

**HOW MANY BODIES DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE A BUDDHA?
DIVIDING THE TRIKĀYA AMONG
FOUNDERS OF JAPANESE BUDDHISM**

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Introduction

Much of modern scholarship concerned with the historical emergence of sectarianism in medieval Japanese Buddhism has sought to delineate the key features of philosophy and praxis instituted by founders in order to illuminate critical differences between each movement. One of the most influential early proposed delineations was “single practice theory,” *ikkō senju riron* 一向専修理論 originating from Japanese scholars like Jikō Hazama 慈弘裕 and Yoshiro Tamura 芳朗田村.¹ This argument focused on the founders of the new Kamakura schools during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries like Hōnen 法然, Shinran 親鸞, Dōgen 道元, and Nichiren 日蓮, claiming that each promoted a single Buddhist practice for the attainment of liberation at the exclusion of all other rival practices. In recent scholarship, however, single practice theory has been brought into question.² As an alternative method of delineation, this study proposes the examination of how three major premodern Japanese founders (Kūkai 空海, Shinran, and Dōgen) employed the late Indian Mahāyāna notion of the three bodies of the Buddha (Skt. *trikāya*, Jp. *sanshin* 三身) by appropriating a single body of the Buddha in order to distinguish each of their sectarian movements. Unlike single practice theory, which is based in a delineation of exclusive paths to liberation, the appropriation of a single Buddha body, I will argue, provided the very basis for the founder’s authority. Whichever practices the founders may have promoted, they

¹ See Jikō Hazama 慈弘裕, *Nihon Bukkyō no kaiten to sono kichō: Chūko Nihon Tendai no kenkyū* 日本仏教の開展とその基調 — 中古日本天台の研究 (Tokyo: Sansedō, 1948), reprint of the 1923 edition; and Yoshiro Tamura 芳朗田村, *Kamakura shin bukkyō shisō no kenkyū* 鎌倉新仏教思想の研究 (Kyoto: Heirakuji shoten, 1965).

² For a critical response to this characterization of Dōgen’s Zen, see T. Griffith Foulk, “Dōgen’s Use of Rujing’s ‘Just Sit’ (*shikan taza*) and Other Kōans,” in Steven Heine, ed., *Dōgen and Sōtō Zen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 42.

certified the legitimacy of their sectarian claims through the supremacy of the chosen Buddha body.

Indian Origins of *Trikāya* Theory

One of the more radical developments of late Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism was the transformation of Buddha identity from the historical Gotama Buddha to the *Trikāya* or three bodies of the Buddha. The formulation of this idea evolved, however, over a number of centuries in a historically complex, and to a great extent, untraceable manner. There is quite early evidence of the “*Dharmakāya*” or “truth body,” indicated in the Pāli canon, even if there is only a single example to be found:

He whose faith in the Tathāgata is settled, rooted, established, solid, unshakeable by any ascetic or Brahman, any deva or māra or Brahmā or anyone in the world, can truly say: “I am a true son of the Blessed Lord, born of his mouth, born of Dhamma, created by Dhamma, an heir of Dhamma.” Why is that? Because...this designates the Tathāgata: “The Body of Dhamma [*dhammakāya*],” that is, “The Body of Brahmā” [i.e. body of the highest].³

Paul Harrison’s historical-critical study of the *Dharmakāya* argues that the concept maintained an adjectival, rather than nominal form from this early Pāli example through much of the early Mahāyāna sūtra literature.⁴ The term “*Dharmakāya*” indicated an embodiment of the teachings or qualities of Buddhas instead of a transcendentalized or essentialized identity. Yet, most scholars agree that there were notable contributions to the notion of Gotama Buddha’s unworldly identity deriving from Mahāsāṃghika School⁵

³ See the *Aggañña Sutta* (D iii 84) in Maurice Walsh, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 409.

⁴ See Paul Harrison, “Is the *Dharma-kāya* the Real ‘Phantom Body’ of the Buddha?” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15/1 (1992), 44–94.

⁵ See Janice J. Nattier and Charles S. Prebish, “Mahāsāṃghika Origins: The Beginnings of Buddhist Sectarianism,” *History of Religions* 16/3 (1977), 258.

as early as the third century BCE.⁶ Even so, it is still difficult to assert clear doctrinal lines between Mahāsāṃghika characterizations of Gotama and the fully developed *Trikāya* theory presented in the fourth century CE writings of Aśaṅga, the founder of the Indian *Yogācāra* School.⁷

If one recognizes the *Trikāya* as the traditional identity of the Buddha, then all three bodies must be assimilated in the presentation of the meaning of Buddha identity and Buddha activity. To emphasize any one of the three bodies, one could argue, is to present an incomplete or skewed representation of Buddhahood. Yet, if we consider the founding of Japanese Buddhism in the formulations of Kūkai, Shinran, and Dōgen, we find that each chose a single Buddha body to represent the central meaning of their respective schools. Not only did each construct a vision of the Dharma based upon a single body, but each chose a different body so that in these major premodern Japanese Buddhist sects of Shingon (真言), Jōdoshinshū (淨土真宗), and Sōtō Zen (曹洞禪), we find the *Trikāya* divided: the *Dharmakāya* (Jp. *hōshin* 法身) placed at the center of Kūkai's Shingon, the *Saṃbhogakāya* (Jp. *hōjin* 報身) placed at the center of Shinran's Pure Land Buddhism, and the *Nirmāṇakāya* (Jp. *ōjin* 応身) placed at the center of Dōgen's Sōtō Zen. One possible reason for such body choices, I contend, is that the choice of a single body assured the authority of the representative sect through the very exclusion of other sects understood *as* other bodies. However, by choosing a single body, each founder was compelled to negate certain dimensions of Buddha identity, limiting access to all three bodies, and thus limiting the soteriological alternatives made available to the practitioner. This study will consider the contextual reasons for these particular body choices, the limits of each

⁶ The earliest textual evidence of this position being attributed to Mahāsāṃghika thought is in the Sarvāstivāda *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra* (dated from the First to Second century of the Common Era) Here, the latter describes the rival Lokottaravāda school of the Mahāsāṃghikas as proclaiming that all the words of Gotama Buddha were perfect transcendent truths, and in addition, his body was undefiled and not subject to any worldly conditions. See Bart Dessein, "The Mahāsāṃghikas and the Origin of Mahayana Buddhism: Evidence Provided in the *Abhidharmamahāvibhāṣāśāstra*," *The Eastern Buddhist* 40/1–2 (2009), 46.

⁷ See Maitreyanātha and Āryāsaṅga, *Universal Vehicle Discourse Literature (Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra)*, trans. L. Jamspal et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

presentation of the Dharma through a single body rather than the entire *Trikāya*, and possible implications for our understanding of foundational Japanese Buddhism based on these single-body/triple-body distinctions.

