

A True “Healing” in Amida’s Compassionate Light: The Cure for Incurable Diseases in the *Nirvana Sutra* and the *Zenkōji Engi*

Inoue Takami

Introduction

Shinran’s use of metaphors concerning medicine and healing, which Michael Conway has analyzed clearly in his paper,¹ is consistent with those of Śākyamuni Buddha’s and those in the Mahāyāna sutras. Basically, fantastic medicines, various kinds of magical therapies and miraculous cures are adopted in Buddhist discourses as metaphors or parables, and the performance of actual therapeutic practices have been considered worldly businesses since the Buddha’s days. In the synopsis of his extensive study on *Buddhism and Healing*, Paul Demiéville wrote, quoting a passage from a Buddhist text:

Medicine [then] appears as a sort of reduced image of religious therapeutics, applicable to the physical domain alone, or as religion on a human scale: “The worldly physician knows not the radical remedies, those which heal birth, old age, sickness and death... He only tends to the four corporeal elements whereas the Buddha, the supreme physician, tends to the six elements and the eighteen planes (*dhātu*), healing the defilements (*kleśa*), making an end to all suffering and delivering from birth and death forever...”²

“Illness” is also used metaphorically as a “skillful means” (*upāya* 方便)

1 Conway 2016.

2 Demiéville 1985, p. 2

in order to make suffering sentient beings realize their karmically-conditioned existences, with the “three poisons” (greed 貪, anger 瞋, ignorance 痴) being the fundamental cause of their affliction.

Using analogies between physical and spiritual healing is a very effective means in preaching, especially to lay audiences who, more often than not, go through all kinds of hardships in their lives. For example, Śākya-muni Buddha and Jīvaka (Jp. Giba 耆婆), the attendant doctor of the early Sangha, are both called “king of physicians (Skt. *Vaidyārāja* 医王)” in many Buddhist narratives, and by contrasting their powers and abilities in their “healing practices,” the significance of the Buddha’s teaching in the spiritual domain is greatly emphasized.

In the following presentation, I would like to introduce two such narratives that have played important roles in the elucidation and dissemination of Pure Land soteriology in Japan. The first is the miraculous cure of Ajātaśatru (Jp. Ajase 阿闍世) by the Buddha’s “Moon-Love Samādhi” (Gatsuai Sanmai 月愛三昧) in the *Nirvana Sutra* (*Daihatsu nehanyō* 大般涅槃經).



Figure 1. Giba 耆婆 and Ajase ō 阿闍世王



Figure 2. Gakkai chōja 月蓋長者³

槃經), which is quoted extensively and significantly in the Chapter on Faith (*shin* 信) in Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō* (教行信証), and the second is the story of the awakening of faith in Somachattrā (Gakkai, or Gatsugai 月蓋), a wealthy but faithless man in Vaiśālī, in the introductory part of the popular origin story *Zenkōji engi* (善光寺縁起), which was widely used in Jōdo Shinshū sermons during the Edo period.

In analyzing these stories, I will focus on the common narrative strat-

3 The Figures 1 and 2 are details of *nehanzu* (涅槃図, the pictures of the Buddha's Nirvana scene) from Takebayashi 2011, p. 107, figure 9 (the possession of Shōnenji 称念寺 in Yamaguchi prefecture) and p. 95, figure 1 (the possession of Gangōji Institute for Research of Cultural Property 元興寺文化財研究所, Nara prefecture).

egies found in them such as the following:

1. In both stories, the great physician Jīvaka plays a supporting role, leading the suffering protagonists to the Buddha and his teaching.
2. The “moon” (月, Skt. *candra*, or *soma*), and its derivatives, “moonlight” (月光, Skt. *candra-prabhā*) and “moonstone” (月愛珠, Skt. *candra-kānta-maṇi*), are used symbolically as the ultimate source of the power of “soothing, cooling, purifying, and healing.”
3. Fatal illness is used metaphorically as a symptom of the “three poisons,” (Skt. *triviṣa*, Jp. *sandoku bonnō* 三毒煩惱), and its cure, the awakening of faith, is induced not by any human agency but by the power of the Buddha, symbolized by his light of compassion.
4. Marvelous therapeutic motifs, which are adapted from well-known literature, are used skillfully and effectively. However, it is quite apparent for the audience that the gist of the story is the awakening of faith in a faithless person (= “faith without root” ; Skt. *amūlikā śraddhā*, Jp. *mukonshin* 無根信), and not the cure of physical symptoms.
5. In the case of the story of Gakkai in the *Zenkōji engi*, his daughter Nyozehime (如是姫), who was miraculously cured by Amida’s light, symbolizes the faith awakened in human beings by the power of the Buddha.

