwise unnoticed formal features. The total number of forty-eight seed-syllables of the Letter A may well be a reference to

³² Huntington, ‘Rebirth in Amitābha’s Sukhāvatī’, 58.

³³ The twenty-five bodhisattvas are described in Chapter Seven on the benefits of the *nenbutsu* in Genshin’s *Ōjōyōshū*. The bodhisattvas appear in the following order: Kannon, Seishi, Yakuō 藥王, Fugen 普賢, Hōjizai 法自在, Shishiku 師子孔, Darani 陀羅尼, Kokuzō 虛空藏, Tokuzō 德藏, Hōzō 宝藏, Konzō 金藏, Kongōzō 金剛藏, Kōmyōō 光明王, Sankaie 山海慧, Kegonō 華嚴王, Shuhōō 衆宝王, Gekkōō 月光王, Nishōō 日照王, Sanmaiō 三昧王, Jōjizaiō 定自在, Daijizaiō 大自在王, Byakuzōō 百象王, Daiitokuō 大威德王, Muhenshin 無辺身. The same arrangement appears along the mounting of a thirteenth-century *Welcoming Descent of Amida Triad* hair embroidery at Hōgonji 法嚴寺 located on the island of Chikubushima 竹生島. This sustained fabrication suggests that it was a repeatedly produced design.

³⁴ From the perspective of Shingon Buddhism, Seed-Syllable A is the totality of all things. As the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, it is the progenitor of the cosmos as it resides in every syllable as the necessary vowel sound to complete the consonant. On the other hand, as a negative prefix in Sanskrit, the seed-syllable stands for emptiness. It encompasses the concept of *honpushō* 本不生 (originally nonarising); that is, that all things are without beginning and end. On the Seed-Syllable A, see Payne, ‘Ajikan’.

the forty-eight vows the Amida Buddha takes in the *Muryōju-kyō* to achieve Buddhahood, establish the Pure Land, and save all sentient beings, adding force to the suggestion that its design aims to link the Amida Buddha with the Vairocana Buddha.

Kakuban 覚鑊 (1095–1143), the founder of the ‘new doctrine’ Shingi 新義 lineage of the Shingon school maintained an all-inclusive practice that crystallized Amidist beliefs into a systematic esoteric perspective. In the *Amida hishaku* 阿弥陀秘釈 [Esoteric Explanation of Amida], Kakuban identifies the three syllables of the Buddha’s name—A-mi-da—with the threefold truth of emptiness, conventional existence, and the middle, writing that ‘the precious name of Amida is the most excellent of all the buddhas because the syllable A is in it’.³⁵ Kakuban promoted the recitation of the name of the Amida Buddha not to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land but to recognize innate enlightenment within the self. It was a false dualism, he argued, to perceive the Pure Land as beyond this polluted world. He postulated instead that the Amida Buddha was transcendent, a divinity simultaneously one with the phenomenal world and one with the devotee’s embodied Buddhahood.

The Tokugawa Art Museum embroidery offers an interesting example of an image not only equating Amida Buddha with the Vairocana Buddha but also encouraging the recitation of the *nenbutsu* alongside A-syllable contemplation. Kūkai first introduced the ritual practice of *ajikan* to realize the true nature of things as conditioned and empty, to seek unity with the Vairocana Buddha, and to realize the principle of non-arising.³⁶ The monk Jichihan 實範 (ca. 1089–1144) developed this practice further, recommending A-syllable contemplation alongside the recitation of the *nenbutsu* at the time of death. In *Byūchū shugyō ki* 病中修行記 [Notes on Practice During Illness], he reworks the deathbed practice of chanting Amida Buddha’s name into an esoteric conceptual framework, transforming the deathbed *nenbutsu* from an invocation to assure salvation at death into a recitation for realizing Buddhahood in this very body. As

³⁵ Sanford, ‘Amida’s Secret Life’.

³⁶ Payne, ‘Ajikan’, 221.

