

CHAPTER 11

KAMO NO CHŌMEI AND THE APPREHENSION OF IMPERMANENCE

1. Chōmei as Recluse

There appear to be two types of people who abandon worldly endeavors and undertake the life of a recluse. Persons of the first type possess a clear and firm resolve, dedicating all their efforts toward their goal. They are rigorous in their spiritual cultivation and discipline, and maintain an austerely critical attitude toward secular society, renouncing all entanglements in the world. This attitude represents the way of life of the ideal practitioner—one who has consciously determined and selected his course in reclusion. This type of practitioner frequently appears in late-Heian and Kamakura period collections of anecdotal biographies of virtuous monks and people who aspired for birth in Amida Buddha's Pure Land. Many of these figures were recluses or hermits, but they nevertheless demonstrated in action their extraordinary ardor and resolve. In reading their biographical sketches from the period, one cannot help but be moved by their impressive strength. At the same time, however, one may also sense that they lack a certain human quality.

The second type of practitioner is the person who, although seeking to lead the life of discipline and religious practice, is incapable of pursuing it in a thoroughgoing manner. Although such people adopt the same severely critical attitude toward society, they do not necessarily evince the spiritual strength necessary to renounce it completely. Rather, they lead an unhappy existence within actual life in society, experiencing

repeated failures and painful misfortunes. Before they know it, they are driven helplessly into a way of life they do not will, and are tossed about on the waves of adversity and wretchedness. They suddenly find themselves fleeing from the world, or turning their backs on society, and heading in the direction of reclusion. Such people somehow turn into hermits because they lack any alternative. In the lives of recluses who have been pressed by fate into such an existence, there seems to dwell a feeling of inexpressible sorrow. Such individuals recognize their own human weakness, and from this there emerges a resignation—a humble, unpretentious attitude. This type of practitioner manifests the attractiveness of a person possessed of human frailty.

Looking at the biography of Kamo no Chōmei 鴨長明 (1156?-1216), one finds that he closely fits the pattern of the second, “passive” type of recluse. His career was one in which, one after another, his human hopes and ambitions were disappointed. In the process by which his dreams evaporated, he came to see the transience and fragility of human endeavors, and his spiritual insight gradually matured, pervaded by a sense of sorrow. Thus, in pursuing his career in various directions, he moved little by little toward the life of a recluse.

Chōmei’s biography consists of repeated disappointments and reveals striking ineptness. While stumbling, however, he began to see from his experiences the very nature of human existence, and in his erratic life permeated with deeply felt sorrows, one may sense something familiar and approachable. To begin with, Chōmei was born as the second son of Kamo no Nagatsugu 鴨長継, the head priest of one of the most prominent Shinto shrines in Kyoto, the Shimogamo 下鴨 shrine. Thus, by rights he was to become a priest of the shrine, a position of some standing. As it turned out, however, this position was denied him. There were several opportunities for his advancement to the position, but each time it ended futilely. Here, the seeds of his later sorrows were sown.

In addition, at a relatively young age, he was adopted into the family of his paternal grandmother, where there happened to be a marriageable heiress to the house. He married this woman, and it even

appears that he had children by her. After a time, however, he separated from his wife and children and left the household. This was the beginning of his life of wandering. Apparently, he thus was also unsuccessful in heading a household.

Chōmei entertained ambitions of making his way as a poet, and he gained a considerable reputation in this field. He began to be included in poetry gatherings at the court and was appointed as a judge of poetry. He demonstrated a genius for this art, studying under Minamoto Shun'e 源俊恵 (b. 1113), a priest of Tōdaiji 東大寺 temple who was active in literary circles and who, together with Fujiwara Shunzei 藤原俊成 (1114-1204), was regarded as one of the foremost poets of the day. Here we find another pivotal point in Chōmei's early life, for Shun'e, unlike Shunzei, favored a reclusive way of life, and Chōmei was probably unconsciously influenced by this inclination.