Now, I would like to take a closer look at the first case, Ajātaśatru’s miraculous cure in the *Nirvana Sutra*.

I. Ajase’s Case

For Shinran, Ajase-ō, the king of the Magadha empire, was a paradigmatic model of an “evil person (*akunin* 惡人) living in the age of the Final Dharma (*mappō* 末法),” who could only be saved by the power of the Buddha (*tariki* 他力), and his case is introduced in the latter half of the Chapter on Faith in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, the section usually called “Beings who are difficult to

cure” (*nanji no ki* 難治の機). The citation there, from the *Nirvana Sutra*,⁴ is the longest single scriptural quote in the entire *Kyōgyōshinshō*. It begins as follows:

O Kāśyapa, there are three classes of people whose disease is difficult to cure:

1. those who slander the Mahāyāna,
2. those who commit the five grave offences, and
3. the *icchāntika* (not endowed with faith).

These three groups of patients are the hardest in the world to cure. They are not amenable to the treatment given by the śrāvaka (hearer), pratyekabuddha (those who gain Enlightenment by reflecting on the doctrine of causation), or bodhisattvas. O good men! It is like the case of a man who is affected by an incurable disease. [He may be cured, however,] if the nursing is properly carried on and the physician knows what medicine to give. If otherwise, such a patient cannot be cured and his fate is decided. O good men! The three patients just mentioned are such cases. Let them listen to what the Buddha or bodhisattva gives them and, having taken this hearing-cure, let them be awakened to the incomparably perfect Supreme Enlightenment. As long as they are left to the care of the śrāvaka, the pratyekabuddha, or the bodhisattva, who may or may not teach the patients in the Dharma, they have no chance⁵ for awakening to the incomparably perfect Supreme Enlightenment.

From this, the narrative makes it clear that the therapeutic, medicinal language used in the sutra is allegorical, and the point it tries to convey is the awakening of faith in “evil persons” by the power of the Buddha. In this context, Ajase is introduced as an infamous historical “evil figure,” who underwent such a transformation in the presence of the Buddha.

4 *Daihatsu nehangyō* 大般涅槃經 T0374.12.0431b24- c02, 0474a27- b07 (Dharma-kṣema’s 曇無讖 translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*).

5 T2646.83.0609c14-c23. English translation from D. T. Suzuki, 2012, p. 161. See also Hirota, et al. 1997, p. 125.

[Again, in *The Nirvāṇa Sūtra*.] At that time, Ajātaśatru was the king of Rājagṛha. His character was debased, and he liked bloodshedding. He was addicted to the four evils of mouth and also to deeds of greed, anger and folly. His mind was of a fiery disposition.... Enticed by his kinsmen he indulged in the worldly pleasures of the five senses, and went so far as to murder his innocent father. This, however, later led him to deep repentance.... Because of this mental disturbance, his whole body began to be covered with sores. Their offensive odor was repelling and unapproachable. He reflected within himself: “This present body of mine is already indicative of the coming fruition which may take place in hell, which cannot be very far away.

Vaidehī, the queen-mother, applied various salves to the patient’s skin. But this worsened the sores, which showed no signs of improvement. The king said to his mother: “These festering wounds come from the mind. The physical elements have nothing to do with it. People may say they are curable, but that is not true.”⁶

At this point, six ministers in Ajase’s court referred him to six heterodox masters (*rokushi gedō* 六師外道) with no avail, and it was the great physician Giba (Jīvaka) who recognized unmistakably the significance of Ajase’s self-awareness, deep remorse and contrition, and so guided him to see the Buddha. According to the sutra, the light emitted by Śākyamuni Buddha in the “Moon-Love Samādhi” healed the sores on Ajase’s body instantly, and made him awaken to faith in the Buddha and the Dharma.

Ajase’s story in the *Daihatsu nehangyō* has a complex and complicated narrative history, which unfortunately cannot be dealt with here in this short presentation. For a detailed philological analysis of this story, please refer to Michael Radich’s recent study, *How Ajātaśatru Was Reformed: The Domestication of “Ajase” and Stories in Buddhist History* (Tokyo: The International Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2011). One thing that I would

⁶ T2646.83.0609c23-0610a04. D. T. Suzuki 2012, pp. 161-2. Hirota, et al. 1997, pp. 125-6.

like to note here is Radich's perceptive comment that the motif of Ajase's sores, the physical symptom, is unique in the Mahāyāna *Daihatsu nehangyō* version, which probably derived from earlier Jātaka sources so as to add a dramatic effect on Ajase's conversion.⁷ Thus, the therapeutic allegory is one of the "skillful means" of this Mahāyāna sutra to highlight the power of the Buddha's working in the transformation of a human being.