Jacqueline Stone has shown, A-syllable contemplation as a deathbed practice probably had limited appeal since references to the act at the final hours of life are few and far between.³⁷ The Tokugawa Art Museum embroidery then was probably intended for the gaze of a viewer who had the necessary knowledge to understand the gravity of the logic and ritual forms within esoteric Buddhist practice.

Who, then, was this sophisticated monastic audience with the knowledge expected to interpret this conflation of the Seed-Syllable A with the Amida Buddha? The depiction of the forty-eight seed-syllables offers further clues. Kakuban wrote extensively on A-syllable imagery, describing the significance of its lotus base and the white moon disk.³⁸ He associated the distinct positionings of the lotus base with two separate teachings from the *Ryōkai Mandara* 兩界曼荼羅 [Maṇḍala of the Two Realms] that served as important iconographic expressions of enlightenment in Shingon Buddhism.³⁹ The A-syllable depicted on a lotus base inside the moon disk was tied to teachings of the *Kongō Mandara* 金剛曼荼羅 [Diamond World Maṇḍala] whereas the A-syllable depicted on a lotus base outside the moon disk was associated with teachings of the *Taizō Mandara* 胎藏曼荼羅 [Womb World Maṇḍala].

In the case of the Tokugawa Art Museum embroidery, however, the lotus base for the Seed-Syllable A is conspicuously absent. Though rare, Buddhist images depicting a Letter-A without a lotus base alongside the *Welcoming Descent of the Amida Buddha* survive, the thirteenth-century painting of *Yamagoshi Amidazu* 山越阿弥陀図 [The Descent of Amida Buddha over the Mountains] at Zenrinji 禅林寺 being the most famous example (Fig. 2). Lacking a lotus pedestal, the Seed-Syllable A in the upper left corner soars in the sky high above the towering body of the Amida Buddha. Previous scholarship has noted this absence of a lotus pedestal for the Seed-Syllable A in the painting, suggesting this missing detail signaled affinity with Tendai Pure Land thought on the interconnectedness between the

³⁷ Stone, 'Just Open Your Mouth', 172–77.

³⁸ Kitao, *Mikkyō meisō no kenkyū*, 167–89.

³⁹ Winfield, *Icons and Iconoclasm*, 82–88.



FIG. 2 *Amida Coming Over the Mountain* (*Yamagoshi Amidazu* 山越阿弥陀図). Japan, 1895–1896, 19th century reproduction of 13th century Zenrinji 禅林寺 original. Colors on paper, panel, 136 cm x 116 cm. Photograph © Nara National Museum.

Amida Buddha and the Vairocana Buddha.

Tendai Pure Land thought, first stimulated by Genshin's 源信 (942–1017) *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集 [The Essentials of Rebirth in the Pure Land; 985], emphasized the nonduality between the Amida

Buddha and the practitioner. This discourse would later develop to include the belief that the Pure Land is found within this present world.⁴⁰ The *Yamagoshi Amidazu* painting offers an excellent visual of this point: the Amida Buddha emerges in the centre between the valley of two malachite green and azurite blue mountains, suggesting that the Pure Land could be found here even within this defiled realm. Although the interpretation of the interconnectedness between the Amida Buddha and Vairocana Buddha was originally limited to Shingon Buddhist clerics at Mount Kōya, it gradually spread beyond these confines to include Tendai circles that developed their own system for Seed-Syllable A contemplation. This practice is recorded in the *Honri taikōshū* 本理大綱集 [Collection in Outline of the Original Principle] apocryphally attributed to Saichō 最澄 (767–822) but most likely dated from around the twelfth century.⁴¹ An article within the *Honri taikōshū* entitled *Aji isshin no bun* 阿字一心之文 [Writings Concerning Concentrating the Mind on the Letter A] describes visualizing the Seed-Syllable A as the same act as concentrating on the name of the Amida Buddha.⁴² Such comparison of the Seed-Syllable A in the Tokugawa Art Museum embroidery to the Letter-A in the *Yamagoshi Amidazu* painting offers some weight to the interpretation of the image as reflecting Tendai Pure Land Buddhist thought—its surface encouraging viewers to contemplate the Seed-Syllable A while also reciting the *nenbutsu* to achieve innate Buddhahood.