2. The Continuing Life of Disappointments

Chōmei was actively engaged as a poet, serving as a judge of contests at the imperial court. Because of his low birth, however, his participation was restricted and he was unable to attend the most illustrious gatherings. Contemporary poet Fujiwara Teika 藤原定家 (1162-1241), the son of Shunzei, recorded in his diary, the *Meigetsuki* 明月記, that "Chōmei holds the fifth court rank but is of remarkably inferior birth." His humble origins were doubtlessly the source of chagrin on numerous occasions. Despite these humiliating experiences, his abilities as a poet prevented Chōmei from abandoning the path of poetry. His dilemma was that he possessed talent, but his circumstances denied him success at the center. On one occasion, he even went to the Kantō 関東 region seeking a position in the bakufu through a friend's recommendation, but nothing came of this effort, either.

In addition to poetry, Chōmei demonstrated talent in music, and many people held high expectations of him as a koto 琴 and biwa 琵琶 musician. In this also, however, his hopes failed to bear fruit. His low birth and lack of social backing again barred his path. At the same time,

there were those who recognized his ability. The Retired Emperor Gotoba 後鳥羽 (1180-1239) greatly admired his skill and tried to help him gain a position of employment. In the Shimogamo shrine complex (formally, the Kamo no Mioya 加茂御祖 shrine) there is a lower level shrine called the Tadasusha 河合社. When the office of head priest was open, Gotoba-in supported Chōmei for the post. Other parties obstructed the appointment, however, and Chōmei failed to gain the position.

Thus, from his youth to middle age, disappointments followed one after another. Gradually driven into difficult straits, in his feelings of defeat he redirected himself towards a life of sequestration. Rather than withdrawing from the world out of genuine resignation and farsightedness, he forced himself into reclusion out of his sense of bitter misfortune and lack of alternatives. In due course, Chōmei took up residence in Ōhara 大原, north of Kyoto, where he lived for awhile. Then he moved to Hino 日野, in present-day Fushimi 伏見 ward located in the southern part of Kyoto, and there built his ten-foot-square hut (*hōjō* 方丈). In comparison with his renowned contemporary Saigyō 西行 (1118-1190), the poet-monk who abandoned wife and child to live a life of wandering, we find that Chōmei failed to pursue a thoroughgoing life of homelessness.

In Chōmei's reclusion, one detects a distortion of motives, even perhaps an aspect of anger or rage. He had repeatedly been confronted with his own weakness in a series of failures, but at the same time he sought to maintain and nurture his own talents, and in his choice of the life of a recluse, we can sense the strength of his effort and determination. What emerged for Chōmei through the experiences that I have described above—what came to pervade his thought and writings—was the Buddhist vision of impermanence. In a life weighted with defeat and misfortune, the feeling of the sorrow of human life gradually deepens, and one perceives the instability and unreliability of life in the world. This was the foundation of Chōmei's grasp of impermanence, which is vividly evoked in his *Hōjōki* 方丈記 (Record of the Ten-Foot-Square Hut). In the first part of this work, he eloquently describes various

events illustrating the impermanence that characterizes social life and institutions, the natural world, and individual human life. The passages depicting a number of natural disasters that befell the capital city are particularly vivid.

For example, he describes a huge conflagration that turned Kyoto into a scorched field overnight and the confusion of the inhabitants. Next, he recounts the disordered flight of citizens as a whirlwind destroyed part of the city. Then there occurred a famine and the spread of epidemics, and we see the terrible suffering and sorrow that these bring upon the lives of the people. There is also a description of a great earthquake. Furthermore, this era is when Taira no Kiyomori 平清盛 decided to move the capital to Fukuhara 福原, near present-day Kobe, and Chōmei describes how this plunged the people of Kyoto into a state of panic.

Apart from the moving of the capital, these events were all natural calamities that cast human society into disarray. The violent scenes of rise and fall in the world are graphically and precisely narrated in passages of exceptional beauty. In experiencing the agitation and fear of people amid disaster depicted by Chōmei, we sense how deeply he was moved and sorrowed by the changeability and vicissitudes of worldly life.

3. The Impermanence of Dwellings

In Chōmei's description of the world of transience presented in the first part of his *Hōjōki*, he repeatedly writes about the impermanence of human dwellings. The houses in which people reside are burned down in fires, collapsed by winds, and wrecked in earthquakes. Dwellings are fragile and undependable, and yet human beings cannot live for a day without such shelter. Dwellings inevitably undergo change with time, eventually falling into ruin. In taking up the process of alteration that dwellings undergo, Chōmei describes their rise and fall, speaking of the vicissitudes of fortune experienced by the families inhabiting them.