The Case of Kūkai

Kūkai (774–835 CE), the earliest founder of the three, inhabited the Japan of the late Nara, early Heian period when state-sponsored Buddhism was mainly in possession of the court and aristocratic scholars, and essentially functioned as a source of imperial preservation. However, Buddhism also had by this time, spread into the countryside, providing the peasantry with examples of charismatic wonder-workers (*hijiri* 聖) like Gyōki 行基 (668–749), who practiced and slept in the mountains and offered an early form of social engagement, dedicating themselves to activities like bridge building and irrigation development. But the court was aware of these unorthodox wanderers and was able to restrict them enough, so they were not able to establish an independent, popular sect of Buddhism.⁸ Kūkai’s major accomplishment in the historical development of institutional Japanese Buddhism is in his uniting mountain-based Buddhism with court-based Buddhism, without being fully beholden to either. His capacity to do so came from a rare combination of religious sensibility, creative genius, and political savvy.

Kūkai’s presentation of the Dharma was inherently hierarchal, writing tracts on the superiority of Buddhism over Confucianism and Taoism,⁹ the superiority of esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō* 密教) over exoteric Buddhism (*kengyō* 顯教),¹⁰ and the superiority of Vajrayāna or *Dharmakāya*-based teachings over Hīnayāna, *Nirmāṇakāya*-based teachings and Mahāyāna, *Saṃbhogakāya*-based teachings.¹¹ This hierarchal representation of Buddhism mirrored the social stratification of Imperial Japan, providing the

⁸ Daigan Matsunaga and Alicia Matsunaga, *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism*, vol. I (Tokyo: Buddhist Books International, 1974), 118–119.

⁹ Yoshito S. Hakeda, trans., “Indications of the Goals of the Three Teachings (*Sangōshiki* 三教指帰),” *Kūkai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 101–139.

¹⁰ Hakeda, “The Difference Between Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism (*Benkenmitsu nikyōron* 辯顯密二教論),” *Kūkai: Major Works*, 151–157.

¹¹ Hakeda, “The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury (*Hizō hōyaku* 秘藏宝鑰),” *Kūkai: Major Works*, 157–224.

possibility of the court's identification with such a structure. The universalism of the *Dharmakāya* in the image of Mahāvairocana Buddha (Jp. *Dainichi Nyorai* 大日如来) likewise supported the universalist self-identity of the imperial clan; the Great Sun Tathāgata, as a neo-iconic validation of Amaterasu (天照), the Great Sun kami of the Yamato territories, made possible a Buddhist-centered source of power for the protection of the nation.

Kūkai's biography served as a narrative for the discovery of these hierarchies among the indigenous and foreign influences of his lifetime. He rejected his aristocratic Confucian-based education in order to search among those practicing various amalgamations of Shinto, Daoism, and Buddhism in the mountains of Shikoku. The story of his search among the *shugenja* (修験者), culminated in his introduction to the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (Jp. *Dainichikyō* 大日經) at about the age of thirty, served mainly as a rejection of both the prevalent institutional forms of Buddhist scholasticism and the magico-ascetic systems he discovered in the mountains, thus mirroring the search of Gotama Buddha. It is only in this text that he came to recognize a superior teaching. While much of the text was impenetrable to him, given its central focus on Sanskrit mantras, a language he could not yet read, the esoteric pronouncements of the text assured him of its superiority over the exoteric disciplines of Japanese Buddhist scholasticism. His ability to recognize its superiority had already been established through his initial preparatory indoctrination into the *Kokūzōgumonjihō* (虚空藏求聞持法) rite, "The Rite for Seeking a Grip on What is Heard."¹² Thus, the recitation of the bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha (Jp. *Kokūzō* 虚空藏) Mantra for one million repetitions promised the capacity to grasp the meaning of any text. In this sense, both his rejection of other available teachings and his embrace of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* were both validated in this bestowed power to recognize a text's ultimate value.

One factor that seems to have attracted Kūkai to the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* was its claim of universality. One possible hermeneutic of this text (most likely transmitted to Kūkai by his Chinese teacher, Huiguo 惠果 (746–805)¹³ is that it claimed to provide direct access to the preaching of the

¹² Hakeda, "Indications of the Goals of the Three Teachings," *Kūkai: Major Works*, 102.

¹³ Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 128–129.

Dharmakāya, subsuming all other works within it. The preaching of Mahāvairocana as the *Dharmakāya* included all Buddhist teachings within itself since all *Sambhogakāya* and *Nirmāṇakāya* teachings are ultimately the expression of the universal *Dharmakāya*. While other sūtras represent snapshots in time, teachings that provided skillful expressions of the Dharma formulated to reach the limited capacities of a particular audience, and the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* was not limited to time and space since both transcended and contained all other expressions of the Dharma. To study this text was to study all Buddhist texts and to know their ultimate meaning. It is this claim of superiority offered by the Esoteric path, grounded in the preaching of the *Dharmakāya*, that Kūkai based his own claims of authority, thus resulting in the most overt body choice among the three founders. One clear example can be found in his work, “The Difference Between Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism (*Benkenmitsu nikyōron* 辯顯密二教論), where Kukai cited the Esoteric *Vajraśekhara Sūtra*¹⁴ in order to delineate the hierarchical relation between the paths offered by the three bodies:

The Buddha, manifested in human form [i.e. *Nirmāṇakāya*], preached the doctrines of the Three Vehicles for the sake of bodhisattvas who were yet to advance to the Ten Stages of Bodhisattvahood, for the followers of the Hinayana, and for ordinary people; the Sambhogakaya Buddha taught the doctrine of the One Vehicle for the bodhisattvas in the Ten Stages of Bodhisattvahood. Both teachings are Exoteric. The Dharmakaya Buddha, for his own enjoyment, with his own retinue, preached the doctrine of the Three Mysteries.¹⁵ This is Esoteric. The

¹⁴ (Jp. *Kongochokyo* 金剛頂經). In accordance with the training he received from Huiguo, Kukai paired this text with the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* as co-equal in canonical authority. The work is mainly an Esoteric retelling of Siddhartha Gotama’s awakening, where the cosmic bestowal of an Esoteric initiation allows him to fully extricate himself from the limitations of asceticism and subsequently attain Buddhahood.

¹⁵ The Three Mysteries (Jp. *sanmitsu* 三密) of body, speech, and mind are realized exclusively through the Esoteric initiations of mudrā, mantra, and maṇḍala. These are understood as mysteries precisely because of their exclusive Esoteric accessibility.

doctrine of the three Mysteries is concerned with the innermost spiritual experience of the Dharmakaya Buddha, and the bodhisattvas in the Ten Stages of Bodhisattvahood or even those who are nearly equal to the Buddha cannot penetrate it, much less the Hinayanists and ordinary people, who could not cross its threshold.¹⁶

The superiority of the Esoteric over the Exoteric and the exclusivity of the Three Mysteries, based in this differentiation between the teachings offered by the three bodies, functioned as a prevalent theme throughout Kūkai's career and was his central claim for distinguishing his school of Buddhism and solidifying his institutional authority.

However, it took Kūkai more than a decade after his return to Japan to fully establish himself in the centers of Heian institutional power. During the three-year reign of Emperor Heizei (平城), Kūkai remained excluded from the capital on the island of Kyushu. It was not until 809 before he was called by the court of Emperor Saga (嵯峨) to take up residence at Takaosanji (高雄山時). Although Saichō (最澄), the founder of Japanese Tendai, had been given a political head start, enjoying the favor of the emperor Kammu, and performing the first Esoteric *abhiṣeka* ritual¹⁷ in 805 while Kūkai remained in China, fate was in the end, more attentive to Kūkai. The death of Kammu in April 806 weakened Saichō's advantage, and the emperor Saga enthroned three years later, had more of an appreciation for aesthetics than he did for Buddhism. Kūkai was capable of obliging the emperor's literary interests with demonstrations of his own poetic talents through written correspondence and was also eager to show how the powers of esoterism could provide superior protection of the nation.¹⁸ Still, it was not until 816 before Saga finally granted permission for Kūkai to construct a Shingon monastery on Mt. Kōya. By 822, Kūkai's institutional power was further established after Saga permitted the construction of a dedicated *abhiṣeka* hall at Tōdaiji in Nara.

¹⁶ Hakeda, "The Difference Between Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism," *Kūkai: Major Works*, 152.

¹⁷ (Jp. *kanjō* 灌頂); the primary initiatory ritual.

¹⁸ In 810, soon after supporters of the former emperor Heizei had instigated a failed, but violent attempt to usurp the throne, Kūkai presented Saga with a written memorial promising protection of the nation through Esoteric mantra recitation. See Hakeda, "Rise to Eminence," *Kūkai: Major Works*, 41.

The following year Saga abdicated the throne, but not before transferring Kūkai's residence from Takaosanji to Tōji, a national monastery in the capital city that would become a dedicated training center for Esoteric Buddhism. The growing relationship Kūkai successfully cultivated with Saga culminated with the former emperor receiving the *abhiseka*.¹⁹

The rise of Kūkai during these years, while not necessarily bringing about a decline of Saichō's stature in the capital, indeed resulted in some disappointments for the latter. This was the tension between their mutual interest in esotericism and the incongruity of their notions of dharmic authority. For Saichō, this authority was founded on the one vehicle (Skt. *Ekayāna*, Jp. *ichijō* 一乘) teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* (Jp. *Hokekyō* 法華經), recognized in Tendai as the final, and therefore, most advanced teaching of Śākyamuni Buddha. Saichō's interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra* led to an inclusive, eclectic approach to Tendai monasticism, where numerous forms of practice were understood to be included in the one vehicle. Like Kūkai, Saichō claimed that his system of practice could lead to liberation in a single lifetime,²⁰ but he also held the position that Esoteric practice was affirmed within the *Lotus Sūtra* as part of the one vehicle, while Kūkai rejected this notion due to his position on the limitations of *Nirmāṇakāya* teachings. Both claimed a universalism, but while Saichō's universalism was defined in terms of inclusivity, Kūkai's universalism was decidedly exclusive due to his interpretation of the *trikāya*.

Their initial encounters seem to have exhibited mutual respect, with Saichō recognizing the value of Kūkai's expertise rather early, seeking him out as soon as he arrived in the capital to borrow texts in 809 and then to receive the first two *abhiseka* initiations in 812.²¹ Kūkai was willing to oblige these requests but expected a greater commitment to the day-to-day Esoteric disciplines held at Takaosanji before he would be willing to bestow Saichō

¹⁹ Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, 43.

²⁰ See Paul Groner, "The *Lotus Sutra* and Saichō's Interpretation of Buddhahood with This Very Body," in George J. Tanabe Jr. and Willa Jane Tanabe, eds., *The Lotus Sutra in Japanese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989).

²¹ Hakeda, "Abhiṣeka Ceremonies at the Takaosanji," *Kūkai: Major Works*, 42–44.

with the more advanced initiations.²² The decline in their relationship may have escalated; yet, when one of Saichō's prized students, Taihan (泰範), began to break from Mt. Hiei in favor of Takaosanji. In Ryūichi Abé's examination of the correspondences between Saichō and Taihan during this period, he cites an 816 letter Taihan wrote in response to one of Saicho's pleas for a reunion of their joint dissemination of Tendai Buddhism. Taihan's rejection of Saicho's plea is unequivocal, and the very basis for his sound refusal was in Taihan's conversion to Kukai's form of universalism and exclusivity:

You also asked me, "What difference in excellence could there be between the One Unifying Vehicle of the Lotus and the One Unifying Vehicle of Shingon?"...because I cannot remain forever perplexed by your thundering question, I would like to state my view, one that is as narrow as that through a bamboo pipe. The Tathagatas, the great teachers, provide the medicine of Dharma according to the capacities of their patients. They prescribe myriad medications corresponding to countless proclivities in people...And yet the Dharmakaya Buddha unfailingly distinguishes himself from the Nirmanakaya Buddha. How, then, could there be no difference in depth between the exoteric and esoteric teachings? The teaching of the Dharmakaya is absolute, hidden, and ultimate, while the teaching of the Sambhogakaya is relative, apparent, and provisional. Therefore, I am now immersing myself in the nectar of Shingon and have no time for tasting the medicines of the exoteric schools.²³

The Case of Shinran

Both Shinran and Dōgen lived in a world four centuries removed from Kūkai, yet they mirrored their predecessor's concern for ascertaining the singularity of attainment, resulting in their own particular body choices. They also shared in their respective biographies, a rejection of Tendai eclecticism, both beginning their training on Mt. Hiei, but ultimately leaving in

²² See Ryūichi Abé, "Saichō and Kūkai: A Conflict of Interpretations," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22/1-2 (1995), 118-120.

²³ Abé, "Saichō and Kūkai," 130-131.

search of greater clarity for the meaning of attainment. Shinran's affinity for the *Sam̄bhogakāya* reflected his assertion of the impossibility of liberation through self-power (*jiriki* 自力) and the corresponding necessity of fully entrusting the vows of Amitābha as liberation through other power (*tariki* 他力). The promise of attainment embraced by Shinran originated from three canonical texts, the Larger *Sukhāvātī-vyuha Sūtra* (Jp. *Daimuryōjukyō* 大無量壽經), the Smaller *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra*, often named the *Amitābha Sūtra* (Jp. *Amidakyō* 阿彌陀經), and the *Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra* (Jp. *Kanmuryōjukyō* 觀無量壽經). The Larger *Sukhāvātī-vyuha Sūtra*'s importance mainly lies in the record of forty-eight vows promised by the bodhisattva Dharmakāra to the primordial Buddha Lokeśvararāja if he were to attain final enlightenment. As a recognized canonical text, the Larger *Sukhāvātī-vyuha Sūtra* represented for Shinran a contract of soteriological certainty. The promise of Amida's primal vow is unique in the Indian canonical records, offering a decisive liberation from the faithful's karmic burdens.

The *Amitābha Sūtra* describes the Pure Land given to Sariputra by the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, extolling its exceptional beauty, and reiterating vows eighteen through twenty promised by Amitābha while he was a bodhisattva. But the *Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra*, an apocryphal text most likely composed originally in China, offers an even clearer promise of liberation. It is based upon a story of a king and queen who are imprisoned by their power-hungry son. The queen prays for the aid of Śākyamuni Buddha, and he responds by teaching her a hierarchal system of meditations on the visual details of the Pure Land. However, for those so burdened with past karma that they are incapable of meditation, he tells the queen that one can attain the Pure Land after death by simply reciting the name of Amitāyus (Buddha of Infinite Life).

Although the Larger *Sukhāvātī-vyuha Sūtra* and the *Amitābha Sūtra* are both Indian in origin, there is no historical evidence of a Pure Land cult that emerged in India exclusively devoted to the Pure Land Sūtras. The earliest evidence of Chinese interest in the *Sam̄bhogakāya*-based powers of the Pure Land writings comes from Southern teachers like Huiyuan in the fourth and fifth centuries and Zhiyi in the sixth. However, they are not even considered canonical in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism because they are seen as presenting elitist systems, emphasizing the self-power of the meditational techniques found in the Indian sources. It was in the North, when extreme political instability and strife during the 350-year period between the Han and

Tang dynasties brought about a questioning of the efficacy of self-power, that Shinran's Chinese predecessors emerged.²⁴

In this region, between the Fifth and Seventh centuries, the hopelessness of social reality inspired a reversal in the Mahāyāna vision of the bodhisattva vow. Rather than seeing in themselves a capacity to take on the bodhisattva vow to attain final enlightenment for the welfare of other beings, those who recognized their own incapacity to attain could place their hope in the recorded vow of a cosmological bodhisattva, thus placing the possibility of attainment in one's dependence upon the aide of other-power (Jp. *tariki* 他力).

Although Shinran did not travel to China to receive the Pure Land Dharma from its source, he had been introduced to its practice on Mt. Hiei. He left the Tendai school after nineteen years of training and became a student of Hōnen in 1201, having given up on the possibility of attainment through his own efforts. We find in these two patriarchs of Japanese Pure Land a distillation of the Chinese teachings into a definite meaning of attainment through Other Power. Most of the Chinese founders emphasized the meditative practices presented in the *Amitāyurdhyana Sūtra* as the most efficient vehicle of Pure Land practice. Shandao's contribution to the evolution of Pure Land thought was in declaring that recitation was *equal* to meditation as a path to attainment.

But Hōnen, even though he saw himself as a follower of Shandao, argued that recitation was superior to other practices like meditation, encouraging his followers to recite the *nembutsu* exclusively (*senju nembutsu* 専修念仏).²⁵ Shinran radicalized, or one might argue, *clarified*, Hōnen's teaching even further. He concluded that claiming birth in the Pure Land resulted from reciting the *nembutsu* would mean that self-power was still operative. Shinran asserted that the promise of attainment was only possible through recitation with true entrusting (*shinjin* 信心). This would mean that the

²⁴ Matsunaga and Matsunaga, *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism*, vol. II, 24.

²⁵ See chapter 3, "Passages Concerning the Tathāgata Amida's Original Vow, Which Promises Birth Not for Other Practices but for the Nembutsu Alone" in *Hōnen's Senchakushū: Passages on the Selection of the Nembutsu in the Original Vow (Senchaku hongan nembutsu shū)*, trans. Senchakushū English Translation Project (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; Tokyo: Sōgō Bukkyō Kenkyūjo, Taishō University, 1998), 72–81.

recitation is simply a recognition of Amida's Vow rather than an intentional practice of attainment.²⁶

Functioning as a soteriological release from the uncertainty of final enlightenment, Shinran's radical hermeneutic of the Indian sources promised attainment to even the most unskilled of religious seekers, those left with nothing more than the capacity for true entrusting in Amida's Primal Vow. Shinran's *Jōdoshinshū* (浄土真宗) is the Way of True Entrusting, only requiring one's recognition that the burden of karma has made attainment through self-power an impossibility. It is only in the full recognition of this impossibility of attainment that attainment is made possible; a hope that relies on hopelessness, an entrusted promise that renders the uncertain certain. For the way of true entrusting, neither the Gotama as *Nirmāṇakāya* nor Vairocana as *Dharmakāya* could provide such a conduit of attainment. The teachings of the historical Buddha were of no practical use to the seeker of the Dharma. Even Gotama recognized his Way would be challenging and was uncertain if it could be conveyed to others.²⁷ The world of Shinran, so far removed from the original discoverer of the Dharma, was a world of insurmountable karmic blindness, rendering the instructions of the Buddha incapable of penetrating the ignorance of those, like Shinran, who were left stranded on the further shore of karmic bondage.

If human beings were too blind to recognize the vision of Gautama, they were also too deaf to hear the preaching of Mahāvairocana. For Kūkai, in order to realize attainment through the *Dharmakāya*, one must come to recognize one's true identity as none other than the Truth Body itself; attainment is realized in the original state of enlightened reality. But for Shinran, the defilements rendered the recognition of this nature an impossibility. Reciting the *nembutsu* with true entrusting bypassed the path of self-power,

²⁶ According to Shinran, "with regard to Other Power, since it is inconceivable Buddha-wisdom, the attainment of supreme enlightenment by foolish beings possessed of blind passions comes about through the working shared only by Buddhas; it is not in any way the design of the practitioner." See Dennis Hirota, trans., "A Collection of Letters," *The Collected Works of Shinran* (Kyoto: Jōdō Shinshū Hongwanj-ha, 1997), letter 10 (accessed July 14, 2020, <http://shinranworks.com/letters/a-collection-of-letters/10-2/>).

²⁷ See *Mahāvagga* I. 5, 2–4 in F. Max Müller, ed., *The Sacred Books of the East*, trans. T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg, vol. XIII (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1881), 84–85.

which required one to penetrate through the defilements to reveal one's original nature. In contrast, in order to enter the Way of True Entrusting, the other power of Amida's Primal Vow could only be received through the utter conviction of one's defilement. Only in the certainty of defilement is there the certainty of attainment, realized as an unequivocal dependence on Amida's Vow.²⁸ In Shinran's collection of hymns, "Gutoku's Hymns of Lament and Reflection," the conviction of his defiled nature provided the very basis for his attainment.

Each of us in outward bearing,
 Makes a show of being wise, good and dedicated;
 But so great are our greed, anger, perversity and deceit,
 That we are filled with all forms of malice and cunning.

Extremely difficult is it to put an end to our evil nature;
 The mind is like a venomous snake or scorpion.
 Our performance of good acts is also poisoned;
 Hence, it is called false and empty practice.

Although I am without shame and self-reproach
 And lack a mind of truth and sincerity,
 Because the Name is directed by Amida,
 Its virtues fill the ten quarters.

Lacking even small love and compassion,
 I cannot hope to benefit sentient beings.
 Were it not for the ship of Amida's Vow,
 How could I cross the ocean of painful existence?²⁹

²⁸ See Shinran's letter "Lamp for the Latter Ages" (*Mattoshō* 末燈鈔): "those who have attained true shinjin are already certain to become Buddhas, and therefore are equal to the Tathagatas. Although Maitreya has not yet attained Buddhahood, it is certain that he will, so he is already known as Maitreya Buddha. In this manner, that person who has attained true shinjin is taught to be equal to the Tathagatas." See Hirota, *Collected Works*, letter 15 (accessed July 14, 2020, <http://shinranworks.com/letters/lamp-for-the-latter-ages/15-2/>).

²⁹ Hirota, "Gutoku's Hymns of Lament and Reflection," *Collected Works*, hymns 95–98 (accessed July 14, 2020, <http://shinranworks.com/hymns-in-japanese/hymns-of-the-dharma-ages/hymns-of-lament-and-reflection/>).

However, where is Shinran's claim to authority in this passage? Throughout his writings, Shinran insists on refuting any possible claim to authority, incessantly reminding his readers of his foolishness and sinfulness, and is said to have asserted that he did not have even a single disciple, stating, "If I could bring people to say the Nembutsu, then I could call them 'my disciples.' But it would be preposterous to call somebody 'my disciple' when he says the Nembutsu solely through the working of Amida's compassion."³⁰ This denial of authority points rhetorically to the *Samhoga*kāya Buddha Amida and the canonical origins of his Vow, while at the same time renders Shinran an exemplar of True Entrusting for the faithful. In being recognized as such, his reputation and authority in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism was assured.

While Amitābha Buddha is represented as a *Samhoga*kāya Buddha in both the Pure Land sūtra literature as well as the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*³¹ and was identified as such in the vast majority of Shinran's works, contemporary scholars³² have also cited later writings in Shinran's career where he recognized Amida as the *Dharmakāya*. On one level, one could say, Amida is certainly the *Dharmakāya* because all Buddhas, including Amida, are merely outward forms of the universal, formless, *Dharmakāya*. In Shinran's "Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone'" (*Yuishinshō-mon'i* 唯信鈔文意), written in 1251, he clarified the distinction between the formless dharma-body and the dharma-body of form that is Amida, while at the same time recognizing their inseparability:

there are two kinds of dharma-body with regard to the Buddha. The first is called dharma-body as suchness and the second, dharma-body as compassionate means. Dharma-body as suchness has neither color nor form; thus, the mind cannot grasp it, nor words describe it. From this oneness

³⁰ From the *Tannishō* (歎異抄) in Alfred Bloom, *Strategies for Modern Living: A Commentary with the Text of the Tannishō* (Berkeley: Numata Center For Buddhist Translation and Research, 1992), 6.

³¹ Maitreya-nātha and Ārya-saṅga, *Universal Vehicle Discourse Literature*, 95.

³² See Alfred Bloom, "The Ultimacy of Jodo Shinshu: Shinran's Response to Tendai," *Pure Land* 10/11 (1994), 28–55; and Thomas P. Kasulis, "Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262): Naming What Comes Naturally," *Engaging Japanese Philosophy: A Short History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018), 181–211.

was manifested form, called dharma-body as compassionate means. Taking this form, the Buddha announced the name Bhikṣu Dharmakara and established the Forty-eight great Vows that surpass conceptual understanding.³³

While all Buddhas may be identified with the *Dharmakāya* on the level of *Dharmakāya*'s universality, only Amida Buddha, the dharma-body as compassionate means, is originally primordial with the formless dharma-body of suchness. Therefore, because the Vows of Dharmakara originate from the formless dharma-body of suchness, they transcend the common discriminatory capacities of human beings (*hakarai* 計らい). The dharma-body as compassionate means is the Buddha-nature in the phenomenal world as true entrusting (*shinjin busshō* 信心仏性). For this reason, Shinran contended that *shinjin* did not originate from human discretion, but only from Amida's compassion. Because Amida is none other than the natural outpouring of compassion originating from the formless dharma-body of suchness, Amida is the ultimate expression of Buddhahood in the world of form. Through the acceptance of Amida's compassion as true entrusting, one transcends the limits of one's karmic condition, participating in the original, formless Buddhahood of the *Dharmakāya*.

However, due to Shinran's years on Mt. Hiei, he would have been trained in the primacy of Śākyamuni's teachings as the Buddha of the *Lotus Sūtra*. While formulating his own recognition of the supremacy of Amida Buddha and the message of the Pure Land sutras, he also needed to reconcile this resultant shift in the ultimate import of the Lotus. In Alfred Bloom's study of Shinran's critique of the Tendai interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, he elucidates Shinran's rejection of Tendai syncretism, thus claiming that the One Vehicle was none other than the Primal Vow of the dharma-body of compassionate means, not the multiplicity of self-power teachings and practices espoused by Saichō and other leaders of the Tendai school.³⁴ Also, Shinran displaced the central position of the *Nirmāṇakāya* in the Tendai interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, instead asserting the supremacy of Amida. In his "Hymns of the Pure Land" (*Jōdo Wasan* 浄土和讃), he interprets chapter

³³ From Shinran's "Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone'" (*Yuishinshō-mon'i* 唯信鈔文意) in Hirota, *Collected Works* (accessed July 15, 2020, <http://shinranworks.com/commentaries/notes-on-essentials-of-faith-alone/>).

³⁴ Bloom, "The Ultimacy of Jodo Shinshu," 40.

sixteen of the *Lotus Sūtra* as an indication of the eternal nature of Amida Buddha (*jindenkuongō* 塵點久遠劫) rather than the Tendai notion of the eternal Śākyamuni (*kuonjitsujō* 久遠実成).³⁵

While Shinran identified Amida Buddha with the *Dharmakāya*, he was not, therefore, identifying Amida with Vairocana, at least not in the way Kūkai understood Vairocana. As the *Dharmakāya*, Kūkai understood that all phenomena without exception are manifestations of Vairocana, each expounding the Dharma in particular ways (*hosshin seppō* 法身說法). The same could be said for Amida, but that only places Amida on the same level of any other manifestation of the *Dharmakāya* and would consequently be limited to the particularity of the *Dharmakāya*'s expression, limited by time and place.

For Kūkai, the dharma-body would not be of two kinds as Shinran contended (formless dharma-body of suchness and dharma-body of compassionate means), but rather the single universal dharma-body of suchness expressed in the world in an infinite array of forms. Vairocana is the universal, formless dharma-body of suchness, and the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* is the singular text that provides the preaching of the formless dharma-body. In his later writings, it seems as though Shinran strove to address this distinction between the original formless ground of Vairocana and the manifested form of Amida in order to dissolve the problem of time claimed by Kūkai, thus presenting an eternal *Sambhogakāya* Amida with no particular origination in time, sharing a primordial identity with the formless dharma-body of suchness.

The Case of Dōgen

Eihei Dōgen's *Bendōwa* (辨道話) fascicle is commonly cited to support single practice theory.³⁶ The high level of attention given to this text has been primarily due to both its early date and the inclusion of a question and answer section, unique in the collection of materials included in the 95-

³⁵ Ibid., 48. Bloom cites hymn 55: "It is taught that ten kalpas have now passed since Amida attained Buddhahood, but he seems a Buddha more ancient than kalpas countless as particles"; and hymn 88: "Amida, who attained Buddhahood in the infinite past, full of compassion for foolish beings of the five defilements, took the form of Sakyamuni Buddha and appeared in Gaya."

³⁶ See Norman Waddell and Masao Abe 水野弥穗子, trans. *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 7.

fascicle *Treasury of the True Dharma-Eye* (*Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏).³⁷ Traced to 1231, four years after his return from China, *Bendōwa* is most likely the earliest text included in the collection, and has been understood as an early public assertion of the supremacy of seated meditation (*zazen*). However, an equally important theme is Dōgen's claims of authority based in patriarchal transmission, a transmission he traces back to the *Nirmāṇakāya* Buddha, Siddhārtha Gotama. Throughout *Bendōwa*, both in the introductory material and the question and answer section, Dōgen repeatedly reminds his audience that attainment can only be authenticated through the approval of a teacher included in the line of patriarchs. In the introduction, for example, he states:

The great teacher Śākyamuni Buddha disclosed the Dharma to Mahākāśyapa before the assembly on Vulture Peak; it was then transmitted from patriarch to patriarch to Bodhidharma. Bodhidharma traveled to China and imparted the Dharma to Huike. This was the beginning of the Buddhadharma coming to the East...immediately entangled vines were cut at the source, and the one pure Buddhadharma spread. We should pray that this succession will occur in our country as well.³⁸

³⁷ Steven Heine finds the text problematic in his historical-critical analysis of Dogen's writings, *Did Dōgen Go To China? What He Wrote and When He Wrote It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 123–124. This is because *Bendōwa* was not discovered until the late seventeenth century, about 400 years after Dōgen's death. In addition, question and answer material is not included in any fascicle other than *Bendōwa*, making it a rather strange outlier in comparison to his remaining works. While the text is included as the first fascicle in the early nineteenth-century 95-fascicle *Shōbōgenzō*, it was excluded from the 75-fascicle collection, originally edited by Dōgen's disciple Ejō. In regard to this study of Dōgen's claims to authority, the question and answer section does provide a unique window into the ways that Dōgen is said to have responded directly to questions regarding the validity and efficacy of his form of Buddhism.

³⁸ Mizuno Yaoko 水野弥穗, ed., *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏 [Treasury of the True Dharma-Eye], 3 vols., vol. I (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1990), 14–15.

Included in the question and answer section of *Bendōwa*, Dōgen is asked to compare his school with other established Japanese traditions like the Lotus, Kegon, and Shingon systems. Dōgen replies that it is unnecessary to debate about the inferiority or superiority of teachings, or to get caught up in the meaning of traditional phrases from various schools, but then reiterates the necessity of authentic transmission:

In receiving and transmitting the Buddhadharmā it is necessary for a teacher to be a person who has been vouched with realization. Priests who are literary scholars fall short, like the blind leading the blind. Today, all the followers of the Buddha patriarch's right transmission preserve the Buddhadharmā in their reverence for a skilled master who has attained the Way.³⁹

This insistence on certified transmission is not limited to *Bendōwa*, but other significant fascicles in the *Shōbōgenzō* as well. Dōgen opens the 1241 *Busshō* (*Buddha-nature* 仏性) fascicle for example, with Śākyamuni's assertion that all beings without exception have the Buddha-nature, and then follows by stating:

This is the lion's roar of our great teacher Śākyamuni turning the wheel of the Dharma, and it is the craniums and brilliant eyeballs of all the many Buddhas and patriarchs. As of 1241, for the last two thousand one hundred and ninety years, scarcely fifty generations of rightful heirs up to my late master Tiāntóng Rújīng, have faithfully practiced this Dharma. Twenty-eight consecutive generations of patriarchs in the West and twenty-three consecutive generations of patriarchs in the East have all resided there.⁴⁰ The Buddhas and patriarchs throughout the ten directions have all resided in this Dharma.⁴¹

³⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. I, 24.

⁴⁰ A total of fifty-one generations; the last representative of this transmission is therefore, Dōgen himself.

⁴¹ Mizuno, *Shōbōgenzō*, vol. I, 72–73.

In 1245, the same year that Dōgen established Daibutsuji 大仏寺 (renamed Eiheiji 永平寺 in 1246), a new monastic residence located in the secluded environs of Fukui prefecture, Echizen province, he began composing fascicles that emphasized the traditional practices of the earliest Sangha, including *Hatsu-u* 鉢盂 (*Begging Bowl*), *Ango* 安居 (*Rains Retreat*), and in the following year, *Shukke* 出家 (*Homeleavers*). In *Hatsu-u*, Dōgen traced the “authentic transmission” from the seven Buddhas of antiquity to all the generations of both India and China, claiming that “the fifty-one generations of the West and the East are the Treasury of the True Dharma Eye, the mind of nirvāṇa, the robe, and the begging bowl.”⁴² The reference here to the *Shōbōgenzō*, the title given to his entire collection of fascicles, reveals the very basis for Dōgen’s authority. This title claims the continued age of *shōbō* 正法 (True Dharma), as a direct refutation of *mappō*, the notion that medieval Japan resided in the age of a degenerate or defiled Dharma. According to Dōgen, an undefiled Dharma had been maintained historically through a certified patriarchal transmission that originated from the earthly founder of the True Dharma, Siddhārtha Gotama.⁴³ By asserting the necessity of patriarchal transmission, Dōgen placed his authority within the historical realm of the *Nirmāṇakāya*. In contrast to Kūkai, who argued that the *Nirmāṇakāya* represented a Dharma limited by historical time and place, or to Shinran, who confessed that the True Dharma of Siddhārtha Gotama was no longer accessible for those hindered by karmic burden, Dōgen claimed he had procured an undefiled Dharma for Japan, certified by his inclusion in the historical line of patriarchal transmission.

Dōgen also cites such transmission-based protection of the Dharma from degeneration in the *Eihei Kōroku* (永平広録), a collection of formal *jōdō* 上堂 style sermons, as well as *kōan* cases and poetic works, primarily compiled in the final eight years of his career. In volume 5, Dharma Discourse 374, Dōgen presented a *kōan* case (also number 59 in *Eihei Kōroku*, volume 9) between the monk Nanyue and the Sixth Patriarch Huineng. When they first met, Huineng asks, “What is this that thus comes?” It took Nanyue eight

⁴² Ibid., vol. III, 415.

⁴³ This claimed contrast between *shōbō* and *mappō*, due to the certification of historical transmission, forms the grounding of the *Shōbōgenzō* title to such an extent that, while not being a literal translation of the title, could be more accurately understood in an English translation as *Treasury of the Undefiled Dharma Transmission*.

years to finally answer, by saying, “To explain or demonstrate anything would miss the mark.” Huineng responds, “Then do you suppose there is practice realization or not?” Nanyue replied, “It is not that there is no practice realization, but only that it cannot be defiled.” Huineng responded, “This nondefilement is exactly what the buddhas protect and care for. I am thus, you are thus, and the ancestors in India are also thus.”⁴⁴

There are more direct criticisms of both *nembutsu* and Shingon esotericism in *Bendōwa*. The third question in the text begins by recognizing the legitimacy of patriarchal transmission but asserts that recitation of the nembutsu also leads to enlightenment. Dōgen’s response could not be more unequivocal:

What do you know about the merits of sūtra recitation and nembutsu? It is pointless imagining that simply moving your tongue is a meritorious activity...Intending to attain the Buddha Way by foolishly occupying the mouth with a thousand or ten thousand recitations is akin to directing the shaft of an ox cart northward in order to reach the southern lands, or trying to fit a square peg into a round hole...you are no more than a frog of the spring field, croaking day and night without benefit.⁴⁵

Both questions 4 and 16 recorded in *Bendōwa* allude to what was understood as a Shingon assertion that the meaning of the Buddhadharmā is to realize that the mind is already fully Buddha. Dōgen responded to these claims with as much derision as he did with the practice of the *nembutsu*, returning to the transmission of the Dharma through the efforts of the historical Buddha, stating “if the Buddhadharmā were attained by knowing the self is already Buddha, Śākyamuni would not have gone through the trouble long

⁴⁴ Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura, trans., *Dōgen’s Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Kōroku* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 328. See an early study of the place of these works in Dōgen’s career in Steven Heine, “The Dōgen Canon: Dōgen’s Pre-*Shōbōgenzō* Writings and the Question of Change in His Later Works” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 24/1–2 (1997), 47.

⁴⁵ Mizuno, *Shōbōgenzō*, vol. I, 21–22.

ago to guide others to enlightenment.⁴⁶ He then turns to an encounter dialogue between master Fa-yen and his disciple Hsüan-tse,⁴⁷ where the latter is reminded by the former that simply recognizing one's original nature is not sufficient without dedicated practice, thus illustrating the primary insight realized by Dōgen himself after leaving Mt. Hiei and discovering what he concluded was the True Dharma while studying under the Chinese master Ru-jing.⁴⁸

Yet, it is not as though Dōgen never engaged in such practices; having been a monk on Mt. Hiei, he would have been introduced to both the *nembutsu* and esotericism as a matter of course. Nevertheless, Dōgen left the Tendai school abruptly after only a single year of training. As is generally acknowledged, it was not Dōgen's problems with *nembutsu* practice that brought about his rejection of Tendai, but rather his concern about the meaning of original enlightenment (*hongaku* 本覺) and its relationship to practice. Dōgen, it seems, initially sought out a Pure Land master named Kōin (公胤) after leaving Mt. Hiei but was recognized by the teacher as not being a good match. It may have been Kōin who sent Dōgen off to Kenninji (建仁寺) to seek out Eisai (榮西), the first Japanese Zen master to receive transmission in China.⁴⁹

As the Pure Land sūtras and esoteric texts seem to have had little, if any, influence on Dōgen while training on Mt. Hiei, he would have likewise been trained in the study of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which, unlike these other textual materials, seems to have had a significant influence on his thought, since his references to this sūtra can be found throughout the *Shōbōgenzō*.⁵⁰ One obvious distinction between the *Lotus Sūtra* and both the Pure Land and *Mahāvairocana* sūtras, a distinction germane to this study, is that the *Lotus Sūtra* contains the teachings of the *Nirmāṇakāya* Buddha, which, given

⁴⁶ Ibid., vol. I, 41.

⁴⁷ From the early eleventh-century *Jingde chuandenglu* 景德傳燈錄, a Chinese record of Tang-era master-disciple encounter dialogues. The example used by Dōgen in this case is titled "Ping-ting comes for fire."

⁴⁸ For instance, the unity of practice and attainment (*shushō ittō* 修証一等).

⁴⁹ Matsunaga and Matsunaga, *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism*, vol. II, 235.

⁵⁰ See Gudo Nishijima and Chodo Cross, trans., *Master Dogen's Shobogenzo*, book 1 (Woking, UK: Windbell, 1994), 293–321, for a list of all these references in the 95-fascicle *Shōbōgenzō*.

Dōgen's insistence on the authentic transmission of the true Dharma originating from Śākyamuni Buddha, would seem to be no mere coincidence. Taigen Dan Leighton has contributed a significant study of these influences on Dōgen's thought, especially chapters fifteen and sixteen of the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁵¹ From this section of the text, Leighton examines Dōgen's hermeneutical wordplay reflecting on the scene of innumerable bodhisattva's arising from the earth in order to hear the words of Śākyamuni. Amid this congregation, the Buddha claims to have been training these beings throughout an inconceivable lifespan, far beyond the eighty-years attributed to the *Nirmāṇakāya* Buddha. This indicates a continued presence of the Buddha and his Dharma throughout time and space so that his *parinirvāṇa* was merely a show of skillful means in order to avoid the attachment of his followers.

Although Leighton observes that Dōgen's contemporary Myōe Shōnin, a Shingon scholar, yearned to witness this ever-present Buddha by traveling to India, Dōgen's insights of space and time allowed him to mourn the passing of Śākyamuni and see his continued presence through the here-and-now dedication to monastic practice, where each practitioner turns the flower of the Dharma in the temporal continuation of mind to mind transmission.⁵² To illustrate Dōgen's idiosyncratic reading of this event, Leighton cites a Dharma discourse recorded in the *Eihei Kōroku*, given during the yearly ceremony to remember Śākyamuni's *parinirvāṇa*.⁵³ Here Dōgen reminds his disciples:

This night Buddha entered nirvāṇa under the twin sāla trees,
and yet it is said that he always abides on Vulture Peak.
When can we meet our compassionate father? Alone and
poor, we vainly remain in this world. Although it is like
this, his remote descendants in this thousandfold Sahā
world, at this very time, what can you say?

After a pause Dōgen said:

⁵¹ See Taigen Dan Leighton, "Dōgen's Appropriation of *Lotus Sutra* Ground and Space," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 32/1 (2005): 85–105.

⁵² Dōgen dedicated an entire *Shōbōgenzō* fascicle to this phenomenon in 1241, titled *Hokke-ten-hokke* (法華轉法華), or "The Flower of the Dharma Turns the Flower of the Dharma."

⁵³ Leighton, "Dōgen's Appropriation of *Lotus Sutra*," 101.

In Crane Forest with the moon fallen, how could dawn appear? In Kuśi[nagara] flowers wither, and spring is not spring. Amid love and yearning, what can this confused son do? I wish to stop these red tears and join in wholesome action.⁵⁴

While referring to the miraculous Buddha of the *Lotus Sūtra*, who “is said” to always abide on Vulture Peak, Dōgen focuses his discourse on the Buddha of history, who died a mortal’s death, leaving behind all those who “vainly remain in the world.” He remembers the absence of Śākyamuni with great mourning, but at the same time, avoids limiting his “love and yearning” to lamentation. Instead, the Buddha’s passing reminds Dōgen to “join” all the Buddhas and patriarchs in his own continued reaffirmation of here-and-now practice. It is in this joining with all practitioners throughout space and time that, for Dōgen, Śākyamuni continues to abide.

Even while contemplating the inconceivable lifespan of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Buddha, unlike both Myōe and Shinran, Dōgen remained firmly grounded in the historical *Nirmāṇakāya*, not rendering Śākyamuni into a transcendent form that would approximate a *Sambhogakāya*.⁵⁵ However, while not directly referring to the *Dharmakāya* in his writings, are there examples that would nonetheless seem to invoke such a body? One concept from the *Busshō* 仏性 (Buddha-nature) fascicle, what Dōgen presents as “whole-being Buddha-nature” (*shitsū busshō* 悉有仏性), may be as close as he gets to a traditional notion of the *Dharmakāya*, recognizing the Buddha-nature of all phenomena, both sentient and insentient. This understanding of whole-being Buddha-nature is invoked in other fascicles as well, like *Bendōwa* and *Genjōkōan* 現成公案. For example, in his introductory remarks in *Bendōwa*, he states, “The grass and trees, fences and walls, proclaim and exalt the Dharma for the benefit of the ignorant, sages, and all living beings. The ignorant, sages, and all living beings expound and make clear the Dharma for the benefit of grasses and trees, fences and walls.”⁵⁶ In *Genjōkōan*, he declares, “To confirm all things by gathering them to the self is

⁵⁴ See discourse 486 (delivered in 1252) in Leighton and Okumura, *Dōgen’s Extensive Record*, 432–433.

⁵⁵ Refer to the discussion of Shinran’s interpretation of chapter sixteen of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

⁵⁶ Mizuno, *Shōbōgenzō*, vol. I, 18.

delusion, for all things to advance forward and confirm the self is enlightenment,”⁵⁷ and further on, “To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be confirmed by all phenomena.⁵⁸ To be confirmed by all phenomena is to cast off body and mind of self and other.”⁵⁹ These statements affirm a direct realization of the suchness (Skt. *tathātā*) of all phenomena as the continuous manifestation of the *Dharmakāya* in the everyday world. While Kūkai recognized a similar dimension of Vairocana as *hosshin seppō*, Dōgen’s whole-being Buddha-nature is not the Vairocana whose mysterious preaching can be found in the pages of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* and accessed through the performance of esoteric rites, but only in the common, unobstructed presencing of the “ten thousand things.”

In comparison to Shinran, Dōgen’s whole-being Buddha-nature bears no resemblance to Buddha-nature as true entrusting, which is grounded in the cosmological dharma-body as compassionate means, and only known through the full relinquishment of self-power. In addition, while both Shinran and Dōgen were influenced by chapter sixteen of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Dōgen resisted the eternalism bestowed upon Śākyamuni, mourning the latter’s death while attributing his inconceivable lifespan to the continued sharing of the dharma in the monastic tradition of mind-to-mind transmission. Shinran embraced the notion of eternalism by questioning the origins of Amida as expounded in the Pure Land sūtras and merging him instead with the primordial dharma-body of suchness.

Limits of the Body, Limits of the Path

So far, we have examined how Kūkai, Shinran, and Dōgen each claimed exclusivity for their particular movements based primarily on the identification with a chosen Buddha-body. By limiting the path to the meaning of a single Buddha-body, attainment was given a meaning that could be distinguished against the background of other competing traditions. If they were to include the entire *trikāya* in any of their movements, it is quite apparent how such an inclusion would have compromised the promise of attainment each of them proclaimed. If Kūkai included the *Samḥogakāya* and *Nirmāṇakāya*, Mahāvairocana would lose his universalist promise, since his teachings would not be recognized as both superior to, and inclusive of, all

⁵⁷ Ibid., vol. I, 54.

⁵⁸ Literally, “the then thousand dharmas” (万法).

⁵⁹ Mizuno, *Shōbōgenzō*, vol. I, 54.

teachings attributed to these two remaining Buddha-bodies. If Shinran included the *Nirmāṇakāya* and *Dharmakāya*, there would be a recognition that attainment was possible through self-realization and would thus render true entrusting utterly impossible. If Dōgen included the *Saṃbhogakāya* and *Dharmakāya*, he would have to admit an incompleteness in the Buddha identity of Śākyamuni, putting into question the singularity of historical mind to mind transmission. These body-choices do provide a stable and clear foundation for the possibility of liberation, allowing for the establishment of distinct Japanese Buddhist schools, providing exclusive paths that, in their very exclusivity, were able to establish authoritative legitimacy.

Because the choice of single-body systems over triple-body systems effectively removes the uncertainty of liberation, one could be led to recognize an underlying pressure in medieval Japan to assure the possibility of attainment. A path of uncertainty would not be able to survive in a world that demanded proof that liberation was within one's grasp. This pressure for assurances does warrant consideration given the central importance placed upon certainty in all three movements. The entire span of medieval Japanese history was beset by dramatic social changes and instability both within the political power centers, and in the experiences of the marginalized masses. People were hungry for liberation from the strife of human existence, and they demanded a clear and assured response to their needs.

The competition among Japanese founders for both governmental approval and popular support in a time of palpable human need required them to distinguish their movement from other alternatives and to base this distinction upon the possibility of attainment. There was the very practical requirement of impressing others that one's religious claims were certifiable, superior, and exclusive. Without such assurances, a new sectarian movement would not receive enough support to survive. Within this socio-political environment, Kūkai, Shinran, and Dōgen all rejected the eclecticism of Saichō and the Tendai establishment, and in so doing, formed institutions with exclusive paths to liberation, founded primarily on the authoritative promise of a single Buddha body.

While all three could also be said to hold a conception of the *Dharmakāya*, still, each presented an idiosyncratic vision of the universal Truth Body by further reinforcing the primacy of their chosen Buddha body: Kūkai in the direct preaching of the *Dharmakāya* as Vairocana, Shinran in the primordial eternalism of the *Saṃbhogakāya* Amida as the dharma-body of compassionate means, and Dōgen in the everyday presencing of phenomena, all continuing to expound the Dharma of Śākyamuni throughout space and time.

In this way, by structuring the universal in the specific, each one reinforced the exclusive authority of their offered paths. Nevertheless, the division of the *Trikāya* among these three founders of Japanese Buddhism resulted in a greater multiplicity of means to liberation, each suited to persons of differing walks of life and various individual proclivities. Such division also limited the power and influence of any single Buddhist institution, thus avoiding possible sectarian monopolies that, when paired with political power centers, could have drastically reduced personal choice and religious freedom.