Tendai Pure Land Visualities: Fudō myōō and Bishamonten

The overall visual program offers further proof that the Tokugawa Art Museum embroidery should be interpreted as a suitable surface for deathbed practices within Tendai Pure Land thought. This per-

⁴⁰ On the development of Tendai Pure Land Thought, see Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 33–34.

⁴¹ Tsujimoto, 'Zenrinji yamagoshi amidazu', 222.

⁴² *Tendai bongaku ron*.

spective extends to the frame where Fudō myōō and Bishamonten are represented at the base of the image. Embroidered Buddhist images often include a pond at the bottom of the mounting directly underneath the central image (Fig. 3). This pond denotes a portal for the viewer to imaginatively enter the Pure Land itself. Although heavenly fowl such as *kujyaku* 孔雀 (peafowls) and anthropomorphic birds such as *karyūbinga* 迦陵頻伽 (*kalavinka* birds) usually flank either side of the pond, the Tokugawa Art Museum embroidery defies iconographic norms. Fudō myōō and Bishamonten stand firmly rooted between the pond instead, the former sporting sharp fangs and a fiery mandorla while carrying a sword and rope to destroy the three poisonous hindrances and draw the viewer towards enlightenment.⁴³ Bishamonten, the guardian of the north, wears protective armor and raises a miniaturized pagoda in his left hand while firmly grasping a staff in the other.

The two flanking figures of Fudō myōō and Bishamonten were considered *gobōjin* 護法神 (dharma protectors) and reflect patterns of veneration at Enryakuji.⁴⁴ The deities were venerated at the Yokawa chūdō 横川中堂, one of the three subcomplexes of Enryakuji on Mount Hiei that functioned as a special hall for *nenbutsu* recitation. The typology of the flanking figures developed gradually. In 847, the monk Ennin 円仁 (794–867) commissioned two statues of Kannon and Bishamonten to commemorate his safe passage through tumultuous storms from China to Japan. The monk Ryōgen 良源 (912–985) subsequently added a sculpture of Fudō myōō in 975, resulting in its current triad form. Fudō myōō and Bishamonten were regarded as the

⁴³ Some features of the Fudō myōō from the *jūkyūsō kanyō* 十九相觀樣 (nineteen visualizations) are notably absent including the representation of garuda mythological birds and the *dōji* 童子 acolytes. See Mack, 'The Phenomenon of Invoking', 298–99.

⁴⁴ There are two types of representations for Bishamonten. The first is depicted with his feet firmly on the ground. The second type raises one foot on top of a rocky base below. The original image of the Yokawadaō Bishamonten does not survive, but the *Shiju hyaku innen shū* 私聚百因緣集 [Compilation of A Hundred Buddhist Tales; 1257] describes it as the latter.



FIG. 3 *Welcoming Descent of Amida Triad* (*Amida sanzō raigō zu* 阿弥陀三尊来迎図). Japan, Kamakura Period (1185-1333) or Nanbokuchō Period (1336-1392), 14th century. Embroidery completely covering plain weave silk, 150 cm x 40.7 cm. Chūgūji 中宮寺. Photograph © Nara National Museum.

primary flanking guardian figures of Tendai Buddhism by the twelfth century and arranged alongside a variety of central deities.⁴⁵ The composition of Amida Buddha flanked by Fudō myōō and Bishamonten, in particular, originated at Jōgyō Zanmaidō 常行三昧堂 at Mount Hiei where the *nenbutsu* was repeatedly chanted while walking.⁴⁶ The Tokugawa Art Museum embroidery echoes the importance of these figures, compellingly suggesting that its intended viewers were connected to the religious sphere of Enryakuji.

