

Sin or Crime?

Buddhism, Indebtedness, and the Construction of Social Relations in Early Medieval Japan

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*This study examines the history of the use of the Buddhist discourse of the four objects of indebtedness (*shion*) to establish that its introduction provided the basis for a novel taxonomy of social relationships in Japan. The discourse, introduced to Japan in the early ninth century, included the sovereign for the first time as one of the fundamental objects of obligation to which all beings are indebted, and thus represented the ruler as a basic component of the ideal Buddhist society.*

*The discourse of the four debts came to be appropriated by not only clerics but also members of the government and was incorporated into well-known historical tales and diaries of women of the imperial court. Although the discourse as originally presented in scripture did not measure the respective importance of any of the objects of indebtedness, a series of sources of the medieval era indicates that some Japanese experienced tensions with regard to the question of the highest object of obligation—for example, is one's higher obligation to one's mother or to Buddhism? Moreover, is the highest of obligations to the ruler? The fact that members of a wide variety of social strata appropriated the discourse from a very early period to interpret their situations suggests that it was disseminated to virtually every level of society; given such early dissemination, knowledge gained from the study of indebtedness discourse may help us to gain a clearer understanding of the impact of Buddhism on the lives of Japanese people of the early medieval era than that gained from analysis focused primarily on the discourse of Royal Law/Buddhist Law (*ōbō buppō*), which was appropriated most often by members of institutions of the cultural and political elite.*

Keywords: four debts — Kūkai — *hijiri* — Shōkū — *Heike Monogatari* — Nijō

IN THE EARLY NINTH CENTURY, a corpus of Buddhist literature was introduced to Japan that emphasized four fundamental objects of debt (Ch. *ssu-en*; J. *shion* 四恩) that all beings are obligated to repay: one's parents, other sentient beings, the sovereign, and the three jewels of Buddhism. Failure to repay the kindness of each of the four constituted not only ingratitude but a serious sin akin to the cardinal sins of traditional Buddhism. As will be shown, the incorporation of the four debts into the prominent teachings of the Shingon founder, Kūkai 空海 (774–835), provided grounds for a new religious belief: the indebtedness of all beings to the sovereign for his blessings. This belief soon became a significant factor in the conceptualization of the social relationship between the sovereign and his subjects.

In fact, close study of early medieval Buddhist records, Buddhist tale collections, imperial court diaries, and historical tales indicates that the introduction of the discourse of four debts made possible a reimagining of both transgression and rulership. Transgression could now be defined as sins against a Buddhist king, with karmic ramifications. The Japanese ruler, who had long been represented in government literature as a believer in Buddhism, became one of the four foundational figures in a Buddhist society; in fact, insofar as he was one of these figures, he was himself a debtor, since he also was indebted to the three jewels.

We will see, ultimately, however, that this new discourse of debt and recompense was in no sense completely stable. There were tensions and potential contradictions in indebtedness discourse that in some cases found their source in the context of medieval China. And in the cultural milieu of early medieval Japan, such tensions erupted in a cacophony of voices of men and women, lay and clerical Buddhists—even voices from the seminal world of kami worship (*jingi sūhai* 神祇崇拜) could be heard. Yet in each case, we will find that the discourse of the four debts provided the framework for delineating the divide between proper behavior and transgression in Japanese society; the four debts, while they increasingly transcended institutional boundaries, remained a consistent measurement for evaluating social contravention.¹

The Introduction of the Discourse of the Four Debts

The discourse of the four debts began on the continent. In its earliest

¹ An earlier version of this study was presented as a paper at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Francisco, November 1997. I would like to thank the Japan Foundation for a grant (1998–1999) that enabled me to make further progress in the analysis of the connection between such discourse and practices as well as narratives of religious exchange in medieval Japan.

version, recorded in the *Cheng-fa nien-ch'u ching* 正法念處經 (Scripture of concentration abiding in the True Dharma), the objects of debt are described as mother, father, the Buddha, and the Buddhist teacher, respectively.² At the same time, these seminal beginnings found their roots in Buddhist traditions quite ambivalent about whether indebtedness was a virtue or a vice. All Buddhist clerics were to declare that they were free from any debts before they entered the order. Debts were not, of course, viewed only in simple financial terms. The feeling of indebtedness toward others, particularly one's parents (Sk. *trṣṇā*, *priya*; Ch. *en-ai*; J. *on'ai* 恩愛), was also deemed a problem: attachment through a sense of indebtedness toward others constituted, in this view, an impediment to overcoming the afflictions (Sk. *kleśa*; Ch. *fan-nao* 煩惱) along the path to *nirvāṇa*.³ On the other hand, the repayment of obligations (Sk. *pratikāra*; Ch. *pao-en*; J. *hōon* 報恩) towards others in society, especially if a person were a lay believer, seems to have been seen as appropriate.

Given the strength of Confucian and other native traditions in East Asia that stressed the responsibility of the individual vis-à-vis others in the family and society, the translation of the *Cheng-fa nien-ch'u ching* seems all the more appropriate. In fact, however, the schema of the four debts outlined in this scripture did not prove the final form of this discourse in the Chinese context nor in the Japanese one it directly influenced. The schema of the four debts that the Japanese would inherit in the early ninth century was introduced to the Chinese in the same era.

The sūtra entitled *Ta-ch'eng pen-sheng hsin-ti kuan ching* 大乘本生心地觀經 (Mahāyāna former birth scripture on contemplating the mind-ground) was translated by the Indian monk Prajñā (744–ca. 810) with the help of the Japanese monk Ryōsen 靈仙 (?–828) and others. This scripture provided a different version of the four fundamental objects of debt: all beings are here obligated to repay the kindness of parents, other sentient beings, the king, and the three jewels of Buddhism. The introduction of the ruler into the equation here should not be overlooked, because the text emphasizes the importance of the ideal king to a Buddhist society. The king, through his virtue, inspires deities and dragons to provide plentiful harvests and water, and thus effects peace and prosperity in his realm.⁴

² See T 17, no. 721; this is noted also in MOCHIZUKI Shinkō, *Bukkyō daijiten*, vol. 2, p. 1725 (1958–1963).

³ This concept is discussed in a series of scriptures (*Wu-liang-shou ching* [*Sukhāvativyūha*], T 12, no. 360; *Yüan-chüeh ching* 圓覺經, T 17, no. 842) as well as East Asian Buddhist treatises such as Chih-i's *Mo-ho chih-kuan*, T 46, no. 1911. See also MOCHIZUKI 1958–1963, vol. 1, p. 360c.

⁴ See T 18, no. 868, pp. 280a–84b. NAKAMURA Hajime (1979) provides an interpretation

Within a short period of its translation, the *Ta-ch'eng pen-sheng hsin-ti kuan ching* was introduced to Japan, and the discourse of the four debts was soon remarked upon in tale collections, commentaries, and governmental records. The earliest major tale collection in Japan, the monk Kyōkai's (fl. 823) *Nihonkoku genpō zen'aku ryōiki* 日本国現報善惡靈異記 (Extraordinary stories of karmic retribution of good and evil in Japan)⁵ includes the story of a nun who gave thanks to the four objects of debt through constructing and worshipping an image of the Buddha with a picture of the six paths of rebirth. It also tells the tale of a man who copied the *Lotus Sūtra* in order to requite the four debts. Unfortunately, in each case, we cannot know to which list of the four debts the story refers.

The most likely sources for the introduction of the discourse of the four debts as described in the *Ta-ch'eng pen-sheng hsin-ti kuan ching* were Kūkai's writings. Kūkai, who had studied under Prajñā,⁶ referred to the four debts on several occasions. He implicitly invoked the debts in the memorial (*Goshōrai mokuroku* 御請來目錄) he submitted to the imperial court concerning the materials he imported from China. Kūkai emphasized his indebtedness to the emperor and his teacher Hui-kuo's statement that spreading the faith would requite Kūkai's debts to the Buddha and his teacher and so establish also his loyalty to the realm and his filiality to his family (KZ 1, pp. 100–101; HAKEDA 1972, p. 149).

On another occasion, in which he was trying to defend Buddhism against any charge of lack of patriotism, Kūkai more explicitly evoked

and translation of part of this work. Another prominent explanation of the four debts figures in a scripture translated by Prajñāruci (fl. 516–543), *Cheng-fa nien-ch'u ching*, T 17, no. 721, p. 359a–c. Other Chinese translations of scriptures that refer to the four debts include those of Dharmarakṣa (Ch. Chu Fa-hu; fl. 265–313), *P'u-yao ching* (Sk. *Lalitavistara*; J. *Fuyōgyō*), T 3, no. 186, pp. 487c, 495c, 512c, *Tang-lai-p'ien ching* (J. *Tōraihekyō*), T 12, no. 395, p. 1118b; and of K'ang Seng-hui (d. 280), *Liu-tu chi-ching* (Sk. **Satpāramitāsamgraha*; J. *Rokudō jikkyō*), T 3, no. 152, pp. 5a, 30a. These earlier sūtras did not provide a complete formulation of the four as they would be invoked in later writings, but instead referred primarily to the reciprocating of others' kindness, especially that of bodhisattvas and the sangha.

⁵ More commonly known as the *Nihon ryōiki*. See NKBT vol. 70, fascicle 1, no. 35, pp. 154–57, and fascicle 2, no. 6, pp. 190–91; and NAKAMURA 1973, pp. 150–51. A text called *Tōdai-ji sakura-e engi* records that the image of veneration in the Hokke-dō hall at Tōdai-ji was constructed and worshiped to repay the four debts, though here too, the list is not made clear. See NKBT 70, p. 472, n. 100.

⁶ Kūkai noted, in a report he submitted to the court ("Hongoku no tsukai to tomo ni kaeran to kou kei," *Seireishū* 性靈集, NKBT 71, p. 277), that he studied under both Hui-kuo (746–805) and Prajñā. See also the discussion of Kūkai's studies in China in ABÉ 1999, especially pp. 116–19. Abé's work, the most comprehensive and groundbreaking study of Kūkai to date, is concerned primarily with Kūkai's ritual use of *mantra* (J. *shingon*) in the production of a new field of discourse in the era, and thus does not discuss Kūkai's references to the four debts.

the four debts. In his commentary *Hizō hōyaku* 秘藏宝鑰 (Bejeweled lock to the secret treasure), Kūkai created a dialogue between a Confucian who questions whether or not Buddhism is beneficial to the nation and a monk who defends the faith. When the Confucian claims that Buddhists squander the wealth of the nation through eating its food, the monk stresses that this is not so. The government exists to remove the people's suffering just as parents exist to take care of their children; the ruler and the people should read the Confucian classics and the histories so that all can live in harmony and find peace. However, the monk also goes on to point out that although people read these writings, they do not follow the teachings contained in them; so why should this Confucian condemn all Buddhists because of the transgressions of the few, when the students of the classics likewise no longer follow the ways of Confucius? From here, the monk stresses that any claim that Buddhists simply take from the wealth of the state is wrong: Temples have been granted no more than ten thousand households in the entire realm. In fact, the monk goes on to make the following claim:

Monks and nuns eat no more than a bowlful of (rice) grains, requiting their debt to the government through reciting scriptures and genuflecting before the Buddha. They respond to the virtues of the four objects of debt through meditative contemplation. (KZ 1, p. 437; HAKEDA 1972, p. 183)

The Confucian critic is not through, however, and wonders how such acts as reciting a scroll of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (J. *Hannya*[kyō] 般若經; Perfection of wisdom scripture) or chanting the name of a buddha can requite the four objects of debt. The monk responds by noting that the doubts of the Confucian only *seem* valid. In fact, however, the opportunity to hear the teaching of the scriptures is so rare that Śākyamuni in previous lives as well as other bodhisattvas and kings sacrificed their own bodies (usually referred to as *shashin* 捨身; Ch. *she-shen*) in order to do so. Moreover, a person who chants the name of a buddha liberates himself from the heaviest of sins, and one who recites a mantra of one syllable may acquire unlimited merit (KZ 1, pp. 437–39; HAKEDA 1972, p. 184).

We can note here that Kūkai's monk-interlocutor emphasizes the connection between recitation, self-sacrifice, expiation of sin, and the acquisition of karmic merit in the requital of the four fundamental debts. Recitation of the scriptures is so essential to society—represented here by not only an array of bodhisattvas but also a king—that it becomes an occasion for the most extreme of gifts: the offering of the body. Such self-sacrifice is a very common motif in Mahāyāna Buddhism,

and it has an especially close relationship with stūpa and relic veneration; the self-sacrifice signifies the most absolute of gifts, and quinquennial assemblies from those represented in the *Aśokāvadana* (Legend of Aśoka; J. *Aikuō den* 阿育王傳) to medieval China and the so-called “Unlimited Alms Assembly” (*musha dai-e* 無遮大会) of early Japan included the symbolic self-sacrifice of the ruler.⁷ In fact, self-sacrifice in practice and in literature had a long association with the effort of Buddhists, especially lay believers such as kings, to requite an implicit debt to the Buddha and his spiritual descendants.

Kūkai’s monk rounds out his argument by connecting the expiation of sin and the acquisition of unlimited merit with the chanting of particular sounds such as the names of buddhas and one-syllable mantras. It is, in particular, the reciting of the Buddha-name that can liberate one from his sins. The monk goes so far as to compare the words of Buddha and the recitation of the Buddha name with imperial edicts, emphasizing that unlike recitation of Confucian classics and histories, these acts can free people from their sins and enable them to avoid calamity.

On another occasion, Kūkai explained each of the four fundamental objects of debt in greater detail, providing lengthy explanations of why all beings are indebted to them. Our parents, he stressed, gave birth to us and raised us, so our debt to them stretches from heaven to earth. He went on to describe the debt of all beings to the ruler:

If there weren’t a ruler, the strong and the weak would war with each other, the rich and the poor would steal from each other; wouldn’t it be hard to preserve lives when we protect riches [only]? [Does the ruler not] pacify the homes of myriad beings, and give peace to the four seas? [He] seals the court and the dominions, granting them rank and stipend, which gains them fame in this world and flows afterwards [i.e., is recalled] in the beautiful voices of their descendants. Only the power of the king of the realm does this.

(*Kyōōkyō kaidai*, p. 714)⁸

Although Kūkai did not go into much detail in these cases on the

⁷ I discuss the importance of literatures and images of self-sacrifice—particularly in connection with the cult of Buddha relics—in early medieval Japan in *Jewel in the Ashes: Buddha Relics and Power in Early Medieval Japan* (RUPPERT 2000), pp. 69–75. Though materials on the early “Unlimited Alms Assembly” in Japan are scant, the very character of the rite indicates that, at least in symbolic terms, the ritual included the self-sacrifice of the ruler.

⁸ This text is a discussion of a scripture originally translated by Pu-k’ung (Amoghavajra), *Chin-kang-ting i-ch’eh ju-lai chen-shih she-la-cheng hsien-cheng ta-chiao-wang ching* (J. *Kongōchō issai nyorai shinjitsu shōdaijō genshō daikyōōkyō*), T 18, no. 865.

connection between the expiation of sin and requital of the four debts, he did go into greater depth in other works. He emphasized the four debts to define the aim and rules of Shingon Buddhism. Those who benefit themselves and others and requite the four debts through correct practice of Shingon are bodhisattvas, but those who do not are truly *icchāntikas* (J. *issendai* 一闡提) who will sink without hope of liberation into the sea of suffering!⁹ Kūkai's mention of the four debts in this context suggests that he did not merely invoke them to gain government patronage or approval but also to clarify the character and position of the sinner within Shingon. The sinner was, for Kūkai, an ingrate who did not fulfill his or her proper role in Buddhist society.

In his *Sanmayakai [no] jo* 三昧耶戒序 (Preface to the Samaya precepts), Kūkai stressed that because one is to see all sentient beings as oneself and equivalent with the four debts one does not dare kill any of them. Moreover, for the very same reason, one does not dare steal their valuables. And, likewise, again because one is cognizant that all sentient beings are one with the four debts, one does not dare insult and defile them. One does not, likewise, because of this awareness, dare to deceive them, to speak evil words to them, to alienate them, to crave their property and so on (*Sanmayakai [no] jo*, p. 137). It is clear, in other words, that for Kūkai, the four debts constituted an integral element in the esoteric precepts precisely because they explained the way in which the Buddhist is accountable in his relationships with all other sentient beings. Kūkai in this way envisioned the four debts as the primary impetus for the Buddhist to avoid transgression against others.

Peregrinations of the Discourse in the Mid-Heian Era

Although Kūkai was the figure who first raised the doctrine of the four debts to prominence, the discourse on the four debts moved far beyond his initial presentation of them. The imperial government, leading aristocrats, and a series of monks and holy men (*hijiri* 聖) invoked the four debts in texts as varied as official histories, prayer documents (*ganmon* 願文), and clerical commentaries.

The government repeatedly recorded references to the four debts in *Nihon sandai jitsuroku* 日本三代実録 (The actual record of three Japanese reigns), the only official history written upon the beginning

⁹ See *Yuikai (Kōnin 5)*, KZ 2, p. 862. Kūkai also invoked the four debts in much the same fashion in another set of admonitions to his order near the end of his life. See *Yuikai (Jōwa 1)*, KZ 2, pp. 864–65.

of rule by Fujiwara regents in the late ninth century. It records the words of a high-ranking middle counselor (*chūnagon* 中納言) who attempted to convince the court to grant land toward the construction of a “place of practice” (*dōjō* 道場). He invoked the four debts, which he claimed are the greatest burden borne by sentient beings: “The way to requite the debt is to ascend to the highest stage of *bodhi*” (Jōgan 4.10.7 (862), KST 4, p. 96). The work also records a petition of a Shingon monk named Shinjō 眞紹 (797–873) for official recognition and assignment of the temple name Zenrin-ji to a *dōjō* he had established. Shinjō wrote that he constructed images of Vairocana Buddha and of the buddhas of the four directions “to requite my holy debt [to the emperor] and to protect the state” (*sei on o hōjitatematsurite kokka o goji* 奉報聖恩護持國家). Shinjō acknowledged that his establishment of the temple in a Fujiwara residence broke laws forbidding private *dōjō*, but he argued the it was constructed with sincerity to repay his great debt to the deceased emperor Ninmyō. He claimed for this reason that if it were granted official status, the merit would profit the ruler as well as the government ministers (*shosa no kudoku mina kotogotoku kokū daijin o tasuku* 所作之功德皆悉資國王大臣).¹⁰

This record of Shinjō, in fact, is only one example of a pattern that was increasingly apparent in the late ninth century. The discourse of indebtedness thus served in part as a matrix for bringing together the ritual services of the Buddhist community with government and aristocratic patronage. *Nihon sandai jitsuroku* also reports that monks of the Shingon temple Anjō-ji, established in veneration of the late emperor Montoku, followed the vow they made to the retired emperor and empress to regularly chant mantras, recite sūtras, and engage in other esoteric Buddhist rituals on behalf of the two most recently deceased emperors, deceased members of the imperial family, scholars, warriors, the general populace, officials, those of country and city, the Fujiwaras as well as all of the sentient beings of the “entire universe [i.e., dharma realm] of the four debts” (*shion [no] hokkai* 四恩法界).¹¹

Aristocrats often mentioned the four debts in documents they wrote. In the mid-tenth century, the aristocrat poet-scholar Ōe no Asatsuna 大江朝綱 (886–958) in order to repay the blessing of Heaven (*ten’on*), which he believed enabled him to overcome a grave illness, sponsored the ordination of four monks—the idea being that they

¹⁰ Jōgan 5.9.6 (863), p. 117. This story recalls the tonsure of a favorite retainer (*chōshin* 審臣) of Ninmyō who, following the latter’s death, became a monk in order to “attempt to requite his debt” (*hōon o motomu* 求報恩) to the recently deceased ruler. See the government record *Nihon Montoku tennō jitsuroku*, Kashō 3.3.28 (850), p. 4.

