

# Chapter 4

## Japanese Buddhism and Women: The Lotus, Amida, and Awakening



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### 1 Introduction

Buddhism's claim to be a universal religion would seem to be severely undermined by its exclusion of certain groups of people from its scheme of salvation. Women, in particular, were treated at one time or another as less than fit vessels for attaining awakening. As is well known, even in the days of Gautama the Buddha, the Buddhist order was not entirely free of misogynist sentiments. Female devotees aspiring to follow the Buddha's teaching often had to overcome discrimination and negative innuendos from their fellow monks and the monastic institutions.

This view of women's "spiritual inferiority" persisted, casting a long shadow over the Buddhism tradition that took root and developed in Japan. Although the idea of *sangha*—the community of believers made up of monks, nuns, and laymen and laywomen—was duly embraced in Japan, and although women played a vital role in patronizing Buddhism, the misogynistic view became prevalent around the fourteenth century, with the changes in socio-economic environments. It was *only* in the last century that the iniquitous treatment of women in Japanese Buddhism came to be critically acknowledged by the ecclesiastical authorities, and important steps for a change are taking place slowly but steadily. Despite the hard-to-eradicate subtle institutional chauvinism and dubious perceptions concerning women's spiritual ability, an increasing number of socially active and articulate Buddhist women are working on improving their image and their social standing in the last decades. What is still needed, however, is the emancipation of androcentric Buddhist ecclesiastical tradition from the yoke of its past.

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was quite elderly by the time she took up her practice under Dōgen, but her practice was rigorous, and her awakening profound. When she died, Dōgen in lamentation composed two Chinese verses. One of them reads:

Steel-solid was your understanding of what is meant by “there is no holiness in the vast universe.”

To test your awakening was like putting snowflakes on top of a red-hot burning stove!

I cannot refrain from asking—whither have you gone?

What sort of moon are you gazing at from under the deep azure waves? (Dōgen 1988, 4: 262–263)

Also found in the *Eihei kōroku* are Dōgen’s sermons delivered upon the request of nuns. A nun Eshin 恵信 wished to honor her deceased father (Dōgen 1988, 3: 104–105). Nun Egi 懷義 wished to celebrate the anniversary of the death of her mother (Dōgen 1988, 3: 162–265). Egi earlier had been a member of the Daruma Sect before joining Dōgen’s monastic community. She became indispensable to Dōgen as she took care of him towards the end of his life when he began to ail; she was among those to whom Dōgen entrusted the future of the operation of the monastic community (Tajima 1955: 164–167).

Dōgen’s successor, KEIZAN Jōkin 瑩山紹瑾 (1268–1325), similarly had many nuns practicing under him, no doubt carrying on his master’s will.<sup>74</sup> Harder times fell on the practicing nuns of the Sōtō sect, however, as the memory of the founder receded in the distance. However, Dōgen’s fundamental conviction that the attainment of enlightenment did not discriminate “the male, the female, the rich, and the poor” (Dōgen 1973, 8: 257) remained a bright light in their hearts.

### 3.3.7 Hiratsuka Raichō–Zen and Feminism

We jump several centuries to conclude this present study of Japanese women Buddhists. I want to include the pioneer feminist HIRATSUKA Raichō 平塚らいてう in this discussion to show the dynamic power of Zen teaching that contributed to forming the women’s liberation movement in modern Japan. Known by her pen-name of Raichō (meaning ptarmigan, snow grouse, or thunderbird), she grew up as HIRATSUKA Haru 平塚明 (1886–1971). She was part of the women’s liberation movement that got started in the last years of the Meiji period (1868–1912). In her early twenties, before she came to be actively involved in the cause for women’s liberation, she seriously practiced zazen for several years. Through it she came to “grasp” the source of life, the spiritual home beyond the reality of the ego, and it was this awakening, according to her, that sustained her for the rest of her life. Even after she stopped her formal Zen practice, whenever she encountered difficulties, she would just “sit” in zazen meditation, which would refresh her body, mind, and spirit and give her the renewed energy to go on. Her life activities closely paralleled the radically changing social and economic conditions of modern Japan from the

<sup>74</sup>For an extensive study of today’s Sōtō nuns in English, see Paula Arai’s *Women Living Zen: Japanese Sōtō Buddhist Nuns* (Arai 1999).