Fudō myōō and Bishamonten also evoke two additional deathbed practices that frequently took place at the end of life: chanting the mantra of Fudō myōō and reciting passages from the *Lotus Sūtra*. Deathbed manuals such as Kakuban's *Ichigo taiyō himitsu shū* 一期大要秘密集 [Collection of Secret Essentials for Life's End] recommend that one of the handful of attendants joining a patient during the final hours of their life should recite the mantra of Fudō.⁴⁷ This mantra removed all distractions so that the dying person could maintain concentration on the *nenbutsu*. In popular stories such as the *Hokke genki* 法華験記 [Miraculous Tales of the *Lotus Sūtra*] and *Ōjōden* 往生伝 [Biographical Sketches of Those Who Have Attained Rebirth in Amida Buddha's Pure Land], Fudō myōō is also attributed as a protector of the deathbed and extinguisher of difficulties towards achieving rebirth. He is even ascribed with the uncanny power to prolong life by six months.⁴⁸

The authority of Bishamonten, on the other hand, resides most vividly in his role to safeguard the faithful devotees of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The twenty-sixth Chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, for instance, describes Bishamonten as one of the protectors of *jikyōsha* 持經

⁴⁵ The list of central deities includes Jūichimen Kannon 十一面観音 (Eleven-Headed Kannon), Senju Kannon 千手観音 (Thousand-Armed Kannon), Yakushi nyorai, Miroku, Shaka nyorai, Jizō, Monju bosatsu, and Benzaiten 弁財天. The travels of Ennin are described in the *Eigaku yōki* 叡岳要記, a history and lore of Enryakuji.

⁴⁶ Shimizu, *Tendai bijutsu no keisei*.

⁴⁷ Stone, *Right Thoughts*, 268–72.

⁴⁸ Payne, 'Standing Fast'.

者 (bearers of the *sūtra*).⁴⁹ A fragment from the twelfth-century paintings of the *Hekijya-e* 辟邪絵 [Extermination of Evil] also shows Bishamonten protecting the faithful as he pulls back the string of an archery bow (Fig. 4). Two *oni* 鬼 demons attempt to fly away while one collapses face first on the earth, blood gushing heavily from its back. A monk seated at the bottom left corner remains unperturbed, gazing serenely downward at the scroll on his writing desk. The accompanying text describes this monk as a *hokke no jisha* 法華の持者 (bearer of the *Lotus Sūtra*) who receives spiritual protection from Bishamonten for his admirable efforts in contemplating the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Individual chapters, verses, or phrases from the *Lotus Sūtra* were recited in deathbed practices alongside nenbutsu chanting at least by the tenth century.⁵⁰ The *Kūkan* 空觀 [Contemplation of Emptiness] attributed to Genshin, for instance, concludes by admonishing readers to chant the names of the Amida Buddha as well as the bodhisattva Kannon and recite the *daimoku* 題目 (title of the *Lotus Sūtra*) if they wish to be reborn in the Pure Land. The *Hosshinshū* 発心集 [An Anthology for Awakening the Desire for the Buddhist Path], a collection of Buddhist *setsuwa* stories written by Kamo no Chōmei 鴨長明 (1155–1216), also advises devotees to chant both the nenbutsu and the *Lotus Sūtra* at the final moments of one's life. The Tokugawa Art Museum embroidery, therefore, served to unify multiple deathbed practices conducive to bringing about Buddhahood and birth in the Pure Land.

Materializing the Buddhas of the Three Periods of Time

In contrast to the previously mentioned Tendai Pure Land imagery of Fudō myōō, Bishamonten, and the Seed-Syllable A are also represented in paintings, the arrangement of the *Welcoming Descent of Amida* alongside the Medicine Buddha and the Historical Buddha seems to be unique to the medium of embroidery. A hair-embroi-

⁴⁹ Maizawa, 'Fudō myōō to bishamonten', 253–57.

⁵⁰ Stone, 'Chanting the August', 118–30.