Another significant *hōben* in the story of Ajase in the *Daihatsu nehangyō* is the distinct naming of the "Moon-Love Samādhi," in which the Buddha healed Ajase's sores. As Radich notes, "this *samādhi* is otherwise almost unknown." The earlier Pāli sources such as the *Sāmaññaphala sutta* (*Shamongakyō* 沙門果經) include references to the beautiful moonlit night when Ajase visited the Buddha, and it may have been the inspiration for its naming. In the *Daihatsu nehangyō*, however, the Chinese term "月愛 Moon Love" seems to have been derived directly from the Sanskrit word *candra-kānta-maṇi* (Ch. 月愛珠),⁸ the mystical gemstone with its cooling, soothing, and healing properties. The light emitted from this "moonstone" is used symbolically in early Mahāyāna and tantric sutras as the "purifying and cooling light of the Dharma *dhātu*" (法界清涼光)⁹ that is "capable of removing greed and cravings" (能除渴乏)¹⁰ in human beings. The adoption of this mystical "moonstone" image was a "skillful means" to approach lay audiences who were familiar with folk beliefs in the "moonstone" in India and Gandhāra. The name *candra-kānta samādhi* "Moon-stone/Moon-love Samādhi" fits nicely into the context of Ajase's cure by the Buddha's "healing" power in the *Daihatsu nehangyō*.

Thus, the story of Ajase's miraculous healing is a religious parable filled with powerful metaphors that conveys the central message of the

7 Radich 2011, pp. 35–6.

8 Concerning *candra-kānta-maṇi*, see Padmarajiah 1963, p. 165; Singh 1999, p. 2805. See also Akizuki 1976, pp. 3–13.

9 *Daihōkōbutsu kegongyō* 大方廣佛華嚴經 (*Mahā-vaipulya-buddha-avatamsaka Sūtra*), T0293.10.0785c07. "爲月愛珠，放遍法界清涼光故。"

10 *Kokūzōbosatsu shinjūkyō* 虛空藏菩薩神呪經 (*Ākāśagarbha-bodhisattva-dhāraṇī Sūtra*), T0406.13.0657a23. "能除渴乏，如月愛珠。"

transformation of “evil persons” by the power of the Buddha. Shinran’s extensive quotes from the *Daihatsu nehangyō* and his commentary make this point unmistakably clear.

Next, I would like to examine the case of Gakkai’s transformation in the *Zenkōji engi*.

II. Gakkai’s Case

The prototype of Gakkai’s story in Japanese literature can be found in the *Zenkōji engi* (Ōei 永 edition [c.1394-1428] published in the *Zoku gunsho ruijū* 続群書類従), but its basic storyline had already been introduced in the *Jinnō shōtōki* 神皇正統記 (c.1339), *Heike monogatari* 平家物語 and *Genpei seisuiiki* 源平盛衰記, and hence the story of Gakkai seems to have been quite well known by the 14th century. During the Muromachi period (1392-1573), it was developed into pictorial narratives such as the *Zenkōji nyorai eden* 善光寺如来絵伝, and also the *Dangibon* 談義本 (preaching textbooks) of Jōdo Shinshū such as the *Zenkōji nyorai hongai* 善光寺如来本懷¹¹. The use of Gakkai’s story itself as a parable in Jōdo Shinshū sermons seems to have begun with Zonkaku 存覚 (1290-1373) in his *Jimyōshō* 持名抄 (1324) and *Kenmyōshō* 顯名抄¹² (1337).

The common canonical source of all these versions of the narrative on Gakkai is the *Shō kanzeonbosatsu shōfukudokugai daraniju kyō* 請觀世音菩薩消伏毒害陀羅尼呪經 (*Shōkannongyō* 請觀音經, *SKG*)¹³, one of the earliest esoteric (tantric) sutras which was translated into Chinese in 419, and quoted in Dōshaku’s *Anrakushū* 安樂集¹⁴. The Ōei edition of the *Zenkōji engi* clearly states at the beginning that its Indian-origin section is based on the *SKG*, but actually it is modified quite a bit to suit its Pure Land motif. Among the many alterations, the most conspicuous adaptation is the crea-

11 Concerning the origin and the development of the *Zenkōji engi*, see Yoshiwara 1991, and Kurata 2013.

12 Tatsuguchi 2007.

13 T1043.20.0034b29-0035a05. Concerning *SKG*, see Ōtsuka 2008, and Kurata 2011.

14 T1958.47.0019a28-b06.

tion of Gakkai's daughter Nyozehime, whose fatal illness and its miraculous cure by the light radiated from the Amida triad is featured in the *engi* narrative. Now, let us take a look at its outline.

The story begins in Bisharikoku 毘舍離国 (Vaiśālī) in ancient India during Śākyamuni Buddha's lifetime. There was a very wealthy old man named Gakkai (Skt. Soma-chattra, "Canopy of the Moon" or "Covered Moon"), who was very miserly and without faith. Whenever the Buddha's disciples and even the Buddha himself came for alms, Gakkai refused to provide any offering, thinking it pointless. However, at one time, an extremely virulent epidemic swept the country, and this became the catalyst for his spiritual transformation.

Gakkai had an only daughter named Nyozehime, whom he had begotten at the age of 51. He tried all measures to protect his beloved daughter from the deadly disease, but she eventually caught it. He asked all the eminent doctors to treat her, but even the great physician Giba (Jivaka) could not save her. Finally, Gakkai was advised to see the Buddha and ask for his guidance. Repenting his former misdeeds, Gakkai went to see Śākyamuni Buddha, who told him to face the western direction and say the name of Amida Buddha earnestly. When Gakkai uttered the nenbutsu at home, Amida Buddha appeared above the western gate of his mansion, flanked by Bodhisattvas Kannon and Seishi, and the light emitted by the Amida triad cured not only Nyozehime, but all other patients, who had been suffering from the epidemic. Through this experience, faith was awakened in Gakkai and he became a devout follower and supporter of the sangha. He made a life image of the Amida triad from special gold called *Enbudagon* 閻浮檀金 (Skt. *Jambūnada-svarṇa*) for people to remember and worship. According to the *Zenkōji engi*, this Amida triad remained in India for 500 years and then, moved to Kudara (Paekche 百濟) and stayed there for 1200 years, and thence arrived in Japan in 552 and eventually was enshrined at Zenkōji in Shinano province (present-day Nagano Prefecture).

In the story of Gakkai, the incurable illness of his daughter Nyozehime,

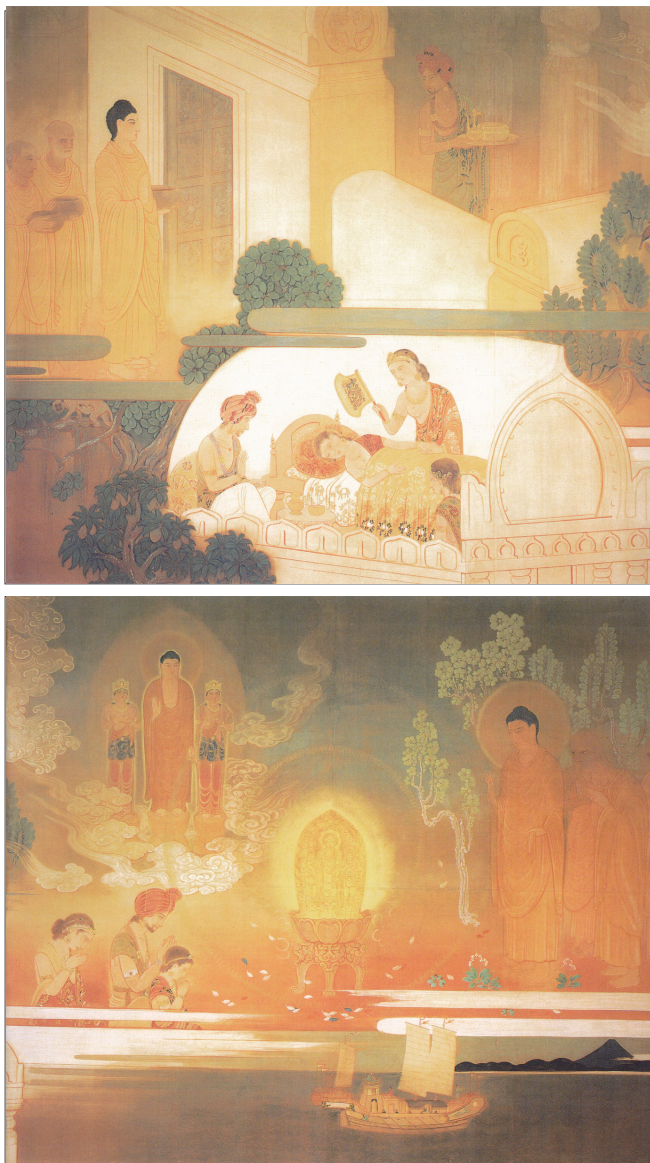


Figure 3. The Mural Paintings of the *Zenkōji engi* by Nōsu Kōsetsu,
inside the Unjōden, Zenkōji¹⁵

15 Nōsu 1987, figure 48: “Bukkyō denrai 仏教伝来” (1940, height 205 cm, width 477 cm). For older images based on the *Zenkōji engi*, see “Zenkōji nyorai engi e 善光寺如来縁起絵” (Kamakura period) in the Cultural Heritage Online site: <<http://bunka.nii.ac.jp/heritages/detail/213533>>

like the fatal karmic disease in Ajase's case, functions as a painful catalyst for Gakkai's transformation: a stingy, faithless old man was turned into a generous, devout patron of Buddhism. It is like "bits of rubble turned into gold," and what enabled this alchemical change is the "healing" light of Amida Buddha.

The cleverest device in the *Zenkōji engi* narrative is probably the creation of Gakkai's daughter who doesn't appear in the original "Epidemic in Vaiśālī" story in the *Shōkannongyō*.¹⁶ Her unusual name "Nyoze 如是" seems to have been derived from the following passage in the *Daichidoron* 大智度論, which is well known in the Japanese Pure Land tradition:

It is by virtue of faith that one is able to enter the great ocean of the Buddha's Dharma. It is by virtue of wisdom that one is able to cross over (佛法大海, 信為能入, 智為能度). The word "Nyoze" [at the beginning of sutras] represents this "faith" (如是者, 即是信也).¹⁷

Thus, "Nyoze"-hime in the *Zenkōji engi* is an avatar (anthropomorphosis) of "faith" awakened in human beings by the power of the Buddha. Her beautiful image, now standing in front of JR Nagano Station, facing the direction of Zenkōji Amida triad, testifies to the success of this symbolization.

Concluding Remarks

The healing of illness is a fundamental metaphor of Buddhism, as formulated in the Four Noble Truths; the "great king of physicians" realized the truth of Suffering (*duḥkha* 苦), the Cause of suffering (*samudaya* 集), the Cessation of suffering (*nirodha* 滅), and the Path (*mārga* 道) leading to that cessation. As we have seen in the stories of Ajase and Gakkai, the miracu-

16 According to Kurata and Kurata 2001, p. 575-6, the oldest text that refers to Gakkai's daughter "Nyoze" is the esoteric ritual manual *Shōkannongyō hō* 請觀音經法 in the collection of "Shōren-in monzeki yoshimizuzō shōgyō 青蓮院門跡吉水藏聖教." Its colophon reads: "Finished collation on the nineteenth day of the third month in the second year of Kōchō 弘長 (1262)."

17 T1509.25.0063a01-02.



Figure 4. The Bronze Statue of Nyoze-hime in front of JR Nagano Station¹⁸

lous cures of fatal diseases by the Buddha’s compassionate light are impressive parables (*hiyu* 譬喩) of the Pure Land tradition that conveys the same truths in more dramatic forms. In Shinran’s interpretation of Ajase’s case, the key to the religious understanding of the allegory is to see who Ajase really is. As Shinran quotes, the *Nirvana Sutra* itself makes it clear: “Ajātaśatru refers to all those who have yet to awaken the mind aspiring for supreme, perfect enlightenment (阿闍世者,即是一切未發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心者).”¹⁹ Gakkai and Nyoze-hime in the *Zenkōji engi* have played similar symbolic roles of transformation on the more familiar level, and popularized the soteriology of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism.

Abbreviations

T Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭, eds. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經, Taishō issaikyō kankōkai. All references to the Taishō edition of the Tripiṭaka will be marked by “T”, followed by the

¹⁸ This sculpture by Sasaki Taiju 佐々木大樹 (1889–1978) was positioned there in 1948. The photographs were taken by Inoue Hiroka on February 27, 2016.

¹⁹ Shinran, *Kyōgyōshinshō*, volume on Faith, T2646.83.0611c12–13; *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (Dharmakṣema’s translation) T0374.12.0480c14–15. English translation in Hirota, et al. 1997, p. 132.

sutra number, volume number, page number, column (a, b or c, standing for the top, middle and bottom column on the respective page) and line number.

References

- Akizuki Mizuhiko 秋月瑞彦. 1976. "Hikari wo hanatsu hōseki 光を放つ宝石 (Gemstones with Optical Effect) 2," in *Hōseki gakkai shi* 宝石学会誌 (*Journal of the Gemmological Society of Japan*), Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 3-13.
- Conway, Michael. 2016. "Medicinal Metaphors in a Soteriology of Transformation: Shinran's View of the Power of the Nenbutsu," in *Shinshū sōgō kenkyūsho kenkyū kiyō* 真宗総合研究所研究紀要 (*Annual Memoirs of the Otani University Shin Buddhist Comprehensive Research Institute*) 33, pp. 13-25.
- Demiéville, Paul. 1985. *Buddhism and Healing: Demiéville's Article "Byō 病" from Hōbōgirin*, translated by Mark Tatz. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Hirota, Dennis, et al. trans. 1997. *The Collected Works of Shinran*, Vol. 1. Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha.
- Kurata Haruo 倉田治夫. 2011. "Zenkōji sōken setsuwa to Shōkannongyō: Vaishārī chibyō setsuwa wo chūshin ni 善光寺創建説話と請観音経: ヴァイシャリー治病説話を中心に," in *Shinshū daigaku jinbunshakaikagaku kenkyū* 信州大学人文社会科学研究所 (*Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*) 5, pp. 62-78.
- . 2013. "Gakkai chōja setsuwa no tenkai: Shinano zenkōji shōshin nyorai onkoto wo chūshin ni 月蓋長者説話の展開: 『信濃国善光寺生身如来御事』を中心に," in *Shinshū daigaku jinbunshakaikagaku kenkyū* 7, pp. 55-73.
- Kurata Kunio 倉田邦雄 and Kurata Haruo. 2001. *Zenkōji engi shūsei* 善光寺縁起集成 I: *Kanbun hachinen hanpon* 寛文八年版本. Nagano: Ryūhō Shobō 龍鳳書房.
- Nōsu Kōsetsu 野生司香雪. 1987. *Nōsu Kōsetsu: butsuga no sekai* 野生司香雪: 仏画の世界, ed. Koike Masahiro 小池賢博, Shinano Mainichi Shinbunsha 信濃毎日新聞社.
- Ōtsuka Nobuo 大塚伸夫. 2008. "Shō kanzeonbosatsu shōfukudokugai daraniju kyō niokeru shōki mikkyō no tokuchō: Vaishārī chibyō setsuwa wo chūshin toshite 『請観世音菩薩消伏毒害陀羅尼呪経』における初期密教の特徴: ヴァイシャリー治病説話を中心として," in *Mikkyōgaku kenkyū* 40, pp. 33-59.
- Padmarajah, Y. J. 1963. *A Comparative Study of the Jaina Theories of Reality and*

- Knowledge*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Radich, Michael 2011. *How Ajātaśatru Was Reformed: The Domestication of “Ajase” and Stories in Buddhist History*. Tokyo: The International Institute of Buddhist Studies.
- Singh, Nagendra Kr. 1999. *Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, vol. 22. New Delhi: Anmol Publications.
- Suzuki, Daisetz Teitarō, trans. 2012. *Shinran’s Kyōgyōshinshō: The Collected Passages Expounding the True Teaching, Living, Faith, and Realizing of the Pure Land*. Shinshū Ōtani-ha Higashi Honganji.
- Takebayashi Fumihiro 竹林史博. 2011. *Nehanzu monogatari 涅槃図物語*. Tokyo: Daihōrinkaku.
- Tatsuguchi Kyōko 龍口恭子. 2007. “Zonkaku *Kenmyōshō* ni okeru hiyu to setsuji 存覚『顕名抄』における譬喩と説示, *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* (Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies), vol. 56, no. 1, pp. 48–54.
- Yoshiwara Hiroto 吉原浩人. 1991. “‘Chūseiteki’ jisha engi no tenkai—*Zenkōjinyorai hongai wo chūshin ni*—〈中世的〉寺社縁起の展開—『善光寺如来本懐』を中心に—.” *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō* 国文学解釈と鑑賞, Vol. 56 No. 3, pp. 113–18.