Taishō (1912–1926) to the Shōwa (1926–1989) periods (see Yusa 2011: 1116, 1121–1126).

When she was growing up, Japan was in transition from a traditional society to a modern nation, and young people were typically consumed by religious and spiritual questions which concerned their self-identity. In addition, her father allowed her to receive higher education, and she attended Japan Women's College in Tokyo (she was in the third graduating class). In short, she imbibed the liberal atmosphere of the vibrant Meiji spirituality. It was in her last year of college that she came upon a copy of the *Zenkai ichiran* 禅海一瀾 (*A Wave in the Sea of Zen*, 1862) by IMAKITA Kōsen 今北洪川 (1816–1892),<sup>75</sup> a renowned Zen master (*rōshi* 老師) and the first Chief Abbot (*kanchō* 管長) of Engakuji in Kamakura. She began her Zen practice under SHAKU Sōkatsu 釈宗活 (1870–1954), a dharma heir of SHAKU Sōen 釈宗演 (1860–1919).<sup>76</sup>

What distinguishes Raichō from the Buddhist women of the previous centuries is that she wrote in prose (although she did compose poetry, too), touching on many social issues. Her autobiography contains straightforward accounts of her Zen practice and her “breakthrough” experience called “*kenshō*.” She tells us how the first audience with Master Sōkatsu went, what it was like to practice Zen that involved such activities as *zazen* 坐禪 (“meditation”), *kōan* 公案 (a question to work on, which each student is given by the *rōshi*), *sanzen* 參禪 (a private interview with the *rōshi*), and “*sesshin*” 接心 (an intensive *zazen* and *sanzen* practice extended into one week), and how her initial breakthrough known as “*kenshō*” 見性 (coming to grasp the true nature of the self) took place (Hiratsuka 2006: 83–96).

For instance, we have a rather rare account of how a typical private interview with a Zen master would go:

A *zazen* session usually lasted from forty-five to sixty minutes, the time it took for one incense stick to burn out. Between the *zazen* periods, we met with Rōshi on a one-to-one basis (called “*dokusan*” 独参 or “*sanzen*,” “private interview”). We were not allowed to reveal what took place during the *sanzen*, or which *kōan* we had been given. During the *sanzen*, we were to report to Rōshi any insight we might have gained about the *kōan*, but more often than not, as soon as we entered the room, we would be told to work harder and be dismissed with a shake of the hand bell. Indeed, it was said that Rōshi could tell how much progress we had made by the mere sound of the gong we would make when our own turn comes around, the fall of our footsteps, the way we opened the sliding doors and bowed. (Hiratsuka 2006: 85)

Raichō's initial breakthrough came several months into her practice, during the monthly *sesshin* in July 1906. She vividly recalls those heightened moments:

As was the custom, we raised our hands in prayer and recited the Four Vows 四弘誓願文 together before Rōshi's talk: “Sentient beings are numerous; I vow to save them all. The

<sup>75</sup> He trained many outstanding lay Zen Buddhists, including HŌJŌ Tokiyuki, NISHIDA Kitarō's mentor.

<sup>76</sup> D. T. Suzuki practiced under SHAKU Sōen after the death of IMAKITA Kōsen. SHAKU Sōen inherited Kōsen's emphasis on training lay Zen students. He also went to the U.S. to speak about Zen at the Parliament of the World Religions (September 10–27, 1893) held in Chicago. His earlier study in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) afforded him a global perspective on Buddhism.

deluding passions are inexhaustible; I vow to sever them. The Buddha's teaching is profound; I vow to study it. The Buddha's path is supreme; I vow to realize it."