FIG. 4 'Bishamonten scene' from *The Extermination of Evil* (*Hekijya-e* 辟邪絵) Japan, Heian Period (794–1185) or Kamakura Period (1185–1333), 12th century. Hanging scrolls; Ink and color on paper, 25.8 cm x 76.5 cm. Photograph © Nara National Museum.

dered Sanskrit seed-syllable representing the Medicine Buddha on the left and a hair-embroidered Sanskrit seed-syllable of the Historical Buddha on the right enclose the image of Amida Buddha's descent within the lotus arabesque frame. This arrangement of the Buddhas of the Three Periods alludes to a tripartite time, projecting a past and present that can coexist within an infallible future of paradise in Amida's Pure Land.⁵¹ Two more hair embroidered images representing the Buddhas of the Three Periods have been found at other sites, offering further evidence for this arrangement as an established program for textiles. Both can be stylistically dated to the fourteenth century. The first, housed at the imperial convent of Chūgūji 中宮寺

⁵¹ The more common arrangement for the Buddhas of the Three Periods of Time was the Historical Buddha (Past), the Amida Buddha (Present), and Miroku 弥勒 (Skt. Maitreya; Future). The reason why the Medicine Buddha is included is uncertain, but it is believed that this deity bestows this-worldly benefits of cures that work to alleviate one's negative karma and assure rebirth. For a discussion on the role of the Medicine Buddha as the Past Buddha, see Proffitt, *Esoteric Pure Land*, 124.

in Nara, depicts the seed-syllables for the Medicine Buddha and the Historical Buddha within the central image above the descent of the Amida Buddha flanked by Kannon and Seishi (Fig. 3). The second embroidery, preserved at Chionji 知恩寺 in Kyoto, portrays all five deities as Sanskrit seed-syllables directly behind two vases positioned at the corners and an altar with an incense brazier in the centre (Fig. 5). Amida Buddha is given far greater visual prominence with its central placement above the canopy and the slightly larger moon disk.

The meaning of this arrangement is uncertain, but a potential explanation for the inclusion of the Medicine Buddha and the Historical Buddha can be found in the Sixth Chapter of the *Ōjōyōshū* which describes the Buddhas of the Three Periods of Time as a component within Tendai deathbed *nenbutsu* practices.⁵² Genshin provides a series of ten steps for those who have sickened to focus on to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. In the first step, the dying devotee reflects on the suffering inherent in this world of transmigration. They begin with three recitations: 'I take refuge in [the Historical Buddha,] the primal master. I take refuge in Yakushi of the lapis lazuli light. I take refuge in all the buddhas of the three periods of time (past, present, and future) and the ten directions'.⁵³ Then, they recite the *nenbutsu* ten times followed by a recitation of the *Namu Myōhō-rengē-kyō* 南無妙法蓮華經 [Sūtra of the Lotus Blossom of the Wonderful Dharma]. The dying devotee completes the final step with a recitation reflecting on the refuge offered by the bodhisattvas Kannon, Seishi, Fugen bosatsu 普賢菩薩 (Skt. Samantabhadra), Monju bosatsu 文殊菩薩 (Mañjuśrī), Miroku bosatsu 弥勒菩薩 (Maitreya), Jizō (Ksitigarbha), and Ryūju 竜樹 (Nāgārjuna). Although a deathbed function for these three hair embroideries can be little denied, it remains an insufficient explanation as to why its maker decided to represent all three of the Buddhas of the Past and Present with human hair.

The Buddhas of the Three Periods of Time materialized with human hair may allude to the *Shinnyōkan* 真如觀 [Contemplation of Suchness], apocryphally attributed to Genshin which insists that

⁵² Rhodes, *Genshin's Ōjōyōshū*, 277–82.

⁵³ Ibid., 280–81.



FIG. 5 *Amida Pentad* (*Amida gozonzu* 阿弥陀五尊図). Japan, Nanbokuchō Period (1336–1392) or Muromachi Period (1338–1573), 14th century or 15th century. Embroidery completely covering plain weave silk, 71 cm x 32.7 cm Chionji 知恩寺. Photograph © Nara National Museum.

all sentient beings are fundamentally buddhas. *Shinnyō* (suchness) refers to the true nature of reality known to enlightened beings. This work on inherent enlightenment urged practitioners to realize the non-duality between the self and the Buddha and to understand the Pure Land as a spatio-temporal reality that is imminent within this very world: ‘To seek a separate Buddha apart from oneself is [the action of] a time when one does not know that oneself is precisely suchness. When one knows that suchness and oneself are the same thing, then, of Shaka (Śākyamuni), [A]mida (Amitābha), Yakushi (Bhaisajya-guru) and the other Buddhas of the ten directions, as well as Fugen (Samantabhadra), Monju (Mañjuśrī), Kannon (Avalokiteśvara), Miroku (Maitreya), and other bodhisattvas, there is none that is separate from oneself.’⁵⁴ Hair embroidery as a medium allowed its makers to embody this true nature of reality on Buddhahood, materializing their persistent presence to reside in a tripartite temporality.

