

The Concept of “Buddha-Nature” in Women’s Salvation and Its Relationship to Japanese Buddhist Teachings on Menstruation

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Abstract: This paper explores one aspect in the evolution of “buddha-nature” (*bussō*) in Japan within the context of Buddhist teachings regarding women’s salvation. “Buddha-nature”, symbolised by the lotus throne where buddhas and bodhisattvas reside, was fused with the notion of menstrual impurity due to syncretism with Shintō beliefs. The introduction of the *Bloody Pond Sutra* (*Ketsubon-kyō*) solidified discussions on menstruation’s origin, attributing menstrual impurity to women’s “mind” poisons. Practical manifestations of this complex idea included wearing chest talismans. This research sheds light on the evolving “Buddha-nature” concept in Japan and its implications for women’s spirituality.

Keywords: buddha-nature, lotus throne, women in Buddhism, *Bloody Pond Sutra* *Ketsubon-kyō*, impurity, menstruation

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Introduction

The lotus flower holds various meanings and interpretations within the context of Buddhist philosophy and iconography, with one of its most profound connotations being the representation of buddha-nature – the inherent potential for enlightenment that exists within all sentient beings. This concept of buddha-nature found expression through the metaphor of the heart as a “lotus throne” (*rendai* 蓮台) with eight petals on which buddhas and bodhisattvas reside. This paper aims to explore how, in Japanese Buddhism, this metaphor was applied specifically to women.¹ It highlights how, in women, the lotus throne was believed to have a distinct positioning or structure compared to men, as exemplified in forthcoming sources. The central argument of this paper posits that these differences were meant to indicate the discrepancy in the potential for attaining the state of a buddha. Furthermore, this divergence was strongly associated with menstrual bleeding and the impurity caused by blood. While this complex set of ideas is traceable in Japanese sources spanning from the 14th to the 19th centuries, it appears to be most prevalent from the 17th century onwards.

Theoretical expressions

The eight-petalled lotus, commonly appears at the center of mandalas (known as the central pavilion or *chūin* 中院), such as the Womb Realm Mandala (*taizōkai mandara* 胎藏界曼荼羅), representing the heart of the universe. The human body is considered a reflection of the universe, and therefore, the lotus throne corresponds to the central organ in the human body – the heart. As mentioned above, this image became intertwined with *kechi'e* 穢血 (or impurity caused by blood), which has deep-rooted associations within Shintō, Japan’s indigenous religion, but initially did not have a presence in Buddhism². A syncretism of

¹ “Buddha-nature” – as one of the key concepts of Sino-Japanese Buddhism – receives a fair amount of scholarly attention. See e.g., ZAPART 2017.

² To support this statement, we can refer to the words of Hōnen (Genkū), the founder of the Pure Land School (Jōdoshū). In *Ippyaku shijū gokajō mondō* [Dialogue in One Hundred and Forty-Five Points], written around 1201, he responds to questions from aristocratic women by stating that there is no obstacle to reciting sutras during menstruation (OHASHI 1989: 254–255). This thinker dedicated considerable attention to the position of women in Buddhism, as evidenced by his extensive commentary on the thirty-fifth vow of Buddha Amida (Amitābha), making his opinion authoritative in this regard. A similar view was held by Nichiren who, in correspondence from 1264, denied the existence of sutras or other scriptures that prohibited women from practicing due to menstruation. He extensively discussed this issue in *Gassui/Gessui gosho* 月水御書 [Correspondence on Menstruation]. At the same time, he invoked the principle of *zuihōbini* 隨方毘尼 (adaptation of the discipline to circumstances), which allowed for flexible adjustment of universal precepts to local and temporal conditions, as long as it did not contradict the fundamental teachings of Buddha. This theoretically paved the way for foreign concepts to be assimilated into Japanese Buddhism (NGG pp. 501–503).

Buddhism and Shintō, catalysed by the introduction of a new, apocryphal sutra *Ketsubon-kyō* 血盆經 [Bloody Pond Sutra³] around the 15th century (*Chōben shianshō* p. 125), played a crucial role in incorporating into Buddhism the idea that female blood – especially menstrual and postpartum blood – has polluting properties. The *Shintōshū* 神道集 [Collection of Shintō Texts] (mid-14th century) exemplifies doctrinal innovation regarding the Buddhist understanding of defilement caused by menstrual blood. When asked why divinities of Shintō shrines and Buddhist temples view menstrual blood as repulsive, the explanation – based on a pseudo-quotation from sutra – is provided:

答、心地觀經^{ニハ}、一切衆生ノ胸ノ間、八葉ノ有^ニ肉壇^ニ、女肝ノ低
 様ナリ、男ノ肝ノ仰背^リ、故男ノ食物、肉壇留^テ、尸虫ヲ養、女食物ノ、
 早^ク熟藏^下、尸虫ヲ不^レ養、故虫共飢^テ、食物求、泣涙ノ流^テ、血ト
 成^テ出^ルヲ月水ト云^{ナリ}云云

(KONDŌ 1959: 164)

Response: The *Shinji kangyō* [The Sutra on the Contemplation of the Mind] states that within the chest of every sentient being there is a fleshy mass (*nikudan*) in the shape of an eight-petalled lotus. In a woman, the liver is situated lower, while in a man, it is positioned horizontally. For this reason, what a man consumes is retained within the fleshy mass [i.e. heart], providing nutrition to the corporal worms (*shichū*) [within his body]. What a woman consumes directly enters her intestines, failing to supply nourishment to the corporal worms, so they demand food out of hunger. The tears they shed turn into blood, which is released externally as what is called menstrual blood.⁴

The next stage in the evolution of this concept began with the reception of the *Ketsubon-kyō* [Bloody Pond Sutra] around the 15th century. Following its introduction to Japan, interpretations regarding the origin of menstruation began to emerge in exegetical literature. The *Tenkai-zō* “*Ketsubon-kyō*” *dangi shi* 天海藏血盆經談義私 [Private Copy of the Sermon on the “Bloody Pond Sutra” from Tenkai’s Archives], copied in 1599, provides the most detailed exploration of this issue:

³ The author interprets a Sino-Japanese term *ketsubon* 血盆 in the title of the sutra as the equivalent of the native term *chinoike* 血(の)池, thus chooses to translate both as “bloody pond”. The semantic suitability of both terms is supported by a range of source texts, including a manuscript titled “*Ketsubon-kyō*” *no yurai* [The Origin of the “Bloody Pond Sutra”] (FUKUMITSU 2002: 406; SOBZYK 2022: 509). The semantic component *bon*, in its first variant, alludes to the round shape of the body of bloody water. This interpretation is further reinforced by the commentary “*Ketsubon-kyō*” *dangi shi* [Private Copy of the Sermon on the “Bloody Pond Sutra”], where the shape of the pond is likened to a vessel (KŌDATE and MAKINO 2000: 22; SOBZYK 2022: 95). The phrase in the title appears to be a figurative expression referring to its round shape, rather than a literal expression of a vessel.

⁴ The author of this paper is responsible for all translations included.

月水ノ由来ノ事一切衆生ノ肉団ニ八葉ノ蓮花有リ[...]是即チ男ノ蓮花ハ上ニ向テ生シ女ノ蓮ケハ下ニ向キ不レ開ケ常ニ有ル也此ノ八葉ニ五仏四菩薩居シテ常住御座ス故ニ心ノ蓮台ト云也

而ルニ男ニ蓮ケハ上ニ向ク故ニ仏菩薩安穩也女ノ蓮ケハ下ニ向キツホム故ニ難シテ住シカン涙ヲ流シ玉フカ月水ト成テ血盆地獄ノ池ニ留ル也是レ月水ノ調レ也

(KŌDATE and MAKINO 2000: 21–22)

About the origin of menstruation (*tsukimizu*). Within the body of every sentient being, there is a fleshy mass (*nikudan*) that resembles an eight-petalled lotus flower. [...] To be more precise, in men, the lotus flower always grows upwards, as a result of which, five buddhas and four bodhisattvas always reside there. Thus, the heart is called the lotus throne. Contrary to men, in whom the lotus flower grows upwards, making buddhas and bodhisattvas reside peacefully, in women, the lotus bud grows downwards, causing discomfort and leading them [buddhas and bodhisattvas] to cry out of despair. From their tears menstrual blood is formed, and it gathers in the Hell of the Bloody Pond (*ketsubon jigoku*). This is how menstruation occurs.

In another part of the same source, the commentator addresses the question of why the tears shed by buddhas and bodhisattvas have a polluting effect:

私云四仏五菩薩ノカン涙ノ露ナラハ清浄ニ雖レトモ可レト有ル譬ハ朱ヲ清水ニスリ合スレハ如ニク赤ク成ル仏菩薩ノ悲嘆ノ涙モ大不浄「ト成テ」交ル故血水ニ反ル也 [...]

女ノ愚「痴ノ」煩惱ニ交ル故ニ仏菩薩ノ悲嘆ノ涙モ大不浄「ト成テ」三宝ヲケカス也[...] 一血ト者赤色ノ物ノ煩惱ノ種也サル程ニ一切衆生ハ此ノ血脉カ地大ト作テ

五大具足ノ成レシテ身ヲ受レ苦也地獄等ノ苦ハ血盆ノ血ノ一字ヨリ起ル可心得也 [...]

今ノ血盆血水カー一切衆生ト成テ受レク苦ヲ根元ナレハ広ハ八万四千由旬ノ血盆地獄ト顕現シテ一切ノ女人ニ業障ヲツクノハセル也 [...]

(KŌDATE and MAKINO 2000: 20–22)

In my view, the tears of despair from buddhas and bodhisattvas should be as pure as dewdrops. However, just as crystal-clear water turns red when cinnabar is added to it, the tears of buddhas and bodhisattvas, despite resembling pearl-like dews, transform into blood (*chi*) when mixed with the redness of a woman's mental defilements (*bonnō*). [...] Likewise, the tears of despair from buddhas and bodhisattvas, as they mingle with a woman's ignorance (*chi*), one of her mental defilements, become greatly impure and go on to pollute the Three Treasures [of Buddhism]. [...] Blood

is the red seed of mental defilements. Therefore, the veins of sentient beings form the earth element (*chi*), which makes up a five-element human body [...] being subject to suffering. Thus, one should understand that infernal suffering, as well as other forms of suffering, originate from just one blood, character in bloody pond – blood. [...] The menstrual blood from the Bloody Pond, which I am discussing here, is the source of suffering for all sentient beings, which is why the Hell of the Bloody Pond manifests as [a vast] hell measuring eighty-four thousand yojanas⁵, where all women must settle their karmic debts. [...] All delusions of the mind have their origin in ignorance (*chi*).

This complex discussion essentially revolves around the notion that a woman’s mental imperfections, particularly “ignorance/foolishness” prevent her from realising her potential to attain buddhahood. In my opinion, the above argumentation relies on the homonymy of “blood” (*chi* 血), which originates from “ignorance/foolishness” (*chi* 痴) and forms “earth” (*chi* 地), which is considered the fundamental substance of the human body subjected to suffering. This is indicated by the nuanced choice of term *guchi* 愚痴 (in other parts of the document frequently abbreviated to *chi*) instead of *mumyō* 無明 (ignorance) – commonly used to denote the first link in the twelvefold chain of dependent origination and the fundamental cause of remaining in conditioned existence. The application of the homonymy principle allowed for the integration of blood, earth, and ignorance/foolishness into a coherent conceptual framework, extracting hidden knowledge within language, which aligns with the exegetical style of *myōsen jijō* 名詮自性 (“the essence [of the signifier] is contained in its name”).⁶

The 17th (or early 18th) century compilation of materials titled “*Urabonkyō shikisho* 盂蘭盆經私記疏 [Private Notes on the Commentaries to the “Ullambana Sutra”]⁷, makes two separate mentions of the lotus throne as a representation of

⁵ A unit of measurement often used in Buddhism to describe the vastness of space. Roughly equivalent to about 7 miles or approximately 11.3 kilometers.

⁶ To reinforce this claim, it should be noted that this is not an isolated instance of applying this method of analysis in the document. Another section provides an interpretation of the title *Myōhō rengēkyō* 妙法蓮華經 [Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law]. The commentator broke down the characters that make up “*myōhō*” 妙法 into their basic elements, obtaining the sequence 少女水去. Then, he interpreted it as “*shōjo mizu o saru*” 少女水ヲ去ル, meaning “a young girl leaving water/emerging from water”. He further attributed the meaning of “moonwater” (*tsukimizu* 月水) to “water”, referring to menstrual blood that collects in the Bloody Pond Hell. This line of reasoning led him to conclude that the *Lotus Sutra* implicitly teaches about woman’s salvation from the Bloody Pond Hell (KŌDATE and MAKINO 2000: 22).

⁷ Despite its title, this source text consists of five sections dedicated, in sequence, to the presentation of the *Ullambana Sutra* and two commentaries on it, the history of the Bloody Pond along with the text of the *Bloody Pond Sutra* and a commentary on its content.

buddha-nature. The latter reference explicitly ascribes to women an incapacity to receive the Teachings of Buddha, linking the concept of impurity with limitations in their buddha-nature:

去^レ女人^ノ胸^ノ間^ニ八^ノ葉^ノ蓮^ノ華^ノ逆^ニ開^テ逆^ニ萎^ム。仍^テ内^ヲ分^テ流^ル零^色、青^黄赤^白黒^見ル^中ニモ赤^キ色^ノ之^零、一^月之^間ニ一^七日^ノ之^数ヲ重^テ、一^年十二^月ノ間^ノ八^十四^日也。此^ノ血^積テ一^期之^間不^レ知^レ数^ヲ。

(IJIMA 1998: 68)

And so, inside a woman's chest, an eight-petal lotus flower blooms upside down and withers upside down. Thus, from blue, yellow, red, white, and black drops [of liquids] that circulate inside her, red drops accumulate for seven days each month, amounting to eighty-four days throughout the twelve months of a year. Who could know how many drops accumulate during one's lifetime!

又^レ女人^ノ垢^穢也。非^是法^器。男^ノ胸^ノ中^ニハ、每^朝開^ニ八^ノ葉^ノ蓮^ノ華^ハ、納^ニ食物^ノ。此^食身^中ノ八^万四^千ノ虫^ノ飲^テ持^レ命[。]女^人ノ蓮^華ハ、依^ニ倒^ニ開^クニ、不^留食^ヲ。故^諸虫^泣キ悲^レ之^其涙^作ニ愛^水ノ、反^シテ月^ニ一^度ノ月^水是^{ナリ}。

(IJIMA 1998: 69)

[...] Above all, a woman is dirty and impure. She lacks the capacity to receive the Dharma⁸. Within a man's chest every morning a lotus with eight petals blooms and stores nutrition. Eighty-four thousand worms, existing inside his body, consume this food and sustain life. In the case of a woman, the lotus opens facing downwards, and as a result, it does not accumulate food. For this reason, worms [within her] cry out of sadness. Their tears form a fluid of love (*aisui*), which each month turns into menstrual blood.

A similar teaching about the origin of menstruation can be found in the “*Ketsubon-kyō*” *Jizō-son engi* 血盆経地藏尊縁起 [History of the “Bloody Pond Sutra” of Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha] published in 1792. As opposed to the manuscripts cited above, its printed format facilitated the dissemination of this knowledge to

This arrangement of material demonstrates that the author must have recognised a thematic connection between both sutras. What binds them together is the central figure of Maudgalyāyana (Mokuren) and his overarching mission – to liberate his mother from posthumous suffering.

⁸ This opening passage appears to have been influenced by the famous passage from the *Lotus Sutra*, as translated by Kumārajīva. These words were spoken by Śāriputra, who expressed doubt about whether the dragon king's daughter (Shagara ryūō 娑伽羅竜王) could attain enlightenment. In Japanese Buddhism, the *Lotus Sutra* has historically been regarded as a key text addressing the salvation of women. Despite the accumulation of circumstances that might hinder spiritual emancipation, such as her young age (8 years old), female gender, and even an animal form, she achieved salvation.

a wider audience. The text originates from Shōsen Temple in Abiko-shi (Chiba Prefecture), which in the 18th century, gained fame as the place the *Bloody Pond Sutra* first appeared in Japan due to revelation from Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha:

夫原に一百三拾六地獄の中に血盆地獄と云ておそろ敷地獄あり縦横広さ八万由旬なり然に此地獄ハ一切の女人業を作るに依て墮所の地獄なり其故ハ如何女人の胸の間に八葉の蓮華あり逆に生し逆に開か故に胸の間より血を出す其色五色なり就レ中赤色の血流る事一月に七日あり十二月の間に八十四日なり是を以て名て月水といふ大悪不浄の水也然るに此悪水大地に落れハ地神の頭を汚す [...] 若水中にすつれハ水神をけがし山中に捨れハ山神を穢す或ハ穢れたる衣装を川水にて洗濯する時其川下の諸の善人は是をしらずして此水をくみ茶を煎じ飯を炊き仏神に供養するに仏神是を請給はず

Let us begin by stating that among the one hundred and thirty-six hells, there is one particularly dreadful known as the Hell of the Bloody Pond (*ketsubon jigoku*). It measures eighty thousand yojanas in height, eighty thousand yojanas in length, and eighty thousand yojanas in width. It is the hell where all women end up due to the bad karma they accumulate. Here is why: In a woman’s chest, a lotus flower with eight petals grows. It grows with its roots pointing upwards and blooms in that manner, which is why blood of five colours flows from a woman’s chest. Specifically, the red blood flows for seven days each month, totaling eighty-four days per twelve months of the year. [...] It is a repulsive and impure fluid. When this impure fluid comes into contact with earth, it defiles the heads of the earth deities. [...] If this menstrual blood gets into water, it contaminates the water deities; if it falls on the mountains, it contaminates the mountain deities. And when a woman washes her stained clothes in a river, people from respectable households unknowingly fetch water downstream, brew tea and cook rice. When they offer the tea and rice to the deities and buddhas, they do not accept them.

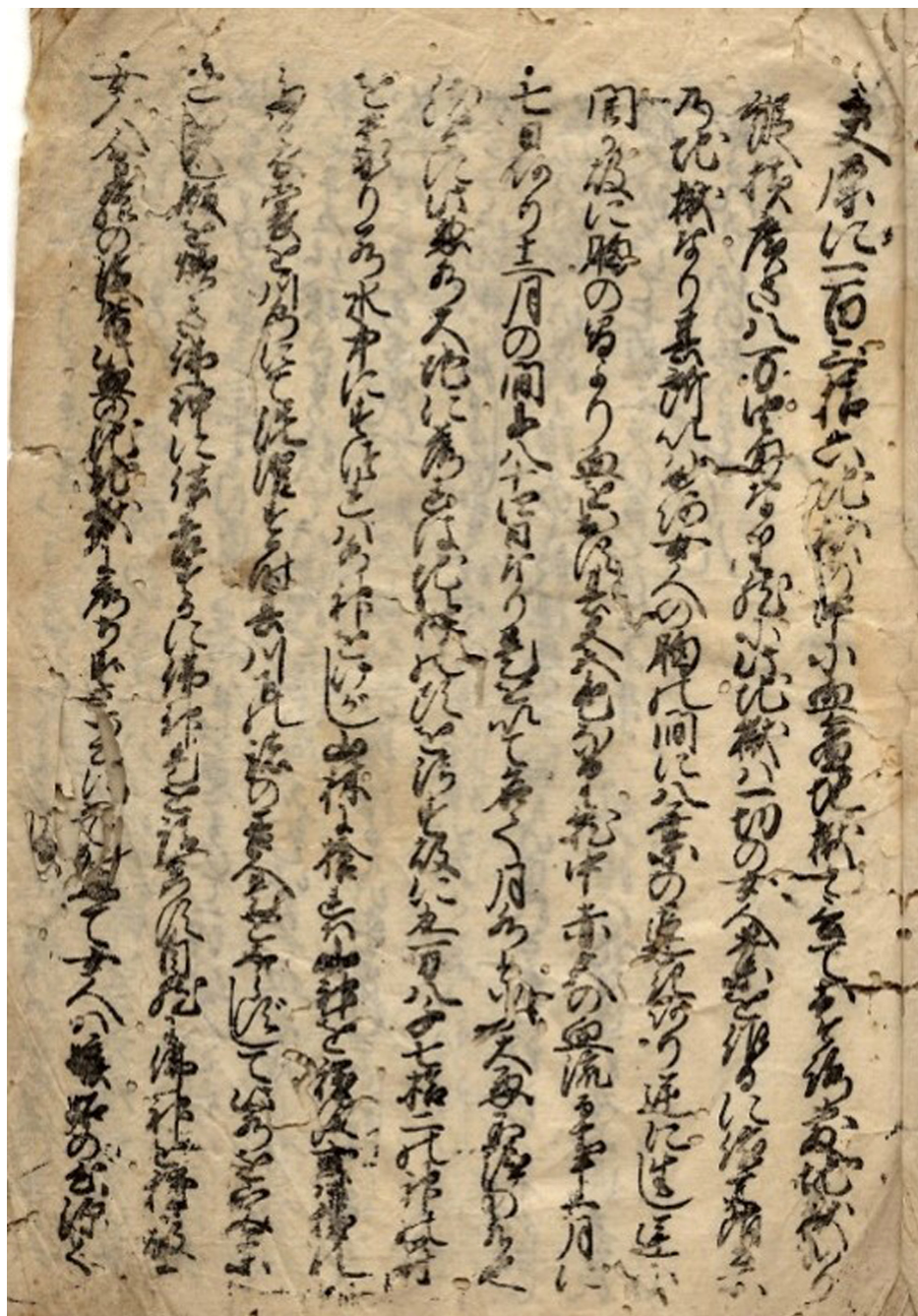


Fig. 1. Opening part of the *Jizō-son engi*, first printed in 1792, where the origin of menstruation is discussed. © Małgorzata Sobczyk. The CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 licence does not apply to this picture.

The passage merits attention as its focus on menstrual blood as the sole cause of a woman’s rebirth in hell. Menstrual bleeding is associated with the improper positioning of the inner lotus throne. Even though the text partially paraphrases the *Bloody Pond Sutra*, especially in terms of how the pollution is disseminated, this explanation for a woman’s posthumous fate lacks confirmation in any existing version.⁹ While some versions mention menstrual blood alongside postpartum blood, postpartum blood is often presented as the primary source of defilement. Given the circumstances of the sutra’s revelation, where a bodhisattva responded to a request from a teenage girl possessed by the spirit of a nun (both women did not experience motherhood), the omission of postpartum blood in the introduction seems to be a justifiable editorial choice.

“*Ketsubon-kyō*” *no yurai* 血盆経の由来 [The Origins of the “Bloody Pond Sutra”] 18th–19th century source, seems to suggest that a woman’s ignorance provides nutrients for a lotus flower to develop:

血の池地獄といふて恐ろき地獄あり。縦横八万四千由旬。然ニ此地獄ハ一切の女人業を作るに依而墮る所の地獄。其故ハ如何。女人の胸の間ニ八葉の蓮華あり。迷に生じ迷にひらくか故ニ胸の間より血を出す。其色五色なり。就中赤色の血流ること一月に七日あり。十二月の間に八十四日なり。是をとって名づき申て月水といふ

(FUKUMITSU 2002: 406–408)

There is a dreadful hell known as the Bloody Pond Hell, which is eighty-four thousand yojanas long and eighty-four thousand yojanas wide. It is a realm where all women find themselves as a result of accumulating negative karma. But why does this occur? Inside every woman’s chest, there grows an eight-petalled lotus flower. It sprouts from ignorance and blooms in ignorance. Consequently, blood flows in five different colours from between her breasts. Specifically, the red one flows for seven days every month, adding up to eighty-four days over the course of twelve months, which is why it is called menstrual blood.

Evidence of the widespread acceptance of this interpretation of buddha-nature can be found in a Japanese-style Buddhist hymn (*wasan* 和讃) titled *Shihon Jōdo* 四品浄土 [The Four Levels of the Pure Land], which was transcribed in 1806. Hymns like these were frequently recited by Pure Land fraternities.

⁹ In a manuscript [*Shōtoku*] *taishi den* [The Life of Prince [Shōtoku]] copied in 1466 by Shaku Keigon 釈慶巖 of the Tendai sect (property of Temple Kawaraya Zen, Shiga Prefecture, Higashi Ōmi), there is a passage concerning Prince Shōtoku’s thirteenth year of life that discusses the origin and content of the *Bloody Pond Sutra*. From this fragmentary record emerges a unique version of the text, in which polluting water and earth with menstrual blood serves as the sole criterion for the rebirth of women in the Bloody Pond (MAKINO 1991: 110).

It presents the idea that the lotus flower within women is inherently unable to bloom, leading to a pessimistic view of their salvation. This particular hymn even offers a specific timeframe for the development of an inner lotus flower:

男胸ニモ蓮華有女人ノ胸ニモ蓮華有男ノ胸ノ蓮華ハ八夜ツホミテ花カサク。又モツホミテ花カサク。女人ノ胸ノ蓮華ハ八夜ツホミテ花サカス。又ツホミテ花サカス。ナニノ女人タスカラス。ナニノ女人タスカラス。

(BUKKYŌ DAIGAKU MINKAN NENBUTSU KENKYŪKAI 1966: 567–568)

Both men and women have a lotus within their chests. In the case of men, after eight nights, the lotus bud in their chests blooms. Then, it releases another bud, which eventually blossoms into a flower. In women, the lotus in their chests also releases a bud but fails to blossom after eight nights. It then releases another bud, yet again without developing a flower. Why could a woman be saved? Why could a woman be saved?

The concept of buddha-nature being expressed in this manner finds resonance in the widely-read and often-copied prose narratives (*otogi zōshi* 御伽草子). Within this literary genre, menstrual blood is frequently likened to tears shed by bodily worms. One example can be observed in the work *Fuji no sōshi* 富士之草紙 [The Story of Mount Fuji] (dated 1800):

女の胸にハ三寸内に血の池有是に蓮華三ぼん有さかさまにうひたり。女ハ瞋恚をなす時ハかうじや虫のなく泪つもりて月に一度の月水と成されハ女人ハ一年に八十四日のさわり有かやうの罪の深き事をしりながらも善根にかたぶく事もなくして女ハマよいふかくさとり少き事ふ便也。

(AMANO 1976: 65)

In the chest, every woman carries the Bloody Pond of the size of three *sun* [circa 9.09 cm], within which three lotuses float with their roots pointing upwards. When a woman experiences anger, tears shed by the worms of bad karma accumulate, and once a month, menstrual blood is produced from them. For eighty-four days a year, the woman remains impure because of it. Even though she is aware of the burden on sins she carries, she has no inclination for good deeds. A woman is profoundly lost in ignorance. Rarely does she attain enlightenment, which makes her truly worthy of pity!

Another work of the genre titled *Tokiwa monogatari* 常盤物語 [The Tale of Tokiwa], with the oldest extant copy dating back to 1625, addresses the issue of the origin of menstruation during a discussion between Tokiwa Gozen and the monk Tōkōbō from Kurama Temple. The monk's explanation aimed to

convince the heroine why women should not be allowed to enter sacred places is below:

おとこのむねの、れんげは、八ようと申て、あしたにひらき、夕べにしほむ、ぬしがものを、ふくすれば、かうしやのむしか、えてふくして、なんもくせもなし、[...]おとこは、ほとけに、はやくなり
又女人のむねの、れんげは、七ようとて、あさゆふ、ひらく事もなし、物をふくすれども、かうしやのむしは、ふくせず、かなしみのあまりに、とりあひ、つかみあひけるほとに、ちのなみだを、なかすにより、月に一との、さはりとて、

(YOKOYAMA 1964: 468–469)

The lotus flower in a man’s chest has eight petals. It blooms in the morning and withers in the evening. When its carrier consumes food, worms of karma feed on it, hence [the man] is free of faults. He quickly attains the state of buddha. [...] On the other hand, the lotus in a woman’s chest has seven petals. It does not bloom in the morning or in the evening. Even when [a woman] eats, worms of karma do not feed on [her food]. Out of despair, they fight over the food and tear it from each other, and as the fight intensifies, they shed bloody tears. As a result, impurity arises once a month.

As the above example indicates, the monk recognised differences in the predispositions for attaining a state of buddhahood between men and women based on the lotuses they carry (a woman’s lotus having seven petals and never blooming). In the context of this discussion, it is relevant to note that in one of the literary works, drawing inspiration from Buddhist teachings, namely in *Gosuiden* (the protagonist’s name), from Yamamoto Kakutayū’s (dated 1700) repertoire, the lotus throne developed in the human heart during the late stages of fetal development (in the eighth month), with no differentiation based on gender – the lotus always had eight petals (SAKAGUCHI 2020: 454).

From the above review of sources, two predominant perspectives come to light. Firstly, within Buddhist texts, particularly in sutra commentaries, menstrual blood was symbolically perceived as the tears shed by buddhas and bodhisattvas who were envisioned to be seated on a lotus throne. Initially, this interpretation possessed somewhat esoteric qualities and was primarily found in manuscripts with a limited readership. However, with the dissemination of printed brochures from Shōsen Temple, this teaching gradually reached a wider audience. Secondly, an alternative line of interpretation emerged, dating back to the 14th century as recorded in the *Shintōshū*, which later found its way into various narratives. This perspective portrayed menstrual blood as tears shed by worms. These tears, whether attributed to worms or enlightened beings, were believed to be a consequence of certain imperfections in the lotus throne within

a woman's chest, such as an inverted position, having seven petals, and an inability to bloom. In my opinion, these characteristics symbolically alluded to the imperfection of a woman's buddha-nature and were meant to indicate of her inability to realise her full potential in attaining the state of buddhahood.

Building upon the previous discussions, it raises the question of whether this inner lotus throne could be improved. In this regard, the text “*Ketsubon-kyō*” *dangi shi* (dated 1599) presents a noteworthy perspective:

男ノ事ハ勿論女房モ法花ヲ信仰シ法ケト人法ノ事ニテ有ル弥陀ノ
名号ヲ唱ハ、心中ノ蓮華カ上ニ向キ反成男子シテ胸中ノ仏菩薩顕現シテ成
仏スト者也

一反成男子ヲ女ノ胸中ノ蓮ケカ上ニ向テ反成男子ト云フ是レハ愚痴者智慧
ノ心口又タハ煩惱即菩提ノ心トク

(KŌDATE and MAKINO 2000: 22)

There is no need to mention a man. However, when a woman who believes in the flower of the law (*hokke*), when she recites the invocation to Amitābha, which is [based on] a doctrine different from the flower of the law and [has been preached] for individuals with different predispositions, the lotus flower in her heart turns upwards, and she transforms into a man. Buddhas and bodhisattvas residing within her chest manifest their presence, and she attains a state of buddhahood.

Transformation into a man (*henjō nanshi*) is a change that occurs when the lotus flower in a woman's chest turns upwards. It signifies that ignorance is transformed into wisdom, and the state of delusion turns into enlightenment.

The above passage reflects the syncretism of Buddhist doctrines. Both faith in the *Lotus Sutra* and Pure Land Buddhism had the ability to instantaneously transform a woman into a man, as symbolised by the reversal of the inner lotus. Such sudden transformations into men serve as clear references to the parable of the dragon king's daughter, who offered a miraculous pearl containing three thousand worlds to the Buddha, and he accepted it immediately. She then turned to Śāriputra, seeking confirmation of the instantaneous exchange. Subsequently, she underwent a rapid transformation into a man (*henjō nanshi* 変成男子), seated herself on a lotus flower, and exhibited thirty-two signs of enlightenment on her body.

Practical expressions

This concept of the lotus throne in relation to menstrual bleeding found practical expressions. Buddhist and Shintō priests crafted special talismans for women as a means of neutralising impurity. These talismans often took the form of

pocket-sized versions of the *Bloody Pond Sutra* or short passages from the sutra, intended as protective charms. Some sources suggest that women were advised to carry these talismans close to their chests, a significant choice as the chest symbolically corresponds to the location of the lotus throne.

Fig. 2. Pocket-sized *Bloody Pond Sutra* intended as a talisman for women to be carried on their bodies.
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Shōyo Ganteki in the *Ketsubon-kyō waga* 血盆經和解 [Explanation of the “Bloody Pond Sutra” in Japanese] (dated 1713) justified the utility of talismans for women and specified the way, they should be carried:

故ニ公家武家社家等ニ居住ノ女人ハ其家ノ棟ヲ出テ別家ニ籠リ七日ノ間堅ク穢汚ヲ忌果シテ常ノ住居ニ帰ル是レ他人ヲ穢サジガ為メナリ其ノ外中下ノ女人ニ於テハ別火ノモノイミ成リ難キ故ニ [...] 此等ノ人々ハ今血盆經不浄除守ヲ頸ニカケ懷ニ持テ浄心ナラシメバ月ノ障リ其ノ外諸ノ汚穢不浄等悉ク免ルナリ又或ハ神社等ノ参詣ノミニ不_レ限世人ニ交テモ茶菴菅袖ノ振合ニモ他人ヲ汚サジガ為メナリ

(KŌDATE 2024: 95–96)

[...] Hence, women from aristocratic, samurai, and priestly families would, for seven days, seclude themselves in a separate hut (*bekka*) not connected by a roof to the main dwelling. The taboo concerning blood is strictly observed, and after this period, women return to their usual place of residence. They do this in order not to transfer impurity to others. Women of middle or lower status find it difficult to adhere to the command of using separate fire (*bekka*). [...] If these individuals carry with faith the *Bloody Pond Sutra* discussed here, either around their necks or placed in chest pockets (*futokoro*) as a talisman against impurity (*fujōyoke*), they

will be protected from monthly impurity, as well as from all other stains and impurities. This extends not only to temple visits. This [talisman] is used to avoid transferring pollution to laypeople with whom they come into contact, or whom they meet while sharing tobacco or tea.

As demonstrated by the above source, talismans worn in proximity to the chest, where the lotus throne was traditionally believed to be located, held the power to safeguard not only impurity-afflicted women but also individuals who might come into contact with impurity through fire. This method of protection proved particularly beneficial for women from middle and lower social classes, who lacked the means to observe seclusion during their menstrual impurity periods.

Similar mention can be found in the *Rue no daiji* 留穢之大事 [Secret Method for Halting Impurity], passed down as *kirigami* (i.e. records on a scrap of paper), and obtained in 1824 by Yūten 宥天, a Zen monk. This document offers detailed instructions to priests on crafting and application of talismans designed for women, particularly for specific occasions such as participation in Buddhist ceremonies. According to this method, a woman was to wear a specially prepared talisman around her neck for as many days as she wished to delay menstrual bleeding.

雖_レ然_リト穢血少_ニテモ出_ル則_キハ忽_チ受_レク穢_ヲ故_ニ疾_ク掛_ク左_ノ守_ヲ而可_レ趣_ニク神前或_ハ道場_ニ了_テ而取_ニリ戻_シ其_ノ守_ヲ

(SŌTŌSHŪ JINKENYŌGO SUISHIN HONBU 1985: 134)

If a woman was to experience even a small amount of impure blood, she would immediately be considered impure overall. In this case, she should wear this talisman around her neck before approaching sacred places or attending Buddhist places of practices (*dōjō*). Afterwards, she should remove the talisman from her neck and return it.

One noteworthy example comes from the *Tsūzoku bukkyō hyakka zensho* 通俗仏教百科全書 [General Encyclopedia of Buddhism] published in 1891, aimed at lay practitioners of Pure Land School. Despite challenging the very idea of wearing talismans and suggesting that protection can be secured simply by calling out the name of Buddha Amitābha, it explicitly states that talismans – even metaphorical ones – were intended to be worn on the chest, where the inner lotus is believed to be situated:

問ふ、其守は女人は何の所に持て居るや
答ふ、女人の胸の蓮華に授かりてあり
問ふ、其守如何
答ふ、南無阿弥陀仏なり

(NAGAOKA 1891: 230)

Question: Where should a woman wear such a talisman?

Answer: It is appropriate for a woman to wear it on the lotus in her chest (*mune no rengo*).

Question: What kind of talisman is it?

Answer: [It says] “I pay homage to Buddha Amitābha.” (*Namu Amida butsu*)

In conclusion, this exploration of the lotus throne concept in the context of menstrual impurity within Japanese Buddhism highlights its profound role as a symbol that conveyed perceived imperfections in women’s buddha-nature. The deficiencies associated with the lotus throne in women served as a vehicle for expressing the obstacles women encountered in their pursuit of complete spiritual realisation. It is evident that the development of this tradition was significantly influenced by the reception and interpretation of the *Bloody Pond Sutra*.

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