We next recited Hakuin Zenji's *Chant in Praise of Zazen* (*Zazen wasan* 坐禅和讃): "Sentient beings are intrinsically Buddha. It is just as it is with ice and water. Apart from water, there is no ice. Apart from sentient beings, there is no Buddha...." We came to the last lines: "At this moment, what is there more for you to seek, with nirvana itself manifest before you? This very place, this is the Lotus Land; this very body, this is Buddha." Then, just as I was about to place my hands on my lap, tears as large as hailstones came pouring down my face. Whenever I cry, I do so in private, choking back the tears. But now, I was crying shamelessly in front of everyone. I could not believe it. These were not tears of sadness, not tears of grateful reverence for Hakuin's words. No, I was crying because *I had broken free of my finite self and reached a state of pure awareness*. My whole being had exploded in a flood of tears. I had never experienced this wondrous, strange state before. (Hiratsuka 2006: 92–93 emphasis added)

The realm of deeper consciousness was ready to burst open. This marked the beginning of her true understanding of Zen teaching. She recalls the decisive moment when she underwent the birth of a "new self." A wave of understanding shot through her, when the master was expounding on *The Record of Linji* (*Rinzai-roku* 臨濟錄):

Even now I can hear Rōshi's clear, strong voice: "Upon this lump of reddish flesh sits a True Man with no rank 無位真人. Constantly he goes in and out of the gates of your face. If there is anyone here who does not know this for a fact, look, look!" His voice pierced me like a jolt of electricity, and in that instant I said to myself, "I understand!" Later I heard talks by many Zen masters, but none as compelling as the talk by Rōshi that day. (Hiratsuka 2006: 93)

This initial breakthrough is known as "*kenshō*" in the Zen tradition. Her account continues:

I had finally attained *kenshō*. I was confirmed by Rōshi and given the dharma name Ekan 慧薰. My *kenshō* was not a so-called *tongo* 頓悟 [a sudden awakening]. It had come after more than six months of intense sitting and amounted to a gradual awakening that culminated in a 180-degree turn, a spiritual revolution, an upheaval of the greatest magnitude. *I had been reborn. I was a new being*. My first birth had been of the flesh, unwilling and outside of my awareness. *My second birth was of my true self, born from my efforts to look into the deepest level of my consciousness*. I had searched and searched and at last found the entrance to the Great Way of the True Life. (Hiratsuka 2006: 93, emphasis added)

Every practitioner has a different *kenshō* experience; in her case it came with a great sense of joy and freedom that liberated her to a way of being that she had never known before. She recalls:

Unable to contain my joy, ...I was oblivious to fatigue; I felt disembodied. The Zen texts had not deceived me when they had declared, "mind and body are one," or "the mind and body fall away." And when Shākyamuni declared, "Above the heavens and below the heavens I am the only honored one," he was not exaggerating but speaking from the truth of experience. What is God? What am I? How is a human being related to God? and the question of one and the many—these philosophical questions that I had wrestled with had been resolved in one flash. I felt emptied and indescribably exhilarated.

A great change came over me. *I found myself eager to explore the intricate web of human relationships*, an aspect of life I had ignored until then.... Never again, in all my days, did I live on such a heightened plane of spiritual awareness or feel so vibrantly alive.

My mind was crystal clear, limitlessly expanding. My body was marvelously light, as though it did not exist. I never tired. I walked all day and stayed up until one or two in the morning. Life was full of pleasure, beauty, and joy. I overflowed with psychic energy. (Hiratsuka 2006: 93–94)