Later in life, Chōmei moved from Ōhara to Hino, building there a small hermitage in which he carried on his daily life. Even such a hut,

however, might be destroyed at any time, and Chōmei shows a remarkable concern over this characteristic of the impermanence of dwellings. This is a significant element in reading the *Hōjōki*. Chōmei's sense of impermanence is clearly expressed in the opening of his work: "The river flows ceaselessly, but the water is not the same. Bubbles floating in the still pools vanish and form, never remaining long. Human beings and their dwellings in the world are like this. All things change and move, never remaining as they are. The lives of people are like the flow of a river, which is never still even a moment. They are like spindrift forming and vanishing."

Chōmei first of all develops this quality of evanescence in relation to people and their residences. Impermanence itself is a fundamental problem of human existence. People are born, live for a time, and then die. This basic principle of impermanence is a truth disclosed in Buddhism, though it tends to be understood in a conceptual and abstract manner. A more concrete theme, however, is found in the dwellings that are the environment in which human beings live. Houses form the structures and spaces in which families conduct their daily activities. At the same time, they are also characterized by transience; this is Chōmei's insight. His assertion that "human beings and their dwellings in the world are also like this is not merely a metaphysical or conceptual restatement of a Buddhist sense of impermanence. Rather, it is a concrete perception of the evanescence of actual daily life which focuses on the place of this activity, the home.

The opening of the *Hōjōki* continues:

If there are people who die in the morning, there are also those who are born in the evening. Human life and death may be seen to be like bubbles drifting on the stream. People being born and dying do not know themselves where they are going. This world is but a temporary shelter that we occupy for a time; why should people afflict themselves with such concern over it? There are things that please the eye, but what do they finally amount to? Ultimately, it is merely a question of which

will fall into oblivion first—the living person or his or her home. They are like the morning glory and the dew on the blossom; it matters little which will survive longer in the heat of the day.

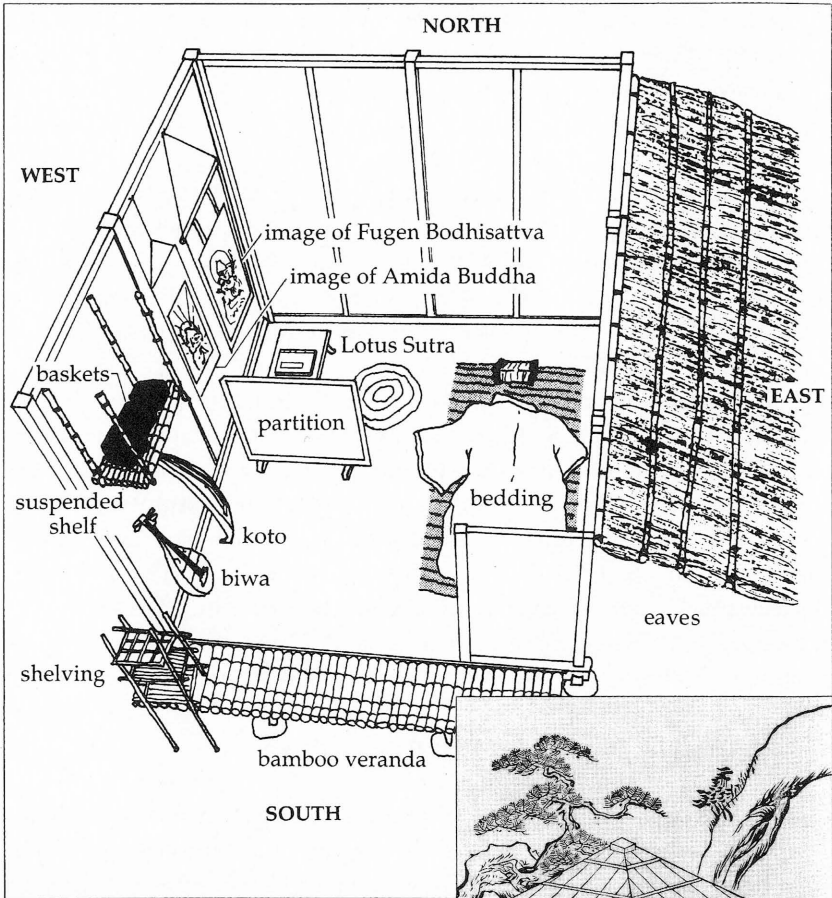
In this passage also, we find the problem of human beings and their dwellings taken up in relation to impermanence. For Chōmei, the impermanence of human life is conceived through a linking of these two elements—the person and the house in which daily life takes place. This is the special character of Chōmei's understanding of impermanence as expressed in the opening of the *Hōjōki*.