Conclusion

Although the *Welcoming Descent of Amida Triad* hair embroidery from the Tokugawa Art Museum unmistakably appears at first glance to fit the mould of Pure Land Buddhist imagery, further scrutiny reveals this observation rests on porous ground. The visual program accommodated a remarkable array of deathbed practices including visualizing the Seed-Syllable A, reciting portions of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and chanting the mantra of Fudō myōō. Tonsured hair was stitched into the surface not as a simple and easy practice for re-birth but to realize original awakening and to attain Buddhahood in this very body. An approach that considers these images as mirrors of Kamakura-period practices in which implementing eclectic Tendai, Shingon, and Pure Land rites was the norm will begin to see this wider visual program. To write a new history of Japanese Buddhist art requires the development of approaches that go beyond expected iconographical typologies: one that probes at ornament and the

⁵⁴ Stone, ‘The Contemplation of Suchness’, 205.



FIG. 6 Detail of left roller of figure 1.



FIG. 7 Detail of right roller of figure 1.

poetic associations of its materiality to reveal the multiple resonances and logics of its surface.

A fitting conclusion, therefore, might be found in the cylindrical roller (*jiku* 軸) attached at the base of the embroidery. There are two monks seated in sumptuous chairs painted on either side of the wooden rod. The monk on the left is seated in a red chair with his hands concealed inside a checkered patterned *kesa* 袈裟 and his mouth firmly closed. With no other distinguishable features, he remains unidentifiable (Fig. 6). The monk on the right, however, is seated with his palms pressed together near his chest, his mouth puckers open in a slight grin (Fig. 7). Two drops of golden paint emerge in a parallel line near his mouth. Itō Shinji interprets these golden marks as *kebutsu* 化仏 and speculates that the figure is intended to be a portrait of Shandao (Jp. Zendō 善導; 613–681) the Third Patriarch of Pure Land Buddhism who advocated for the chanting of the Amida Buddha's name as a means to assure rebirth in the Pure Land.⁵⁵ Indeed, a fourteenth-century Japanese portrait of Shandao portrays the patriarch seated in a similarly rendered blue-green chair facing left in three-quarter view (Fig. 8).

If we are to accept this identification of Shandao, how does it re-frame the remaining imagery? The visual program of the embroidery

⁵⁵ Itō, *Shūbutsu*, 37–38.



FIG. 8 *Portrait of Shandao (Zendō Daishi 善道大師)*. Japan, Nanbokuchō Period (1336-1392), 14th century. Hanging scroll; ink, color, and gold on silk, 27 3/16 inches x 16 7/8 inches. John C. Weber Collection; photo copyright John Bigelow Taylor.

as a whole demonstrates the importance of sound, and in particular, chanting to enact the divine. As Mujū Ichien demonstrated in the *Zōtanshū*, hair embroidery requires the chanting of *nenbutsu* and *dhāraṇī* to attain its meritorious function of deliverance from the world of transmigration. Certainly, the beholder gazing at the image

had the capacity to create this sound of chanting and enact its benefits. But what I would like to postulate here is that the makers of the Tokugawa Art Museum embroidery aimed to devise a method for the image to ‘chant for itself,’ thereby transforming the embroidery into a truly multisensorial surface, engaging sight, body, and even sound. Through a visualization of a monk chanting in perpetuity, the embroidery enacts the surface both materially and sonically, implying that, even when the embroidery is rolled up and enclosed again within its wooden box, it retains the meritorious sounds implied by its surface until an unknown future of its unraveling.

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