¹¹ See *Nihon sandai jitsuroku*, Jōgan 7.7.19 (865). These rituals, according to the text, date to Jōgan 1.

would fulfill the four debts through their religious practice.¹² The greatest aristocrat of the Heian era, Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1028), himself wrote more than once about the four debts. Michinaga wrote at the time that he made an offering to the Fujiwara family temple Jōmyō-ji that he hoped his prayer would fulfill the hopes of the masses, and that its goodness would transfer merit (*ekō* 延向) in fulfillment of the four debts, for pacification of the realm and for the pleasure of all the people. He also reiterated this view in a prayer he made upon the dedication of the jeweled stūpa at the temple a few years later. In this case, however, he dedicated the reliquary specifically to his forebears and compared his in-law relationship with the emperor with that between Aśoka and his ancestor King Ajātaśatru. In addition, Michinaga compared his own reliquary with the tiles and inscriptions on the reliquaries of old, suggesting both his closeness with the emperor and the fact that Aśoka constructed reliquaries originally in repentance for his past crimes. Michinaga emphasized that, like the tiles and inscriptions, his prayer produced merit that was transferred throughout the universe; moreover, he added that his prayer produced good karmic roots (*zenkon* 善根) that would fulfill the obligations of the four debts (*Honchō monzui*, Kankō 2.10.19 (1005), 4.12.2 (1007), pp. 324–27).

There were many others who invoked the debts during the mid-Heian era, including emperors and a variety of monks. The emperor Go-Reizei, in prayer documents produced to mark his copying of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Hokeyō* 法華經) at a series of Lotus Lectures (*hokke hakkō* 法華八講) on behalf of his deceased father, discussed his attempt to repay debt as the basis for his actions. Noting that the *Lotus Sūtra* constitutes relics of the Dharma Body of the Buddha, he emphasized that the holy sovereigns (*shōju* 聖主) of the Engi, Tenryaku, and Kankō periods had copied the scripture with the purpose of knowing their indebtedness and repaying it (*chion hōon [no] kokorozashi* 知恩報恩之志). Go-Reizei went on to reiterate that the wheel-turning holy sovereigns of Great Japan single-mindedly proclaimed the three jewels of Buddhism and the actual words of the Tathāgata, which were the abiding remains of the Tathāgata's teaching. He emphasized that the praises the Tathāgata's words spoke had not yet decayed, and that the virtues of the four debts must first be requited through filialty. This being said, Go-Reizei wrote that he undertook the rite of copying the *Lotus Sūtra* on behalf of his father, whom he referred to as the “former emperor” (*senkō* 先皇)¹³—thus combining both filialty to his parents

¹² See *Honchō monzui*, fascicle 5, KST 29, Tenryaku 7.3, pp. 120–21.

¹³ See *Honchō bunshū*, fascicle 49, KST 30, Jiryaku 1.9.25 (1065), pp. 205–206. The scribe on this occasion was Fujiwara no Sanetsuna.

and devotion to the ruler in his prayer.

Although the leading aristocrats and emperors of the Heian era had their own views of the four debts, the discourse was apparently also disseminated among the general populace. The collection *Honchō monzui* records that the Tendai monk Kōya 空也 (903–972; or Kūya), one of the earliest and most prominent of the so-called holy men (*hijiri*) who interacted with the lower classes, wrote of the four debts. Kōya, sometimes called “The Holy Man of the City” (*ichi no hijiri* 市聖) because he taught the *nembutsu* chant to people throughout the capital, wrote a prayer document at the completion of his thirteen-year effort to copy the entire *Dai-hannyakyō* 大般若經 (Great perfection of wisdom sūtra). Kōya described how he began his effort to copy the scripture out of the realization of the impermanence and karmic uncertainties of all forms of life, and went on to explain the purpose of his actions as follows:

Thus I began in Tenryaku 4 [and continued] until this morning in Ōwa 3 so that [all those marked by] the four debts and the six paths [of rebirth] may attain the fruit of buddhahood.

(Fascicle 13, KST 29, Ōwa 3. 8.22, pp. 331–32)

It is not simply the fact that in one of the few apparently authentic records of Kōya he remarks on the four debts, but that he does so on this important occasion in his life and emphasizes the four debts as a motivating factor for his ritual practice. Moreover, Kōya pairs the four debts with the six paths, which some scholars have seen as the core *épistème* of medieval Japan (LAFLEUR 1986, pp. 29–30). In fact, given his description, the four debts and the six paths of rebirth seem part and parcel of each other. His pairing of the two concepts may be related to the phrase “entire universe of the four debts,” which we saw in government records. In any event, however, it suggests that Kōya saw the world as distinctly relational and dynamic in character, a cosmos marked by debt and ongoing actions of recompense or ingratititude with karmic implications. Indeed, the record *Nihon kiriyaku* notes that not only luminaries like Minister of the Left Fujiwara no Saneyori but also large numbers of lay believers and at least 600 monks made a karmic connection on the occasion of the dedication of Kōya’s copy of the *Dai-hannyakyō*.¹⁴ Given Kōya’s constant interaction with the people of the capital and his frequent travels into the countryside, it is likely that many in the lower class knew of the doctrine of the four debts.

¹⁴ See part 2, collection 4, Ōwa 3.8.23, KST 11, p. 90. The date of the prayer document or of this account is incorrect, since there is one day’s difference between them.

Tensions among the Four Debts and the Priority of Mothers

We have seen that the discourse of the four debts was taken up by clerics, aristocrats, emperors and holy men of the Heian era. Of course, we have witnessed subtle differences between their references to the four debts. In any case, however, the four debts mentioned presumably refer to those outlined in the *Ta-ch'eng pen-sheng hsin-ti kuan ching*. Moreover, the discourse of the four debts marked an intersection between political, familial, and more specifically Buddhist loyalties.

Were there any tensions between the objects of the four debts implied in uses of indebtedness discourse? Did those who appropriated such discourse suggest any division of loyalty? The examples so far, it would seem, have not suggested that any of those invoking this discourse in the early Heian era suggested that one or the others of the four debts was most important to them.

As had been the case in China, the notion of the debts of human beings seems to mask a contradiction within Buddhism: although indebtedness (*on*) was traditionally a potential impediment to Buddhism—particularly when it occurred in the form of attached love (*on'ai*) for family or others—it was reinscribed in later indebtedness discourse as a *Buddhist* obligation that aids the construction and maintenance of the Buddhist society.¹⁵ In Japan, the tensions within indebtedness discourse and, particularly, the discourse of the four debts, primarily focused on the question of the relative propriety of the object of one's loyalties. In particular, beginning as early as the late tenth century and with the increasing instability of Japanese politics and religion, the question was sometimes raised, to whom am I *most* obligated among the objects of debt?¹⁶

In preparation for his pilgrimage to China, the monk Chōnen 耘然 (938–1016) wrote a prayer on behalf of his mother, who was increasingly frail. Chōnen, trained in Mādhyamika (J. Sanron) as well as

¹⁵ Even Kūkai made mention of the problem of *on'ai* in *Rishukyō kaidai*. He began the text with the sentence, “The river of birth and death is still deeper and wider due to *on'ai*,” which he went on to contrast with the wealth of wisdom that when accumulated leads to the top of the mountain of nirvāṇa. Kūkai, explaining that *on'ai* is attached love toward parents, wife, and child, goes on to contrast this form of indebtedness with those of the four debts, the requital of which serves to “save” (*bassai* 拔済) the objects of the four debts and so benefits all sentient beings (KZ 1, p. 725).

¹⁶ We can note that the issue of loyalty was known to continental Buddhists as well. A classic example concerns the notion that the Buddha and his community constitute the highest “field of merit” (Ch. *fu-t'ien*; J. *fukuden* 福田), the giving to which obtains greater fruits than that to any other object. See my discussion in RUPPERT 2000, pp. 19–23. The notion of the absolute or highest character of the Buddha's field—and, by extension, his community—was intimately related to the notion that none can match the gifts of the body, family, and wealth that Śākyamuni offered to sentient beings in his previous lives.

Shingon Buddhism, wrote in the prayer that his plan was to ascend the sacred mountain of Wu-t'ai in China to meet the bodhisattva Manjuśri, and to go from there to India. He wrote, "I want to make obeisance to the remains of Śākyamuni; however, I have this sinful body, with eyes of flesh and blood." Yet Chōnen was determined, because a person of old said that while the trek is difficult, the accumulation of good deeds and virtue as well as the acquisition of the truth and singleness of mind can only occur through action and the fulfillment of a vow. At the same time, Chōnen acknowledged in his prayer that he found it difficult to leave Japan because of his own attachment (*on'ai*) for his family. He was not merely attached, however, because he also worried that in spite of the righteousness of his vow he would not requite his proper debt to his mother. He wrote and described his anguish and conversations with her and with other members of his family:

The Tathāgata sees with profound clarity that my mind is not very patient. My elderly mother was in the Worship Hall, and her years numbered sixty. My debt to her was deep, and I cannot repay it. I want to throw away my mother and leave, so I would not be filial to her. I would part from her and be absent and, further, would set sail with sadness. I felt alone for the first time. In the end, we discussed this; Mother never had a resentful expression, and already had a rejoicing heart. I lamented and cried, my tears falling as I spoke: "My mother is not the mother of this life, but the mother with good karmic conditions. If myriad people intervened with sad hearts and admonished me, I would not give in regardless [of the pressure]. If the words of a single person close to me change their words to stop me, should I not turn against them? Truly, I must pursue my Buddhist path." Why not [take care of the person in] the Worship Hall of Compassion? I have two brothers and three sisters, and told them as follows: "It is your place to provide for her food and drink in her remaining years, including the event of starvation or cold weather; it is my place first [to provide for] her enlightenment in the afterlife, given the possibility of falling into evil directions. So that I do not throw away my debt to her, and so that she will not enter [evil directions], *true requital of my debt* is to perform a rite on behalf of her future salvation (*gyakushu* 逆修) through offering a picture of the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten assemblies including images of Maitreya, Manjuśri... [and other protective deities], as well as copying and offering the *Lotus Sūtra* and

the *Sūtra of Benevolent Kings* for installation in this temple; and though holding a five-day, ten-lecture rite for expounding on and venerating the *Lotus Sūtra*. [All] these [acts] are for my compassionate mother, and are to be performed for 49 days.¹⁷

(*Honchō monzui*, pp. 334–35, Tengen 5.7.13 [982])

Chōnen here moves the narrative of his self-doubt to the point where he has realized that any such doubt is misguided. Even though attachment is a problem, he knows he must requite his debt to his mother as part of the Buddhist path. Chōnen realizes, however, that his physical abandonment of his mother does not ultimately mean that he is an unfilial son. True repayment of his debt (*shinjitsu no hōon* 真実之報恩), given his status as a monk, can be done by performing a ritual that will contribute to the improvement of her karmic conditions after death. He who *seems* to some to be an unfilial son is, from the Buddhist perspective, acting faithfully to requite his debt to his mother—in spite of the fact he will leave her for distant lands. In this way, any apparent conflict between Buddhist and parental debt is resolved.

Of course, queries about the relative importance of one's debts, to one's parents and to Buddhism, continued and increased over time. The Sōtō Zen master Dōgen was asked, for example, about the importance of requiting the debt to one's parents. Dōgen understood the

¹⁷ Monks' concerns over their debts to their mothers or parents had, of course, continental precedents. Alan COLE (1998) has analyzed the relationship between mothers and sons in Chinese Buddhism, examining its representation in scriptures such as *Fu-mu en chung ching* 父母恩重經 (T 85, no. 2887). He does not, however, examine that relationship in the context of the Chinese formulation of the discourse of the four debts and thus, understandably, does not address in any detail tensions that presumably existed between indebtedness to the Buddha and his community, on the one hand, and that to the monk's mother, on the other. At one point, however, Cole makes reference to Tsung-mi's use of the concept of the four debts, interpreting it as having been presented "in a Buddhist way, with the Buddha instead of the emperor located at the peak of the pyramid of expected obedience" (153); if correct, Tsung-mi would be offering a uniquely hierarchical arrangement of the four debts. Insofar as I am aware, no other Buddhist scripture or commentary described the four debts as a set directly in such terms. While Buddhist presentations of the four objects of indebtedness are obviously made from a Buddhist perspective—placing all beings in a Buddhist cosmology—they do not usually directly make claims that there is some "order" or "hierarchy" among all four; instead, they argue for the similarly extreme weight of each. Thus Cole's argument for what he calls a "conjunction of hierarchy and discipline" (pp. 153–54) should be refined to take into account, if he is correct, the uniqueness of Tsung-mi's perspective, instead of identifying it as offering a vision of the four debts in a "Buddhist way," a phrase that would suggest—in addition to his endnote for the discussion (p. 268 n. 37)—that it constituted a standard presentation of the four debts as found in other T'ang Buddhist literature, such as *Ta-ch'eng pen-sheng hsin-ti kuan ching*. At the same time, as we will see, in medieval Japan there were often discussions of the relative weight of any two of those debts on any given occasion, especially with regard to the relative debt to parents in comparison with that to Buddhism; the only exceptions, to be discussed later, are the radical rereadings of the debts in *Heike monogatari*.

debt to parents as a problem of attached love (*on'ai*), emphasizing that one who abandons the home life must likewise throw away the debt to his parents and replace it with repayment of the debt to all sentient beings. The monk, no longer limited to requiting the debt of this life to his parents, performs rituals to improve the karmic destinies of beings throughout the universe and into the future. When questioned about memorial rites for parents, Dōgen emphasized that the ritual lives and study of Buddhism by monks constitute ample payment of any debt to parents; and while Chinese monks performed memorial rites for Ch'an masters, there was no record of their having performed such rites on behalf of their parents.¹⁸

The monk Mujū 無住 (1227–1312), a Rinzai Zen monk of Tendai origins, wrote his interpretation of the relative priority of the four debts in his *Zōdanshū* 雜談集 (Collection of miscellaneous conversations) by referring to a statement reputedly by Kūkai. The statement, was based on a prayer dedication included in documents recovered in the late-eleventh century that were reputedly original to the work *Seireishū* 性盡集 (Collection of the pure spirit) compiled after Kūkai's death. Mujū, quoting Kūkai, claimed that the debt of beings to the three jewels of Buddhism is greater than that to the other debts because of the absolute and eternal character of the virtues of Buddhism. At the same time, since the Buddhist Dharma was subtle and unknowable, and bodhisattvas did not appear, the greatest among the debts within Buddhism was to one's teacher in the present life.¹⁹

A seminal story exemplifying the possible conflict is that of the Tendai disciple Shōkū 証空 (n.d.) and his master, the palace monk Chikō 智興 (914–?), which was included in a series of medieval tale collections. Kamo no Chōmei's (1155–1216) *Hosshinshū* 發心集 (Collection of awakening the aspiration [for enlightenment]) of the early thirteenth century describes how when Chikō was on his deathbed due to illness, Shōkū prayed that his own life be taken instead. Yet he did have one condition for offering up his body on behalf of his master: He prayed that insofar as he was an only son, and his mother was eighty years old, that he could first get her permission to do so. When

¹⁸ See *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki*, p. 373. Dōgen stresses the point that one's debt is greater to Buddhism—particularly, to one's teacher and the “Buddha-ancestors”—than to one's parents on a number of occasions. See, for example, *Shōbōgenzō* ch. 16, “Gyōji,” pp. 195–204 (especially 195, 199–200, 203–204), ch. 25, “Keisei sanshoku,” pp. 291–92, and “Den'e,” p. 368. Of course, other famous figures of “new” Kamakura Buddhism also emphasized the importance of the four debts, such as Nichiren in works like *Shion shō* and *Hōon shō*.

¹⁹ This statement is reproduced in ISHIDA 1979, p. 191. Mujū's claim is based, with minor variations, on a dedication Kūkai reputedly made in prayer for his former teacher; see *Zoku henjō hakki seireishū* 続赴照發揮性盡集, in *Sangō shiiki/Seireishū* (NKB 71), pp. 364–68.

Shōkū asked her permission, she told him that she would do so because in acting to requite his great debt to his teacher, the merit of his action would help her to gain *bodhi* in the next life. She said,

True filiality is to throw away this vulgar body and to requite your debt to two people [i.e., me and your teacher].... My foolish heart has not thought about acquiring much merit. When you were young I brought you up alone; now that I'm bent with years like a weak bamboo, depending on you is like the relationship between heaven and earth. It saddens me greatly that during my remaining life, today or tomorrow when I am not aware, you will abandon me and go forth, but when I think of its deep purpose—to exchange your life for that of your master—there is no question you will gain salvation.... Since this is your will, quickly be born in the Pure Land and save me!“²⁰

The narrative goes on to note that at the moment Shōkū was to die, he prayed in tears to be taken by the object of his devotion, the deity Fudō myōō. Fudō was so moved by Shōkū's willingness to die for his teacher that tears of blood streamed from the image, and Fudō told him, “You've taken the place of your teacher; I'll take the place of you.” Shōkū felt Fudō move through his bones and his liver, and suddenly he was healed.²¹ Here, Shōkū, like the monk Chōnen, must somehow resolve the issue of indebtedness through consulting with his mother. Unlike Chōnen, however, he is the only child, and it is he who is to die first and transfer merit to his mother from the other side. His sacrifice is, moreover, to be a bodily exchange that he hopes will save his teacher at the same time that it repays his debt to the master. And he is saved from his personal sacrifice through the compassion of the deity. Ultimately, like Chōnen, the problem is resolved through the exchange of merit between son and mother. As was the case with Chōnen, the debt to Buddhism implicitly overrides—at the same time that it also fulfills—his parental debt. Yet Shōkū's sacrifice, at least in the eyes of his mother, would requite both debts at the same time, a ritual exchange different from that of Chōnen, who had to perform an extensive rite on behalf of his mother's welfare distinct from the pilgrimage of his planning.²²

²⁰ See *Hosshinshū*, fascicle 6, pp. 249–50.

²¹ See *Hosshinshū*, pp. 250–51.

²² *Chōken hyōbyakushū* 澄憲表白集 describes the deepest of the four debts as that to the parents, and that the strongest of debts is ultimately that to the mother. This would suggest that a pattern had developed by the early Kamakura period—in which this collection was

*Social Crisis and Reformulations of the Four Debts
between the State and Buddhism*

Another question concerned the problem of loyalties to the ruler as opposed to other objects of the four debts, particularly parents and Buddhism. The question of “To whom am I most obligated?” proved to be a seminal question from the twelfth century on, in part because of the increasing tensions and shifting alliances between large temple complexes, powerful aristocratic families, and the imperial government. Many of the temple complexes featured large armies that sometimes descended on the capital to demonstrate or ravage the area in favor of their own interests. Warrior families were increasingly powerful, and the retired emperor constituted a more prominent figure than had the child emperors at the height of the Heian era.

Although individuals rarely chose to publicly prioritize among the four debts, historical tales provided a convenient genre through which such commentary could be produced. In fact, the most famous of the historical tales, *Heike monogatari* 平家物語 (The tale of the Heike), written in the thirteenth century, offered a completely new reading of the four debts and their respective importance. Although the author is unknown, the work outlines the fall of the military Taira family in a manner that is both critical of and sympathetic towards them. At a critical juncture of the narrative, in which the Prime Minister (*daijō daijin* 太政大臣), Taira leader Kiyomori, wants to go to battle against Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa, who has plotted his overthrow, Kiyomori finds that his son Shigemori is in existential crisis over the conflict between his loyalty to his father and to the sovereign. Shigemori tells Kiyomori,

I sense from the august words you speak that your good fortune has come to an end. A man invariably thinks of evil acts when his fortunes are in decline.... Ever since the beginnings of governance at the Japanese court, it has been a breach of ritual propriety for the Prime Minister to wear helmet and armor. Moreover, you have the august body of one who has become a monk! To suddenly wear helmet and armor and arm oneself with bows and arrows and so throw away the sacerdotal robes of the buddhas of the past, present, and future that are emblems of liberation is to invite the sins of lack of repentance and the breaking of the precepts....

produced—of emphasizing one's debt to one's mother in a variety of works of literature. This statement is quoted in TOMIKURA 1968, vol. 1, p. 300.

First of all, there are four debts in this world. These are debts to heaven and earth, to the king of the realm, to parents, and to sentient beings. Among these, the most important is the debt to the ruler. [It is said] “All land under heaven is the king’s land,” so even the wise men who washed their ears in the Ying River and folded bracken on Shouyang Mountain knew from ritual propriety that it is difficult to turn against an imperial order. Isn’t this all the more so in the case of one who has become Prime Minister—[a position] to which even his ancestors did not rise? Even I, Shigemori, who am a stupid person lacking in talent, have reached the rank of a minister of the state.... Aren’t all of these the result of the matchless blessing of the emperor (*chōon* 朝恩)? To forget our colossal, august debt and incline recklessly against the retired emperor is to turn against the divine will of Amaterasu (Tenshō Daijin) and of Hachiman. Japan is the land of kami and the kami do not accept indecorum....

As this [problem] is for the august reasonableness of the sovereign, even if I cannot succeed in doing so, I will attempt to guard the imperial palace [of retired emperor Go-Shirakawa] of Hōjūji-dono. This is because [all my successes], from my ennoblement to my present positions of minister and major captain of the palace guards, are due to the august blessings (*go’on* 御恩) of the sovereign. Thinking of the weight of this debt, it is greater than a thousand-myriad jewels; pondering the depth of this debt, it is deeper than repeatedly dyed red. So I should go and retreat into the palace of the retired emperor. Given its [i.e., such an action’s] rightness, I find it difficult to take a few comrade samurai who will take an oath to give their bodies and their lives for mine. So it is indeed a weighty matter that I go to guard the retired emperor’s palace. How sad that I suddenly forget my debt to my father, which is still taller than the eighty-thousand-league summit of Mount Sumeru, if I put forth loyalty to my lord His Majesty! How painful that I become a traitorous retainer who is without loyalty to the sovereign if I avoid the sin of unfilial behavior! This is too extreme a problem for advance or retreat—it is impossible to discern right or wrong. My request is simply that you take my head. I can neither go to guard the retired emperor’s palace nor be of service to you in your attack on it.²³ (*Heike monogatari*, NKBT 32, pp. 172–74)

²³ For another translation of this account, see McCULLOUGH 1988, pp. 74–76.

Shigemori begins his discussion by reminding his father of the impropriety and sinful character of his intentions. In fact, at what he sees as the darkest moment yet in his father's life, he evokes the four debts to remind Kiyomori to whom he owes his position in society. In doing so, Shigemori not only introduces a previously unheard of set of debts that features heaven and earth in place of Buddhism but he also emphasizes that the weights of the debts vary. The debt to the sovereign is the greatest, in part because the entire realm is his, and because the good fortune of Kiyomori, his son, and their family are due to the grace of the retired emperor Go-Shirakawa. So while Shigemori early on draws attention to Kiyomori's sinfulness in Buddhist terms, he continues on to emphasize that Kiyomori's greatest transgression is against the ruler. The four debts, which had in earlier continental history lacked any mention of the sovereign, were now reinterpreted to place the debt of all to the ruler as the highest priority and to discard any mention of debt to Buddhism!

At the same time, in spite of what he first says about the four debts, Shigemori is divided in his loyalties. Somehow his redrawing of the four debts is not in itself stable or clear in its meaning. Shigemori is torn primarily because for the first time in his life he is caught in an epistemic and cosmological catch-22: if he defends the retired emperor, he transgresses against his father, and if he helps his father, he has betrayed the deepest object of his debt. Shigemori, whichever path he chooses, believes himself an ingrate, one who has violated the sanctity of the four debts.

Of course, Kiyomori did not cut off his son's head, regardless of the request. And since his father did not kill him, Shigemori went to the palace of the retired emperor, where he offered his services. The account in *Heike monogatari* tells us that Shigemori gathered together samurai at the retired emperor's palace in order to convince his father of the futility of any plan to attack; indeed, the tale says that Shigemori actually had no plans to fight his father. Defusing the situation, he was, in the view of the narrator, the ideal subject. The tale reads:

Confucius has said that loyalty is for the sovereign and filial piety is for the father. The retired emperor said, "Although this is a new circumstance, the heart of the lord keeper of the privy seal [Shigemori] has previously been noble. He has requited malice with kindness (*on*)."¹ Others said "The results of his karma are auspicious: he rose to minister and major captain of the palace guards; he is a man superior in demeanor and appearance; and his intelligence and knowledge transcend this world, do they not?" "When there is a minister to

remonstrate a realm that realm will invariably be tranquil; when there is a son to remonstrate a household, that household will invariably be straight." From high antiquity to the last age, such a minister has been rare.

(Heike monogatari, p. 178;
see also McCULLOUGH 1988, pp. 77–78)

This reformulation was only one of an increasing number of versions of the four debts, most of which prioritized among the four debts. The fourteenth-century work *Genpei jōsuiki* 源平盛衰記 (Account of the rise and fall of the Genpei) was a variant of the *Heike monogatari* account. It included the same list of the four debts as was found in the latter work and, surprisingly, claimed that it was drawn from the *Tach'eng pen-sheng hsin-ti kuan ching*, which could not be further from the historical truth. This text also noted that the weightiest of the debts is that to the sovereign. At the same time, it emphasized *knowledge* of the four debts as an integral part of human relations (*jinrin* 人倫), and claimed that figures such as demons possess no such knowledge (*Genpei jōsuiki*, vol. 1, p. 208).

The Four Debts in Transition: Popular Religion and the Death of the Buddhist Author

We have seen that tensions implicit in the discourse of the four debts were apparent within a century of its introduction to Japan. Moreover, we have seen that figures such as Chōnen, Dōgen, and the literary figure of Shōkū were aware of the apparent conflict between the debt to parents and that to Buddhism. Likewise, Mujū, following a statement attributed to Kūkai, claimed that the most important of the objects of debt is specifically the Buddhist master. In each of these cases, the four debts proved a relevant measure of transgression and propriety in the most intimate of social relationships.

We have also witnessed that this discourse, which Kūkai introduced and used to justify the role of the monastic community in society, also legitimized the king as a fundamental object of debt. Even from the days of the writing of the last of the six official histories, aristocrats approached the court for religious patronage and appropriated the discourse of debt to emphasize the importance of the ruler to the maintenance and propagation of Buddhism. In fact, with the political dominance of the Fujiwara family, and the increasing prominence of retired emperors as well as the related splintering of political power, many of those who wielded such power saw the discourse as a means to legitimate their rule. Figures such as Michinaga and the emperor

Go-Reizei, moved in part by their belief in the powers of Buddhism, invoked the four debts. Michinaga compared himself to the early patrons of Buddhism at the same time that his ritual action presumably helped requite the four debts; his action, performed at the family temple, operated at the intersection between the effort to accrue merit for himself and his family and the strategy to portray himself as a chancellor who, like the rulers of old, patronized Buddhism and was, indeed, himself one of the four objects of debt.

The social crises that deepened from the late twelfth century on served initially to exacerbate tensions that were implicit in the discourse of the four debts. The question of the debt to one's parents remained an issue of genuine concern for many people. However, with the political instability of the era, many felt forced to make difficult decisions concerning the respective weight of their debt to the sovereign and to other objects of indebtedness. This concern, no doubt, was fueled by the belief that the answer to the question could influence not only a person's life but also her potential for salvation.

The story of Shigemori's crisis of indebtedness in *Heike monogatari* serves as a vivid example of the rising tension against which one could scarcely guard the sanctity of the four debts. For Shigemori, his own belief in the primacy of the debt to the sovereign does not assuage his distraught realization that to requite this debt in this circumstance would be to betray his father. In the end, the notion that the debt to the sovereign is greatest could neither resolve the issue of sin against the other objects of the four debts nor guarantee that the four debts would remain stable. In fact, in this case, the very presentation of the four debts in the story of Shigemori is made in Buddhist terms, as he is shocked that such a monk can take up arms, and conceives of his debt to his father through the metaphor of the mountain at the center of the Buddhist cosmos, Sumeru.

For the narrator of *Heike monogatari*, it is this cosmology and *epistème* that guarantee that the discourse of the four debts, albeit reformulated, remains partly Buddhist in character. Shigemori is concerned that he might commit the “sin” (*tsumi* 罪) of unfilial behavior. And while the proper social relations clearly include elements of Confucianism, the narrator notes that others believed Shigemori had remarkably auspicious karmic fruits.

As had always been the case with the discourse of the four debts, it was the question of social transgression and indebtedness that formed the discursive context for Shigemori's outburst. In this case, of course, the four debts were appropriated primarily to serve the ruler as the highest object of debt. To abandon him is even a greater sin than that of abandonment of one's parent.

This tension, however, as we have seen, was precursed by earlier writings that noted the potential conflict between monks and their mothers. The narrator of *Heike monogatari*, I would surmise, has not only reformulated the teachings of *Ta-ch'eng pen-sheng hsin-ti kuan ching* but also drawn on the stories of tension between monks and their parents. The tensions illustrated by the prayers of Chōnen and the story of Shōkū, each part of the larger literary and popular tradition in medieval Japanese society, formed part of the condition for the possibility of producing Shigemori's crisis—whether in fact or legend.

The story of Shigemori in *Heike monogatari* did not, of course, prove the end of discourse on the four debts nor of the tensions between them. It did, however, insofar as it redrew the four debts, partly release this Buddhist concept from its discursive moorings. In fact, from the late twelfth century on, there was a series of discussions of indebtedness in literary and religious works that suggest that any Buddhist institutional control over the production of discourse on the four debts had almost completely collapsed. Medieval society could interpret the framework of “debts” in a variety of ways, so long as its basic rhetorical framework was preserved as the condition for discourse.

For Lady Go-Fukakusa's in Nijō 二条, author of the literary diary *Towazugatari* とばずがたり (The unrequested tale), even animals know the four debts. This she notes to spite herself as concubine for not requiting her debt to her lord, retired emperor Go-Fukakusa; she never appreciated fully his compassion and concern, taking on several lovers throughout their time together. Yet Nijō goes on to conflate what were Buddhologically contradictory categories—romantic love (a form of attachment, *on'ai*) and appropriate indebtedness. Knowing of the story of Shōkū, she prays to the kami of Kitano and Hirano that she die in the place of Go-Fukakusa, who is now gravely ill; but Go-Fukakusa dies, and she is left alone to attend the funeral service for him. For Nijō, continuing to live is ironic, given that she sees her debt to Go-Fukakusa as much greater than Shōkū's to his teacher. Why, she asks, was her prayer fruitless? She hazards her own explanation, quite outside the teachings of any Buddhist temple: maybe some karma can simply not be changed.²⁴

The discourse, now appropriated very differently from any original intent, sometimes even seemed to transcend Buddhist discourse. The late-twelfth-century work *Nakatomi harai kunge* 中臣祓訓解 (Nakatomi explanation of purification), though obviously influenced by esoteric Buddhism, offers an interpretation of the four debts differing in kind

²⁴ See *Towazugatari*, pp. 278, 308–309; BRAZELL 1976, pp. 223, 246–47.

from any produced before. It depicts requital of the four debts as sufficient to prevent the most outrageous of “Shinto” sins (*tsumi*): Requital prevents “rebirth incest”—sexual relations between those who were parent and child in a previous birth, or a parent-child relation between those who were previously husband and wife (TEEUWEN and VAN DER VEERE 1998, p. 37).²⁵ With this amalgamation of Buddhist and “Shinto” discourses of sin and purification, the four debts potentially permeated medieval society just as Kūkai’s discussion of the four debts reached others within the monastic community.

The four debts, however, unlike discourse such as that which conjoined the Royal Law and the Buddhist Law (*ōbō buppō* 王法仏法) seems to have been disseminated to virtually every layer of Japanese society from a very early period. The proliferation of the discourse of the four debts and of indebtedness more generally occurred in part because it was trans-institutional: it included not only the governmental and monastic communities but also families and sentient beings in general. This discourse, which presented a new topography and hierarchy of social relationships, operated in every common arena of social interaction. The inclusion of the parent-child relationship guaranteed that Buddhist notions of transgression and obligation permeated Japanese society at its most intimate level. In fact, such intimacy extended beyond human beings to the entire Buddhist cosmos of sentient creatures, which is indicated not only by the large number of tales concerning the debt requital of animals—even skulls—in tale collections such as the twelfth-century *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集 (Tales of times now past) but also by Lady Nijō’s query: “If even an animal understands the four debts, why don’t I?”²⁶

ABBREVIATIONS

- KST *Shintei zōho kokushi taikei* 新訂増補国史大系. Kuroita Katsumi 黒板勝美, ed. 60 vols. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1929–67.
- KZ *Kōbō Daishi zenshū* 弘法大師全集. 5 vols. Mikkyō Bunka Kenkyūjo 密教文化研究所, ed. Mt. Kōya: Mikkyō Bunka Kenkyūjo, 1970–77.
- NKBT *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* 日本古典文学大系. 100 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1958–68.

²⁵ See also *Nakatomi harai kunge*, p. 19.

²⁶ Thus her reference to animals invokes the sub-genre of Buddhist literature sometimes called *hōontan* 報恩譚 (“stories of requital of debt”) in which animals and other beings—including humans but often those of lower karmic status—were depicted as requiting kindnesses done for them. In Japan, these stories were commonly invoked or re-presented in tale collections. See, for example, *Konjaku monogatari shū*, fascicle 19, tales 26–35, NKBT 25, pp. 115–31. The tale of the skull’s requital is tale 31, pp. 123–24.

T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. 85 vols. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭, eds. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–35.

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