This newly found energy led her to take reckless actions, leading to an incident in which she ran off with a married man, who was an aspiring writer and espoused the strange idea from reading a novel by G. D'Annunzio that young women were most beautiful at the moment of their death. He wanted to go through with his experiment of killing her out of love, in order to depict her last moments. Half-incredulous and half-in a playful spirit, she set out to a snow-covered mountain with him. Fortunately, the man had neither the courage nor the willpower to go through with his plan. The local policemen were mobilized to look for them and got them safely into custody. This incident caused a great media sensation, and Raichō faced the consequences of her own action. With her resilient spirit, she took the cause of her own disgrace and suffering to be of her own making, which meant that she could also be the master of her own self to weather the storm. She felt the need to resume her serious Zen practice to regain her spiritual height. Therefore she took part in the year-end *sesshin* at Kaiseiji 海清寺 in Nishinomiya. There her *kenshō* was recognized, for the second time, by NAKAHARA Nantenbō 中原南天棒 (1839–1925), a renowned Zen master.<sup>77</sup>

Raichō's mother recognized that the prospect of a decent marriage for her daughter was now out of the question. The money saved up for her dowry was later used to publish the journal *Seitō* 青鞞,<sup>78</sup> which was the first journal in Japan “of the women, by the women, for the women”—paraphrasing Yosano Akiko's endorsement of this journal.<sup>79</sup> For the inaugural issue of 1911, Raichō was inspired to pen the celebrated manifesto, which began with these lines:

In the beginning, woman was truly the sun. An authentic person.

Now she is the moon, a wan and sickly moon, depending on another, reflecting another's brilliance.

*Seitō* herewith announces its birth.

Created by the brains and hands of Japanese women today, it raises its cry like a newborn child. (Hiratsuka 2006: 157)

<sup>77</sup>“Nanten” is a tree called “nandin.” He carved a staff out of a nandin tree and carried it around as his tool of teaching. His religious name is Zenchū 全中. When Raichō proved her understanding, he gave her the Buddhist name of Zenmyō 全明, taking a character from his name, Zen 全, combining it with her name “Haru” 明. Nantenbō advocated a rigorous Zen training and maintained that one should practice under masters of different lineages to strengthen the awakening experience. Raichō passed his strict standard by attaining her second *kenshō* under him (see Hiratsuka 2006: 129–131).

<sup>78</sup>“*Seitō*” means “bluestockings.” Raichō adopted this name for the journal to preempt male ridicule and criticisms, just as a group of literary-minded society ladies of the eighteenth century London called their literary circle “Bluestocking” as a good joke.

<sup>79</sup>Yosano was already a well-established poet by this time, and her endorsement had much impact on the promotion of this journal (YAZ 14: 390).

At the conclusion of this manifesto, she signed it with her pen-name, Raichō. She explains the reason for choosing this pen-name as follows:

My acquaintance with the thunderbird, or snow grouse, went back to the time I lived near the northern Alps in Nagano.... I was charmed by the picture of the adult bird with its round and sturdy-looking silhouette, its air of calm repose. I was also intrigued by the fact that it lived at an altitude of 3,000 meters, subsisting on alpine vegetation, and turned pure white in the winter. I was further attracted by the fact that the bird had been indigenous to Japan since the Ice Age. So I did not choose the pen-name entirely by chance. (Hiratsuka 2006: 166)

Being an independently-minded young woman, Raichō began to formulate her philosophical outlook on life, in close connection with her actual *concrete* experiences of daily life. Instead of merely accepting the abstract idea of gender equality, she began to explore her *embodied* reality of being a woman as a sexed being. In this venture she was guided by the Swedish feminist philosopher Ellen Key (1848–1926), whose book *Love and Marriage* became available in English around that time. Through Key’s writings, Raichō came to learn to appreciate Western approaches to women’s psychology, as well as the positive evaluation of romantic love and marriage. She embraced the sexed body as a fundamental component of her philosophical reflection. Being a woman is not an abstract idea but a *concrete* embodied reality. This realization was unshakable, because she fell in love with a younger artist, with whom she began the experiment of cohabitation outside the framework of conventional legal marriage. Soon she discovered she was pregnant. In living the life of a woman in love, she attained a new awakening: “I came to see the need to *liberate women not only as human persons but also as sexed women*.” This was a totally new philosophical problem for me (Hiratsuka 2011b: 1125).<sup>80</sup> The corollary of this conviction is that man, too, has to be “liberated as the sexed body.” For Raichō, thus, romantic love opened up the multi-dimensional reality of love. She reflected on this experience and wrote:

[L]ove rooted in self-affirmation and self-development turned out as gateway to the love of others, to the other side of life. In no time, the whole panorama of love of the other unfolded in front of me, first through the love I bore my lover, and then through my love for my child. I ended up experiencing all sorts of contradictions in my life, but I can no longer dismiss them as merely “life’s contradictions.” I have rather come to think of them as gateways that open out onto a wider, larger, and deeper life. And the real harmonization of these two orientations [of self- and other-love] may well be the subtle and ultimate flavor of life itself. (Hiratsuka 2011a: 1125–1126)<sup>81</sup>

Raichō’s life and thought is a fine example of how Zen awakening *can be* directly tied to addressing the issues of concrete life and how it may introduce the dimension of authentic subjectivity (J. *shutaisei* 主体性) into social activities. Authentic sub-

<sup>80</sup> Raichō wrote “*Kojin to shite no seikatsu to sei to shiteno seikatsu tonno aida no sōtō ni tsuite*” 「個人としての生活と性としての生活の間の争闘について」 [“The Conflict of Life as an ‘Individual’ and as a ‘Gender’”] in 1915.

<sup>81</sup> Raichō wrote “*Haha to shite no ichinenkan*” 「母としての一年間」 [“A Year as a Mother”], in 1917.

jectivity is what Zen calls one's "original face." Raichō turned her attention to the dire need for women to be liberated. In so doing, she demonstrated how ideas coming from other sources (in her case, from Ellen Key) could support her Zen awakening and deepen her philosophical reflection. Her lifelong engagement in social activism, including the women's suffrage movement in pre-Second World War Japan and the anti-nuclear movement in the post-Second World War period all sprang from the core of her *being*, which she clearly came to grasp through her Zen practice in her early twenties. Her Zen awakening remained for life the source that kept her mentally supple, spiritually "ecumenical," and existentially "poetic."

## 4 Conclusion

Discriminations raised against women obliged them to examine not only their faith and motives but also the message of spiritual liberation delivered by Buddhism. Japanese women traditionally relied on the Mahāyāna *sūtras* that supported their bodhisattva practice, or that promised their rebirth in the Pure Land, or assured "awakening" (J. *satori*). These scriptures conveyed the message of the immateriality of the distinction between male and female.

Obviously, any academic study on such a broad topic as "women in Japanese Buddhism" must be limited in scope, but I trust that the present case study of remarkable Japanese women, presented in three strands of *The "Lotus (Sūtra)," "Amida (Buddha),"* and "Awakening (experience)" has demonstrated rich and colorful realities of women's spiritual lives.

In concluding this study, let me mention a couple of socially engaged Buddhist nuns in our time. Following the earthquake and tsunami catastrophe that shook up Japan on March 2011, voices of protest were heard from various corners of Japan. Seto'uchi Jakuchō 瀬戸内寂聴 (b. 1922), a popular novelist who became a Tendai nun, for instance, has been a vocal protestor against the reopening of nuclear reactors and carried out a hunger strike despite her frail health. In fact, when this disaster struck the northeastern region of Japan, she was actually lying in a hospital bed, suffering from a narrowing of the spinal canal and could not stand on her legs. Horrified by the incredible scenes televised on the screen in her hospital room, she was called to action. She asked herself: "What am I doing here on a hospital bed? I must do something for the people; I must be with them." Her courage accomplished the near impossible. She regained a limited mobility and was able to stand on her feet again. She soon visited the disaster-struck areas. In less than a month after the disaster, on the day of the Buddha's birthday—April 8, 2011—her temple organized a charity bazaar. At that time she gave an interview to a biweekly women's magazine, in which she said: