Introduction

The historian of death must not be afraid to embrace the centuries until they run into a millennium. The errors he will not be able to avoid are less serious than the anachronisms to which he would be exposed by too short a chronology. Let us, therefore, regard a period of a thousand years as acceptable.
—Philippe Ariès

Providing funeral and memorial services represents the major social role of Buddhist priests and temples in Japan today. For many people, death may be the only occasion when they turn to the family temple, or, indeed, learn much of anything about Buddhism. In his introductory study of contemporary Japanese religion, Ian Reader recounts a conversation between two university professors of his acquaintance; queried by one about his family's Buddhist sectarian affiliation, the other replied, “I do not know; no one in our household has died yet.”1 Japanese scholarly histories of Buddhist mortuary ritual have often taken a teleological approach, attempting to show just how this present association of Buddhism with death came about. They also tend to be informed by a modernist critique of Buddhist institutions that targets temples’ reliance on funerary and mortuary rites as a symptom of decline.2 The locus classicus of this approach is of course Tamamuro Taijo’s influential Sōshiki bukkyō (Funeral Buddhism), first published in 1963 and still in print, which traces the growth of Japanese Buddhist institutions from the standpoint of their funerary rites. No previous scholar had framed the entire history of Japanese Buddhism in this way, and the data Tamamuro presented, if read critically, remain useful today. Yet his underlying question was clearly one of how the present, and in his view, deeply problematic, state of Buddhism had come about. Tamamuro writes that he chose his particular focus because, of the three avenues by which Buddhism had once appealed to the populace—healing, granting good fortune, and mortuary rites—only mortuary rites still remained influential. But even these no longer answered modern needs. “The issue facing [Buddhism] today,” he wrote, “is to purify its funerals of ancient, feudal, and magical
elements, as well as those pertaining to ancestor worship, and [instead] create funeral rites that [simply] comfort and commemorate. But Buddhist leaders close their eyes to this reality and wander vainly in a world of illusion. Herein, I suspect, lies the cause of the confusion in the Buddhist world." Tamamuro’s study not only reflected ongoing debate over the continued relevance of Buddhist funerary rites but also helped literally to define its terms, as the title sōshiki bukkyō quickly became a catchphrase encapsulating stereotypes of ossified Buddhist institutions, out of tune with people’s spiritual needs in this life and preoccupied solely with death.

We, the editors of this volume, have no interest in pursuing the modernist critique (except as an object of study), and while we find the roots of the contemporary Buddhist near-monopoly on death rites to be a fascinating subject, we do not necessarily read their history as a trajectory of Buddhist decline. Bracketing Tamamuro’s modernist assumptions, we find the story outlined in his Sōshiki bukkyō to be a remarkable one, worthy of further inquiry and historical interpretation.

For more than a millennium, despite moments of fierce competition from Shinto, Confucianism, Nativism, and, more recently, the secular funeral industry, Buddhism has dominated Japanese rites for the dead. No comprehensive understanding of Japanese religion or culture for any period following Buddhism’s introduction would be possible without some knowledge of its death rituals and views of the afterlife and their impact on social practice. Nonetheless, no book-length English-language study presenting an overall history of death in Japanese Buddhism has yet appeared. Cognizant of this lack, Mariko Walter organized a paper session on this topic for the 2000 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, which became the impetus for the present volume. The nine essays gathered here include studies by both established scholars and younger voices in the field and display a range of approaches, including not only Buddhist Studies but also art history, literary criticism, ritual studies, gender studies, sociology of religion, and ethnographic fieldwork. They are presented in chronological order of their subject matter, beginning with the Heian period (794–1185), and collectively cover a period of roughly a thousand years—coincidentally, the very length of time deemed appropriate by historian Philippe Ariès for a proper study of death. As Ariès suggests in the epigraph above, the perspective of the longue durée does indeed make possible an overview of persistent patterns as well as significant shifts in approaches to death. While we make no claim to comprehensiveness (nor even to so detailed a treatment as Ariès’ own monumental study of the history of Western attitudes toward death), we are confident that each essay included here addresses issues vital to an
understanding of death and the afterlife in Japanese Buddhist thought and practice and that, taken in conjunction, the studies presented here will provide a more thorough picture of this topic than has hitherto been available. Our hope is that this volume will not only benefit scholars and students of Buddhism and Japanese religion but also interest those focusing on other areas of Japan studies or religion and culture more broadly. As coeditors, we asked our contributors to make clear the connections among their individual essays by highlighting one or more of three themes: (1) continuity and change over time in Japanese Buddhist death-related practices and views of the afterlife; (2) the dual role of Buddhist death rites in both addressing individual concerns about the afterlife and at the same time working to construct, maintain, and legitimize social relations and the authority of religious institutions; and (3) Buddhist death rites as a locus of “contradictory logics,” to borrow a felicitous phrase from Duncan Williams’s chapter, bringing together unrelated, even opposing ideas about the dead, their postmortem fate, what the living should do for them, and what constitutes normative Buddhist practice. These three sets of interrelated issues are of course by no means limited either to Japan or to Buddhism. To introduce our essays most effectively, then, let us first offer some background and then contextualize the individual chapters by providing a brief historical overview of death in Japanese Buddhism.

“Entrusting the Afterlife to Buddhism”

We have only fragmentary information about the multiple concepts of the afterlife existing in Japan before the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century. The spirits of the dead were thought to reside in mountains, or cross over the seas to the “eternal world” of Tokoyo, or descend to the bleak “land of Yomi” of the Yamato myths. The first dynastic histories make reference, in connection with the system of double burial practiced among the nobility, to notions of a spirit (tama) requiring mourning and pacification; early on, Buddhist monks and nuns were incorporated into the rites surrounding the mogari no miya, or place of temporary interment, to perform services for deceased imperial family members. Over time, however, explicitly Buddhist models displaced this earlier ritual complex, coming to dominate the death-related practices of the aristocracy. The chief site for memorializing the dead shifted from the mogari no miya to Buddhist temples, and funerary ritual for tennō or emperors gave way from eulogies read by courtiers before their tombs to Buddhist rites of merit transference. According to the Nihon shoki, Urabon ceremonies for the
deceased were first sponsored by the court as early as 606. By the Heian period, Buddhist ritual had come to be understood, at least among the nobility, as the preeminent spiritual technology for consoling and pacifying the dead. Buddhist rites were not only performed to memorialize the dead collectively but were also sponsored by families for the sake of deceased relatives. For this purpose, Buddhist mantras, dharanis, and other invocations such as the nenbutsu were chanted, and goma rites, repentance rituals, and other ceremonies were conducted. Buddhist concepts of the afterlife, including the forty-nine-day interim period between death and rebirth, rebirth in the six realms of samsaric existence, and the possibility of salvific birth in a pure land were spread through preaching and doctrinal writings as well as visual representations, songs, poetry, and didactic tales. The reception of Buddhist death rites in turn stimulated a thriving religious culture supporting sutra transcription, ritual performance, production of Buddhist images, and construction of mortuary chapels on a lavish scale. Buddhist cosmology shaped not only the memorializing of the dead but also individuals’ own postmortem aspirations, and specific Buddhist rites were increasingly adopted to insure one’s personal well-being in the next life. These included the “deathbed tonsure” (rinjū jukai, rinjū shukke), first adopted at court by Emperor Ninmyō (d. 850), which conferred the soteriic benefit of enabling one to die as a Buddhist monk or nun and perhaps represented the earliest symbolic association in Japan of death with monastic ordination;9 the gyakushu or “preemptive funeral,” performed for oneself or another prior to death, such as the grand ceremonies sponsored by the courtier Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1027) described in Eiga monogatari (A tale of flowering fortunes);10 and “deathbed rites” (rinjū gyōgi) or ritual practices aimed at focusing one’s thoughts at the last moment so as to escape samsaric rebirth and be born into a pure land. An attitude of “entrusting the afterlife to Buddhism” was forged during the Heian period and, despite vicissitudes and transformations, has persisted to this day.11

But why should Buddhism in particular have come to be entrusted with the afterlife? It has often been noted, and thus scarcely needs restating, that Buddhism at the time of its introduction possessed a systematic doctrine, an institutional organization, and a stunning ritual repertoire unequalled by any other religious tradition represented in Japan, and thus it rose quickly to prominence. Yet we gain some further insight by detailing more specific reasons for Buddhist preeminence in the realm of death. While others could be adduced, three such reasons merit mention here. One lies in Buddhism’s intellectually compelling doctrine of an ethicized afterlife, in which individuals are reborn in pleasant or painful circumstances according to their deeds.
This doctrine provided both an incentive for virtuous behavior and assurance that the structure of reality is a moral one, in which, ultimately, good conduct is rewarded and wrongdoing punished. Yet, while cognitively satisfying, it was also profoundly disturbing, in that one could never be sure of having performed enough meritorious deeds to offset the sins of prior lifetimes.¹² Thus in Japan, as elsewhere in the Buddhist world, the doctrine of karmic causality became inextricably intertwined with an opposing yet interdependent logic by which merit transference on the part of the living could ameliorate or even eradicate the postmortem suffering of the dead.¹³ One might say that teachings of karmic causality generated the problem of possible retribution in the afterlife, while rituals of merit transference provided a solution. In the magnetic tension generated between these two perspectives, Buddhism acquired and held its dominance over death throughout the premodern period.

A second factor contributing to Buddhism’s ascendency in the realm of death lies in its well-known capacity to assimilate and refigure elements from other traditions. In particular, notions of a totality, integrated cosmos characteristic of the Japanese Mahāyāna—exemplified by teachings about skillful means tending toward the one vehicle, the myriad dharmas manifesting the true aspect, or all forms in the visible universe being the body of the cosmic buddha—encouraged and legitimized the redefining and incorporating of local religious elements as aspects of Buddhist truth. Recent research has illuminated, for example, the “combinatory logic” by which kami or local deities and other gods of continental origin were recast as the provisional forms of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and their worship, integrated into a Buddhist ritual and institutional framework.¹⁴ Though seldom as explicitly schematized, similar processes occurred with death-related matters. Buddhist ethical norms of compassion and rites of merit transference to the deceased were mapped onto ancient concerns about the need to pacify unhappy or vengeful spirits. Notions of the afterlife from a range of traditions—eternal Tokoyo, the “Land of Roots” (Ne no kuni), the island of Mt. Penglai, and various Daoist heavens and immortal realms—were assimilated to the topological paradigms of Buddhist pure lands.¹⁵ In every period, Buddhist rituals for the deceased have incorporated features of local religious culture, which is why a comprehensive study of death in Japanese Buddhism should include the approaches, not only of Buddhist Studies per se, but also of social history, folklore studies, literature, and anthropology. One might well argue that the Buddhist near-monopoly on death practices has stemmed, not only from Buddhism’s own compelling teachings about the afterlife and the perceived efficacy of its rites, but
also from its capacity to absorb and refigure elements from a range of traditions.

Third, Buddhism has provided a class of religious specialists perceived as capable of managing the dangers and defilement of death and of mediating between this world and the next. It has sometimes been assumed that Buddhism gained its preeminence in death rites by stepping in, as it were, to fill a gap left by the “native” tradition of kami worship that shunned death pollution (shie). But the historical situation proves far more complex. In the Heian and early medieval periods, Buddhist monks involved in court ritual or rites for the protection of the nation were expected to maintain ritual purity by observing the same avoidances or taboos (imi) surrounding the worship of kami (jingi saishi) associated with the imperial cult, and not all Buddhist clerics routinely conducted funerals.16 It was often those monks practicing outside the formal structures of temple administrative posts and the clerical career path—such as hijiri, or thaumaturgical recluses—who most frequently attended deathbeds or provided funeral rites for lay devotees. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, monks of the emergent Zen and Ritsu orders began regularly to perform funerals for lay patrons.17 But not until the Tokugawa or early modern period (1603–1868) did the great majority of Buddhist monks—or priests, as Western scholars tend to refer to them especially from that period on—come to perform funerals as part of their routine ritual obligations, a situation that still obtains today. The topic of Buddhist ritual and death pollution is a complex one and calls for further investigation. While some Japanese Buddhist discourses have dismissed the notion of death pollution as soteriologically irrelevant, others have maintained or even actively promoted it, as a foil over and against which the thaumaturgical power of Buddhist adepts could be displayed.18

Aspirations for the Pure Land and the Moment of Death

By around the mid-ninth century, Japanese elites were not only performing and commissioned Buddhist rites for the welfare of the deceased but had also begun to envision their own postmortem fate in Buddhist terms. Increasingly, people aspired to achieve ōjō, or birth after death in a pure land or other superior realm, such as the Tusita Heaven (Tosotsuten), abode of the future buddha, Maitreya (Miroku); the bodhisattva Kannon’s Potalaka realm (Fudaraku); Sacred Eagle Peak (Ryošusen), where the eternal Sakyamuni Buddha preaches the Lotus Sutra; or—the most sought-after of all postmortem destinations—the buddha Amida’s western Pure Land of Utmost Bliss (Gokuraku Jodo). It is Amida’s realm to which the terms ōjō and “Pure
Land’’ most commonly refer. From a doctrinal standpoint, birth in the Pure Land was equivalent to reaching the stage of nonretrgression on the bodhisattva path; once born in that realm, one would no longer fall back into the realms of samsaric rebirth but was certain to gain enlightenment. There, conditions for practice and realization were said to be ideal, and after achieving awakening in the Pure Land, one could return voluntarily to the realms of suffering as a bodhisattva, in order to assist the liberation of others. For many, however, Amida’s Pure Land was simply a postmortem paradise, where the sufferings of this world would be transcended. While trained meditators might have visions of the Pure Land in this life, for most, ojō represented a goal whose achievement was by definition mediated by death. Those who could focus their thoughts on the Buddha at the time of death would be welcomed by Amida himself, who would descend together with his holy retinue to escort that person to the Pure Land. Thus death underwent redefinition as the moment of success or failure in achieving ojō.

This was before the rise of the exclusive nenbutsu movements of Hōnen (1133–1212) and Shinran (1173–1262), and birth in the Pure Land was often deemed extremely difficult to achieve—“the most difficult of all difficult things,” as the monk Kakuchō (953/960–1034) is said to have declared—requiring sustained efforts in meditation or devotional practice. Yet this sense of the difficulty of achieving ojō coexisted with the subversive logic of the deathbed rite, by which even the most sinful persons could achieve birth in the Pure Land by right contemplation in their final moments. The treatise Ojō yōshū (Essentials of birth in the Pure Land) by the scholar monk Genshin (942–1017) was the first work compiled in Japan to set forth instructions for deathbed contemplation. Deathbed practices such as it describes were first formally adopted by the Nijūgo zanmai-e or Samađhi Society of Twenty-five, an association of monks formed in 986 at the Yokawa retreat at the great Tendai monastery on Mt. Hiei, in which Genshin took an active part.

The heightened attention accorded to life’s last moments in Pure Land practice forms the context for the first two essays in this volume. The first, by Sarah Horton, explores the role of visual imagery in the spread of Pure Land devotion and the reconception of death as a liberaive opportunity. This reconception, Horton suggests, was made possible more than anything else by the image of Amida’s welcoming descent (raigō), that is, Amida’s arrival, accompanied by his holy retinue, to receive the dying and escort them to his Pure Land. Her essay explores the textual basis of the raigō concept and its early representations, with particular attention to the role of Genshin, whom Heian sources credit with initiating the tradition of Japanese raigō painting.
While modern scholarship has concentrated on Genshin’s contributions to Pure Land thought, Horton suggests that his role in the development of raigō imagery may have contributed far more immediately than did his doctrinal writings to the spread of Pure Land aspirations. In particular, Horton focuses on the mukaekō or ceremony of welcome, a dramatic enactment of Amida’s descent to welcome the dying, using music, bodhisattva costumes, and masks. The mukaekō, possibly Genshin’s innovation, was instrumental in disseminating hopes for the Pure Land among persons of all classes. Its visually stunning performance, Horton argues, helped alleviate fears of death by representing it as a joyful occasion of salvific encounter with the Buddha.

The second chapter, by Jacqueline Stone, offers a contrasting argument. Stone suggests that, while hopes for the Pure Land may have encouraged a reconceiving of death as joyful, the importance placed on right-mindfulness in one’s last moments also provoked fears. If correct meditative focus at the moment of death could transcend the sins of a lifetime and secure one’s birth in the Pure Land, the reverse was likewise true; under the liminal influence of life’s last moments, it was said, even a single stray delusory thought could obstruct the merits of one’s prior practice and send one tumbling back down into the painful realms of rebirth. Thus whether or not one would be able to die with one’s thoughts focused calmly on the Buddha became a new source of anxiety and a problem to be ritually addressed. Examining instructions for deathbed practice produced from the late tenth through early fourteenth centuries, Stone traces the increasing importance of the “good friend” or zenchishiki, here meaning the religious advisor or ritualist in attendance at the deathbed, who exhorted dying persons in right-mindfulness, guided their deathbed visualizations, and assisted their chanting of the nenbutsu. Over time, Stone argues, the dying person’s “success” in achieving ojō came to depend less on the deathbed practice of the dying person per se than on the ritual actions of the zenchishiki, who might also assume responsibility for postmortem rites. The emergence of the zenchishiki at the deathbed as a formal ritual role, she suggests, marked a significant step in the growing influence of Buddhist clergy over death-related practices.

**Death and the Persistence of Worldly Ties**

In a 1907 landmark essay based on his study of Malay funeral practices, anthropologist Robert Hertz argued an inseparable relationship between the treatment of the corpse, the presumed journey of the deceased spirit to its new abode, and the mourning rites observed by the community. Through proper disposal of the body and performance of
funerary rites, Hertz noted, the deceased is led through three stages: separation from world of the living, transition through a dangerous liminal realm, and reincorporation with a new status into the social world of the survivors. Subsequent research has refined Hertz’s insights and also shown their broader relevance to other cultural spheres. Chapters 4 through 6 of this volume, ranging in chronology from the eleventh through the sixteenth centuries, focus on the roles played by Japanese Buddhist ritual, discourse, and institutions in reintegrating the dead into the world of the living and, in the process, defining the contours of that world. As Maurice Bloch has observed, “Death as disruption, rather than being a problem for the social order, as anthropologists have tended to think of it, is in fact an opportunity for dramatically creating it.”

At first glance, claims about the ongoing relationship of the living and the dead might seem incompatible with the Buddhist message of transience and nonattachment. However, it is important to note that while Buddhist doctrine does indeed characterize death as emblematic of the truth that all is impermanent, Buddhist ritual has just as often been understood as affirming the persistence into the afterlife of this-worldly bonds—social, familial, and affective. This emphasis on continuance and stability should be seen neither as a corruption of an originally pure Buddhist doctrine nor as an accommodation to uneducated lay persons, but as an influential strand of Buddhist thought in its own right, present in virtually all Buddhist traditions from a very early date and coexisting, although in tension, with normative teachings about impermanence and nonattachment. Death is, as we have said, a site uniting contradictory logics, a major theme of the essays collected here.

Brian Ruppert’s chapter concerns the funerary and mortuary dimension in premodern Japan of the worship of relics, said to be the physical remains of the historical Buddha. The account of the Buddha’s cremation (and Buddhist cremation more generally) has didactic value as a dramatic performance of impermanence, the body of a once-living person being reduced to smoke and ashes before the viewers’ eyes. Yet at the same time, cremation has an equally significant if opposing purpose in generating enduring physical relics for enshrinement and veneration. Recent scholarship has shed light on how buddha relics have been understood as prolonging the career in this world of Śākyamuni Buddha, whose spiritual powers were understood to still inhere in his remains. Buddha relics, then, in effect transcend the boundary between life and death and thus came to represent the ongoing possibility of enlightenment even in an age of decline. Ruppert shows that relic worship in medieval Japan, as on the Asian continent,
was bound up in a multivalent “thematic complex” involving indebtedness to the Buddha, the soteriological value of self-sacrifice in repayment, and the legitimation of rulership—in imitation of King Asoka, who was said to have built 84,000 Buddhist stupas or reliquaries. But it was in connection with death, he argues, that relic veneration in Japan acquired a secure niche in the repertoire of Buddhist ritual. Central to Ruppert’s discussion is the role played by relic veneration in the development of family mortuary ritual, especially in elite families, as seen, for example, in the rites sponsored by the regent Kujō Kanezane (1149–1207) and his sister, the former imperial consort Kōkamō’ in, on behalf of their deceased forebears. Ruppert notes also the extension of the category of “relics” to encompass the remains not only of the Buddha and Buddhist saints but of deceased persons more generally, purified by secondary burial or cremation. In connection with beliefs about the death-transcending power of relics, enshrinement and veneration of remains of family forebears came to be regarded as a source of lineage prosperity. The preservation and veneration of bones or cremated remains, previously shunned as impure, led to the formation of family gravesites and mortuary temples (bodaišō), such as Jōmyō-ji, built by Fujiwara no Michinaga at the northern Fujiwara clan gravesite at Kohata in Uji. These shifts in burial practices helped reshape kinship structure, contributing to the emergence of the patrilineal extended family (ie), and laid a foundation for early modern notions of reincorporating the dead into the social world as protective ancestors.25

While the dead could be reintegrated via mortuary rites into the community of the living, the living could, by birth in the Pure Land, be reunited with their beloved dead. This idea would seem to have little canonical warrant: Pure Land sūtras suggest that inhabitants of Amida’s land are largely nondifferentiated, describing them as “all the color of genuine gold” and “the same in their appearance.”26 Some sūtras even explicitly state that there are no women in the Pure Land.27 The religious imagination, however, is seldom constrained by normative scripture, and the conviction that, in Amida’s land, one could rejoin deceased loved ones—parents, children, lovers, or religious teachers—was a major source of Pure Land appeal at all social levels. Longings for postmortem reunion in the Pure Land were also cited as a motive for religious suicide, as discussed in Mark Blum’s chapter. Blum investigates the suicides of Jōdo Shinshū adherents, perhaps as many as thirty-three, following the death of the abbot Jitsunyo (1458–1525), the monshū or head of the powerful Shinshū Honganji organization. The practice of “relinquishing the body” has always held an ambivalent position in Buddhist traditions, being alter-
nately condemned and valorized, and recent scholarship has expanded on its multiple significances in specific Buddhist cultures: as both a selfless gift and an exchange of one’s corruptible body for the adamantine body of an enlightened one; as an imitation of the Buddha; as an act of protest when the ruler persecutes the dharma; or as sacrifice on behalf of others. Drawing on both Buddhist canonical sources and the history of this practice in East Asia, Blum analyzes the complex ideological heritage underlying the suicides attending Jitsunyo’s death. They drew, he argues, on both the Pure Land ideal of jigai ojō, or “achieving the Pure Land through suicide”—the most common motive given for Buddhist ascetic suicide in Japan—as well as on Confucian traditions, appropriated into the warrior ethos, of loyalty suicide (junshi) to accompany one’s lord in death. Jitsunyo, who presided over an immense organization that was at once political and religious, united in his person the roles of Buddhist teacher and feudal daimyō or warrior lord. The suicides accompanying his death, Blum concludes, were acts both of mimesis, replicating Jitsunyo’s act of achieving the Pure Land, and of solidarity, expressing loyalty to Jitsunyo and at the same time conveying to outsiders that the unity of Honganji followers transcended life and death.

One of the many tensions that surface in death-related contexts is the opposition between Buddhist ideals of world renunciation and the persistence of familial bonds. A growing body of scholarship has begun to take note, in multiple Buddhist cultures, of the ongoing involvement of monks and nuns in the affairs of their natal family and of distinctively Buddhist discourses of filial piety, especially directed towards one’s mother. The theme of death and mothers is addressed in Hank Glassman’s chapter, which investigates how death-related Buddhist ritual and thought in medieval Japan both mirrored and helped effect a gradual shift in kinship and gender definitions that accompanied the emergence of the patriarchal household (ie), first among nobles and samurai, and eventually, all classes. From late medieval times, women were increasingly defined in terms of motherhood, and a woman’s reproductive capacity came to be seen as a resource belonging to her husband’s family. The sufferings of women subordinated as child-bearers to the patriline are reflected in disquieting tales of women dying in pregnancy who give birth in the grave and care for their infants as “child-rearing ghosts”; in the nagare kanjō rites performed for the salvation of women who died in childbirth; and in the cult of the apocryphal Blood Bowl Sutra (Ketsubonkyō), introduced to Japan from the continent in various recensions around the fifteenth century. According to this text, women as a group are condemned after death to a gruesome Blood Pool Hell, where they are tormented for the sin of
polluting the deities of heaven and earth with the blood of menstruation and childbirth; this fate can be avoided, however, by ritual use of the text. Glassman shows how the Blood Bowl Sūtra was first copied and recited by men and women alike for the postmortem salvation of their mothers and other female relatives; later it was used preemptively by women to ensure their own postmortem well-being; and eventually, in an interpretive twist perhaps unique to Japanese Ketsubonkyō reception, it was employed by women talismanically, in order to undo temporarily the pollution of menstruation and participate freely in kami shrine worship and other activities requiring ritual purity—a development also addressed in Duncan Williams’s chapter. Glassman additionally details the emergence of the Buddhist rites performed for women who died in late pregnancy and childbirth, deaths regarded as especially dangerous because the dead woman’s lingering attachment to her child was thought to prevent her liberation. Such rites gave some spiritual reassurance to women facing the threat of death from complications in pregnancy or childbirth, a frequent occurrence in premodern times, and also relieved the community of the threat of dangerous ghosts.

As Glassman notes, faith in the Ketsubonkyō was spread initially by networks of nuns who acted as preachers and fundraisers for Zenkōji, Kumano, and other major religious centers. For contemporary readers, women’s active involvement in propagating a text that defined them as sinful and polluted is not easy to understand. We must be careful, in our concern for gender egalitarianism, not to leap too quickly to a reading that would dismiss late medieval or early modern female engagement in the Ketsubonkyō cult as an indication that women had internalized misogynistic views of the female body or were complicit in their own subordination. It seems likely that the Blood Bowl Sūtra spoke vividly to the reality of women living under the constraints of the ie system and on intimate terms with the danger of death in childbirth, and that its rites, even while reinforcing their subordinate status, offered hope for a salvation in the afterlife that was not otherwise seen to be available.30

Early Modern Shifts and the Rise of the “Traditional Funeral”

Before the medieval period, Buddhist funerals and memorial rites were largely confined to urban populations and to elites. There was little in the way of prescribed ritual format; the mantras invoked, buddha images or sūtra transcriptions commissioned, and specific rites performed were determined by precedent or by the sponsors’ devotional preferences. Standardized funerals began to appear only in the late
thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with the introduction from Song China of Chan (Zen) funerals for temple abbots, which had incorporated elements of Confucian ancestral rites. These new funerals were conducted for the influential patrons of Zen temples, such as the former shogunal regent Hōjō Tokimune (1251–1284), and spread first among ranking warriors; in the early modern period, they were held for people of all classes. The adaptation of an abbot’s funeral to lay persons required their postmortem transformation into monastics, and symbolic ordination was accordingly incorporated into the funeral sequence. Still central to Japanese Buddhist funerary practice today, the elements of posthumous ordination, the granting of a precept name (kaimyō), and the use of the ihai or ancestral spirit tablets have their beginnings in these late-medieval Zen-style funerals. 31

As Duncan Williams notes in his chapter, the spread of standardized Buddhist funerals in the Tokugawa or early modern period gained momentum from the temple certification system (terauke seido), implemented as a form of population surveillance, in which local temples annually certified that their parishioners were not Christians or members of other proscribed religious groups. All families were required to affiliate as danke (parishioner households) of a Buddhist temple, which became the site of their family grave, and to sponsor Buddhist funerals and memorial rites for family members. This was how the Japanese came near universally to acquire a hereditary Buddhist sectarian affiliation and, as the contemporary expression has it, to “die Buddhist.” 32 Some scholars have stressed the coercive nature of the early modern danke system and its mandatory funerary rites, and academic discourses of institutional Buddhist decline typically take the Tokugawa danke system as their starting point. 33 Yet without overlooking this oppressive aspect, one may also note that the spread of Buddhist funerals gave greater spiritual assurance to the average Japanese for the well-being of their deceased relatives than had earlier, local funerary practices, which had centered chiefly on removing death pollution from the living. 34 In the expanding monetary economy of the early modern period, Buddhist funerals and the building of family graves also became occasions for extravagant display to advance family status, often in defiance of government sumptuary laws. 35 Even ghosts of the neglected dead, possessing mediums to demand proper memorial treatment, sometimes insisted on a funeral “conducted splendidly, in the manner of people who die these days, with a Zen priest officiating, and with a coffin, banners, and a canopy in procession with gongs and drums.” 36

The new style of funerary rites and their near-universal adoption via the danke system reoriented the Buddhist funeral, in effect
“redefining the process of death as one of spiritual fulfillment of the Buddhist path,” to use William Bodiford’s expression. No longer did the funeral aim simply at transferring merit to aid the deceased in achieving a better rebirth; rather, the funeral performance by the Buddhist priest was said actually to accomplish the deceased person’s enlightenment. In the context of the danka system and the patrilineal family organization that it sustained, this meant transforming the dead into protective ancestors. As Nam-lin Hur writes: “The task of saving one’s soul through one’s own religious actions, which had been a mainstay of medieval Buddhism, gave way to a family-centered ritualism designed to elevate the deceased to the status of an ancestral deity or sorei.”

Williams shows how, during the Tokugawa period, the Sōtō school of Zen was able to spread in the provinces and entrench itself in village life by incorporating local customs and concerns into its death rites, thus creating a Zen funerary culture that, mutatis mutandis, was soon embraced by other sects as well. Outside academic circles, Westerners tend to think of Sōtō Zen in connection with its emphasis on seated meditation and the profoundly original writings of its founder Dogen (1200–1253), but its most pervasive influence on Japanese culture lies in the development of what are now called “traditional” lay Buddhist funerals. Williams shows how Sōtō Zen priests sought to unite all matters pertaining to the dead under their ritual authority by means of a twofold logic. First was a “logic of buddhahood,” in which the deceased was said to be immediately translated to the realm of enlightenment by the Sōtō priest’s performance of the funeral rite, including the conferring of a posthumous name and lineage chart connecting the deceased to the historical Buddha. The custom of referring to the dead as hotoke—“buddhas”—has its origins here. But this logic of buddhahood was accompanied by a second, “logic of spirit taming,” in which the deceased were a priori assumed to be volatile spirits, burdened by karma, in danger of falling into the hells, and thus needing a protracted sequence of memorial rites—eventually elaborated into Thirteen Buddha Rites over a thirty-three-year period—to guide them toward the stable state of an enlightened spirit or protective ancestor. The twin logics, Williams notes, coexisted without a felt need to reconcile their mutual inconsistency. They were united in the priest’s ritual authority to save the dead and together laid the basis for the funerary and mortuary rites that economically sustained most danka temples.

The logic of spirit taming, Williams notes, in effect required, as it were, that the dead first be condemned in order to be saved. Structurally, this notion resembled the pairing in medieval Buddhist discourse
of karmic causality and its threat of possible postmortem punishment for sin with rites of merit transference, which could meliorate or even abrogate evil karmic retribution; in both cases, a Buddhist explanatory framework was used to construct death as a particular kind of problem, to which Buddhist rites were then provided as a solution. But the early modern “damnation” of the dead to which Williams refers represents a shift away from earlier notions of karmic causality, as postmortem punishment was no longer tied to individuals’ specific moral conduct but was assumed on general principles—as illustrated, for example, by Sōtō Zen temples’ promotion of the Ketsubonkyō cult, in which all women were assumed to be destined for the Blood Pool Hell unless the proper ritual intervention was performed. This conceptual shift served to move responsibility for one’s postmortem state from the individual to the surviving family, who sponsored the funeral memorial rites, and to the temple priests, who performed them. Ritual acts of preparation for the afterlife on the part of individuals that had flourished in Heian and early medieval times, such as the deathbed rite popularized by Genshin, continued to be conducted but were now clearly overshadowed in soteriological importance by the funerary and mortuary sequence; similarly, tonsure as a preparation for the afterlife shifted from a premortem rite requested by a still-living person to posthumous ordination. All these developments worked to solidify the comprehensive authority of Buddhist priests and temples over death-related matters. At the same time, because they were embedded in a system of family temple affiliation, Buddhist funerary and memorial rites came to be equated with reverence for family and ancestors. Thus today, even those without particularly strong Buddhist convictions nonetheless often hold Buddhist funerals and memorial services, because it is the socially established way to memorialize one’s deceased kin.

Contemporary Funerals and the “Funeral Problem”

The last three essays in the volume address Buddhist funerary culture in contemporary Japan, along with the challenges it now faces. Mariko Walter analyzes the structure of contemporary funerals and their doctrinal significance. Today, each of the major Buddhist sects has its own funeral procedures, which have become codified since the early modern period. Contemporary Buddhist funerals, Walter notes, incorporate several ritual forms dating back to the Buddhist funerals of Heian times: the incantatory language of the nenbutsu and mantras such as the kōmyō shingon; the sprinkling over the body of mantrically empowered sand; and the use of rituals such as the Lotus repentance rite, along with elements first introduced in the Zen funerals of later
medieval and early modern times, including posthumous ordination, the waving of the torch (ако), and the индо sermon for guiding the deceased. While each sect has adopted some distinctive ritual features, Walter identifies an underlying structure common to Buddhist funerals across sectarian lines. This structure consists, in rough outline, of an initiatory phase, posthumous ordination or its ritual equivalent, the sendoff of the deceased, and ongoing memorial rites. This shared structure, she argues, persists even in the abridged funerals conducted under the auspices of сёгиya or professional funeral homes. Walter finds that funerals today exhibit a “double logic” similar to that identified by Duncan Williams in the Sōtō Zen funerals of the Tokugawa period, in that they claim to bring about the enlightenment or salvation of the deceased through the ritual performance of the funeral itself and yet also entail ongoing memorial rites. But where the early modern priests in Williams’s analysis found no necessity to resolve this inconsistency—“Why perform memorial rites of merit transference if the deceased is already enlightened?”—sectarian spokesmen today evidently feel a need to reconcile these two disparate dimensions of funerary ritual. Walter offers a brief survey of doctrinal explanations currently put forth by the major sects to account for ongoing memorial rites: for example, in the case of Jodo, they are said to assist the deceased in joining the Pure Land, or in the case of Shingon, to enable the living to join with the deceased in samādhi union with the particular buddha or bodhisattva who constitutes the honzon or ritual focus of the particular memorial rite. Significantly, however, none of these explanations makes reference to the need to help the deceased negotiate the hells or other realms of punishment in the afterlife. The requirement of “damnation before salvation,” noted by Williams as an underlying premise of early modern Buddhist memorial rites, seems to have fallen away, reflecting a broader, modern attenuation of literal belief in postmortem punishment.39

The sharing of a common funerary structure across sectarian boundaries also leads Walter to reflect on the relationship between doctrine and ritual in Buddhist funeral rites. While the same structure clearly can and does support a range of doctrinal interpretations, she resists a reading that would see ritual as primary and relegate doctrine to the status of incidental overlay. She instead argues that doctrine and ritual have shaped one another. Buddhist conceptual frameworks, Walter says, are what have successfully drawn and held together the disparate elements of the funeral, including purification protocols and notions of pollution originally related to kami worship, Confucian ancestor rites, and features of local religious culture, welding them into a coherent funerary structure that has proved, not only remarkably du-
rable, but capable of supporting a number of differing sectarian interpretations. Despite changing times, in her view, the fundamental Buddhist funerary structure remains deeply entrenched and is likely to endure.

Nonetheless, Buddhist funerals continue to draw heated criticisms, internal and external. The media disseminates images of corrupt priests as purveyors of a Buddhist “death industry,” while priests themselves worry about the future of funeral-centered temple Buddhism. In clerical parlance, the “funeral problem” (sōsai mondai) has come to stand for “a broad range of doctrinal, social, institutional, and economic issues confronting the traditional sects of Japanese Buddhism” and centering around funerary rites.40 As Stephen Covell explains in his chapter, urbanization, land shortages, displacement of the extended ie by nuclear families, and other factors have combined to challenge the Buddhist mortuary system. Funerals and memorial rites constitute the major social role, and source of income, for most Buddhist temples. If people were no longer to sponsor traditional Buddhist funerals, how would temples survive?

Covell’s chapter focuses specifically on issues surrounding the posthumous precept name (kaimyō) or dharma name (hōmyō). Donations to the temple for a posthumous name often constitute the single largest funerary expense and have become something of a lightning rod for controversy over traditional Buddhist funerals. Most people, he notes, no longer understand what precept names are for, and many now reject the idea that the postmortem well-being of the deceased depends on a priest’s ritual performance. While some danka members, especially in rural areas, still consider elaborate posthumous names an important family status marker, the use of kaimyō has been shown to have a tainted history, in that discriminatory posthumous names were formerly used to mark outcaste status—a wrong that many priests now deplore and strive to redress by removal of the offending names from gravestones and temple necrologies. Covell notes also a shift in patterns of religious affiliation, from the continuing ties of the danka-temple relationship toward a one-time-only “fee for service” model in which posthumous names are increasingly understood as a commodity for purchase, another factor undermining the social and religious networks in which traditional Buddhist funerals had their base. Whether or not Buddhist priests can successfully address the issues exemplified by contemporary criticisms of funerals and posthumous names, Covell argues, will determine nothing less than the survival of temple Buddhism.

In the concluding chapter, George Tanabe addresses another aspect of the “funeral problem,” namely, the conceptual gap between
assumptions of perduring spirits in need of pacification, which under-
lies the traditional Buddhist funeral, and the Buddhist doctrine of
anātman (Pali anatta, Jpn. mugo) or not-self, which denies the ontolog-
ical existence of a soul or other unchanging essences. Unlike wide-
spread criticisms of the cost of funerals and posthumous names, de-
tailed in Covell’s chapter, anxieties over the “heretical” nature of
funerals do not trouble most danka parishioners or even local priests
but are confined chiefly to sectarian intellectuals. Nonetheless, the ef-
forts of this small Buddhist elite to reconcile traditional funerals with
doctrinal orthodoxy provides an illuminating glimpse of how some in-
fluential insiders perceive the problems confronting institutional Bud-
dhism in defining its contemporary social identity.

The anātman doctrine is of course distinctive of Buddhist meta-
physics. In Buddhism’s Indian context, it played a crucial role in some
forms of mental cultivation and scholastic analysis and also served as a
Buddhist identity marker over and against the mainstream Brahmanic
religion. Even so, it did not by any means “exhaust the range of psy-
chological and behavioural concern of the individual Buddhist, how-
ever much of a meditative or scholastic specialist he might be.”41 Cer-
tainly it did not hinder the development of Buddhist rites for the dead,
which, far from representing concessions to an ignorant laity, were in-
istituted by monastic professionals.42 While exceptions may be noted,
for the most part, anātman doctrine has not figured prominently in
Buddhist funeral contexts, where discourses of karmic causality and
merit transference instead predominate. Across Buddhist cultures, rit-
ual performance for the placation and benefit of the deceased has
often assumed some form of personal continuity that was convention-
ally spoken of as a “spirit”; there is nothing new, let alone exclusively
Japanese, about this. Yet critiques of funerals as a heterodox deviation
from the principle of not-self occur but rarely in premodern Buddhist
contexts. Why, then, has this become the focus of such concern among
contemporary Japanese Buddhist intellectuals?

At least a partial answer that Tanabe provides lies in the Meiji
 scholarly construct known as “original Buddhism” or “primitive
Buddhism” (genshi bukkyō), paralleling the rationalist “Protestant”
Buddhism, devoid of ritual and superstition, assumed by the first gen-
erations of Western Buddhist scholarship.43 In these modern construc-
tions of early Buddhism, the not-self doctrine was inflated to the status
of an all-encompassing normative standard for what is truly Buddhist,
casting all other elements of the tradition in a problematic light. One
suspects that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this
served a Buddhist modernizing agenda shared by Asian Buddhist lead-
ers and their Western sympathizers, as the not-self doctrine could be
used both to critique Christianity and to dismiss all “nonrational” and “unscientific” elements of the Buddhist tradition, including deities, spirits, ghosts, and demons, as adventitious accretions. However, this creation of a modern, rationalist Buddhism opened a profound disjuncture between those doctrines now held to define orthodoxy and traditional Buddhist ritual culture, especially its funerary and mortuary rites. Intersecting as it does the criticisms of contemporary funerals raised in Stephen Covell’s chapter, this disjuncture has assumed critical dimensions in the eyes of some sectarian leaders. Tanabe outlines a number of strategies by which some Buddhist theoreticians seek to explain the perceived gap: funerals appeal to the worldly truth, not ultimate truth; ideas about spirits are attributable to the incorporation of non-Buddhist elements, necessary to appeal to the laity; funerals address not Buddhist metaphysical realities, but the psychological or emotional reality of the memory of the deceased; and so on. In the end, Tanabe finds that “orthodoxy” and “heresy” are movable signifiers whose content shifts according to the standards one adopts. Currently, funerals may be deemed “heretical” by some, but in the medieval period, for example, Shin Buddhists were at one point condemned as heretical for not providing funerals. Tellingly, contemporary charges of heterodoxy have failed to curtail or modify Buddhist funeral performance, which is dictated, as Tanabe reminds us, not by doctrinal correctness but by the human need to remember.

Just how grave is the “funeral problem”? This question is difficult to assess, and observers seem divided about whether temple Buddhism is on the verge of dying out or is instead undergoing a major self-redefinition. (One advantage of a long-range historical perspective is that it shows such reinventions to be possible.) While still in the minority, a number of alternative forms have risen to challenge the traditional Buddhist funeral. Some, such as “natural funerals” (shizensō), or the scattering of ashes, have little or no Buddhist content; others, such as eternal memorial graves (eitai kuyo baka), maintained by voluntary funeral associations not tied to family, community, or sectarian affiliation, have been initiated by Buddhist priests themselves and are proving remarkably successful. Apart from mortuary rites, some Buddhist institutions have instituted new death-related practices in response to distinctively modern concerns, as seen in the emergence of so-called pokkuri temples, where one may pray for protection from senility and the mercy of a quick death, and of Buddhist hospices for the terminally ill. Whether the management of death will slip from Buddhist institutional control, or whether temples will succeed in refiguring their funerary and memorial rites to accommodate contemporary needs and sensibilities, still remains to be seen. What is
indisputable is the profound influence that Buddhist institutions, rituals, and concepts have exerted, over more than a thousand years, in shaping both Japanese attitudes and practices directed toward the afterlife and the social arrangements in which they have been embedded. While many detailed chapters in the story of “death and the afterlife in Japanese Buddhism” remain to be told, we hope that the essays in this volume will stimulate further inquiry.

Notes


2. For an overview of these criticisms in both scholarly and popular publications, see Stephen G. Covell, Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 11–22.


4. There are, however, several important English-language studies of death in Japanese Buddhism during specific historical periods: in the course of this Introduction, we will cite these in the notes. In addition, there are a number of monographs and essay collections on other aspects of death in Japan, which include substantial treatment of Buddhist elements. See, for example, Maurice Pinguet, Voluntary Death in Japan (La mort volontaire au Japon, 1984), trans. Rosemary Morris (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); Elizabeth Kenney and Edmund T. Gilday, eds., Mortuary Rites in Japan, special issue of the Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 27, nos. 3–4 (2000); Hikaru Suzuki, The Price of Death: The Funeral Industry in Contemporary Japan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Harold Bolitho, Bereavement and Consolation: Testimonies from Tokugawa Japan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); Susanne Formaneck and William R. LaFleur, eds., Practicing the Afterlife: Perspectives from Japan (Vienna: Der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2004); and Andrew Bernstein, Modern Passings: Death Rites, Politics, and Social Change in Imperial Japan (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006).


12. See William R. LaFleur’s classic discussion of this point in “In and Out the Rokudō,” chap. 2 of his Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 26–59.

13. See, for example, John C. Holt, “Assisting the Dead by Venerating the Living: Merit Transfer in the Early Buddhist Tradition,” Numen 28, no. 1 (1981): 1–28. The tension between an ethic of karmic causality and merit transference is not limited to Buddhism but has a counterpart in Hindu tradition, where the teaching that the soul transmigrates in accordance with karmic law coexists with notions that the postmortem well-being of the deceased depends on rites performed by their descendants. See David M. Knipe, “Saññādārā: The Hindu Rite of Entry into Heaven,” in Religious Encounters with Death: Insights from the History and Anthropology of Religions, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Earle E. Waugh (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 111–124.


15. This has been cogently argued by Cristoph Kleine. See his “Rebirth and Immortality, Paradise and Hell: Conflicting Views of the Afterlife in Ancient Japan,” in Formanek and LaFleur, Practicing the Afterlife, 63–98.


18. For a preliminary study of this topic, see Jacqueline I. Stone, “The Dy-


22. See the “Introduction” to Cuevas and Stone, The Buddhist Dead, esp. 3–8.


24. Ibid., esp. 5–8 and 229–230. Recent scholarship on relics is surveyed on 3–5. See also Brian Ruppert’s essay in this volume.

25. On the role of Buddhist burial practices in shaping kinship structure, see Glassman, “Chinese Buddhist Death Ritual.”


27. See Paul Harrison, “Women in the Pure Land: Some Reflections on the Textual Sources,” Journal of Indian Philosophy 26 (1998): 553–572. Harrison finds that while some Pure Land sutras explicitly deny the presence of women in the Pure Land, others are ambiguous. In recent work on medieval Japanese Buddhism, James C. Dobbins argues that, at the level of lived religion, both men and women expected that women would be born in the Pure Land as women (Letters of the Nun Eshinni: Images of Pure Land Buddhism in Medieval Japan [Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004], 74–106). A frequent modern interpretive move reads scriptural passages about the absence of women in the Pure Land to mean that gender distinctions and the sufferings they produce are altogether transcended in Amida’s realm.

28. On sacrifice of the body as both gift and exchange, see Reiko Ohnuma, Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); as imitation of the Buddha, see Liz Wilson, ed., The Living and the Dead: Social Dimensions of Death in South Asian Religions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003),


30. This argument has been offered by Kodate Naomi. See her “Aspects of Ketsubonkyō Belief: The Ketsubonkyō and its Transmission to Japan,” in Formanek and LaFleur, Practicing the Afterlife, 121–139.

31. For a concise account of the emergence of Zen funerals, see Bodiford, Sōtō Zen in Medieval Japan, 185–208.

32. For an overview of Buddhist funerary and mortuary rites in contemporary Japan, see Reader, Religion in Contemporary Japan, 77–106, and Kenney and Gilday, Mortuary Rites in Japan, 167–173, as well as Mariko Walter’s essay in this volume.


34. Bodiford makes this point with regard to Zen funerals in the late medieval period (Sōtō Zen in Medieval Japan, 202).
39. This is of course not limited to Japan. For example, in comparing reports of medieval and modern near-death experiences in a Western context, Carol Zaleski notes that “the most glaring difference is the prominence in medieval accounts of obstacles and tests, purificatory torments, and outright doom,” which are generally absent in their modern counterparts (*Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1987], 189). Formanek and LaFleur note official proclamations of the Catholic Church, beginning with Vatican II, warning against literalist readings of the concepts of hell and damnation (*Practicing the Afterlife*, 7–8).
42. This has been clearly demonstrated by the work of Gregory Schopen. See, for example, his “Burial Ad Sanctos and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archaeology of Religions” (1987), rpt. in his *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, 114–147; “On Avoiding Ghosts and Social Censure: Monastic Funerals in the *Mulasārīvatāvāda-vinaya*” (1992), rpt. in the same volume, 204–237; “An Old Inscription from Amarāvāti and the Cult of the Local Monastic Dead” (1991), 165–203; and “Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Layman/Monk Distinction and the Doctrines of the Transference of Merit,” 23–55.
44. For the scattering of ashes, see Mark Rowe, “Grave Changes: Scattering Ashes in Contemporary Japan,” in Cuevas and Stone, *The Buddhist Dead*, 405–437; and “Where the Action Is,” 369–383, for eternal graves and voluntary burial associations. See also Rowe’s “Death by Association: Temples, Burial, and the Transformation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2006).
45. On pokkuri temples, see Fleur Wöss, “Pokkuri Temples and Aging: Rituals for Approaching Death,” in *Religion and Society in Modern Japan: Selected