We should also note that in the sentence comparing human life to dew on a morning glory, Chōmei employs the term “impermanence” (*mujo* 無常) for the first time. It is often said that the *Hōjōki* speaks of the impermanence of human life, of nature, and of the fixtures of human society, but Chōmei actually uses the word “impermanence” only in this one passage in the *Hōjōki*, referring jointly to people and their houses. His usage here, then, is conscious and deliberate, and its effectiveness lies in his focus on the concrete problem of human beings and their dwellings, disclosing here the root of the actuality of impermanence.

4. Chōmei and the Sense of Impermanence

Chōmei's sense of impermanence, though Buddhist in its roots, is not necessarily identical in nature with the original Buddhist concept taught in India by Śākyamuni. The notions of impermanence held by Indians and by Chōmei in Japan include quite distinct elements. The term “impermanence” may be the same, but the worlds of feeling into which the concepts are incorporated, the realms of emotion it expresses, are different. This is an important point for understanding Japanese Buddhism.

Once, when traveling in India, I noticed that a variety of voices in prayer could be heard emerging from shrines and temples throughout the country. On frequent occasions, musical instruments were used to



Above: Sketch of Kamo no Chōmei's ten-foot-square hut, based on description in the *Hōjōki* in the collection of Daifukukōji temple, Kyoto. Courtesy of Japan Broadcast Publishing Co.

Right: Kamo no Chōmei at his hut. Drawing in the *Fusō in itsuden* (Legends about Japanese Recluses), by the priest Gensei (1623-68), Seikadō Bunko collection.



From Yamaori Tetsuo, "Kamo no Chōmei, the Recluse," *Chanoyu Quarterly* No.64 (1991).

accompany religious rituals. I realized that the voices and religious music there differed utterly from the religious music heard in Japanese temples and shrines. In Japan, the chant of religious texts and prayers evokes a somber air, while in India a cheerful and vibrant world unfolds from the temples. At first, I took little note of this difference, but gradually I came to sense that Buddhism, which was born in such an Indian environment, may have originally possessed this bright and open attitude.

On the basis of my experience, I reconsidered the concept of impermanence taught by Śākyamuni Buddha. The Buddha did, to be sure, teach that all things that have form will certainly perish, employing the term “impermanence” to express this nature. There is nothing in the world that will endure forever. All things without exception change in form and move toward destruction. Coolly and objectively observing the processes of origin and demise, arising and perishing, of actual things, the Buddha proclaimed that they will all pass away. This concrete recognition formed the basis of Śākyamuni’s concept of impermanence. When this idea was transmitted to Japan, however, the thought behind it—the hard, cool observation of things and the recognition of the evanescence at their roots—underwent a transformation, or was channeled into a different area of cultural life. As a concept, it was accepted intellectually, but in the realm of emotion and feeling, it shifted into a lyrical mode. The term “impermanence” came to embrace a sense of sorrow for that which declines and perishes.

The *Tale of the Heike* 平家物語, for example, opens with the words, “The bells of the Gion 祇園 monastery sound the impermanence of all things.” Here, we do not simply find an objective sense of impermanence in which it is recognized that all things inevitably perish. Rather, tears are shed at the fate of the Heike clan, which had risen to the heights of splendor and then plunged to decimation, and in those tears there is a deep and penetrating grief. This passage may be said to sing the solemn beauty of such a fall. There is a lyrical quality here tinged with sentimentality, but, on the whole, the atmosphere is filled with a dark and melancholy feeling. This opening passage of the *Tale of the Heike* chanted to the accompaniment of the Chikuzen biwa is deeply

impressive, with its somber and disconsolate melodic line; in tenor, it is as though the aesthetics of perishing were transferred into the world of sound. Here, there is a concord with the view of impermanence expressed at the opening of the *Hōjōki*.

When we take note of this, we can sense the immense distance between Indian and Japanese Buddhism, and begin to grasp one of the special characteristics of the latter. This richly lyrical sense of impermanence forms one of the chief modes of feeling in the world of Japanese art and literature. The deep note that resounds everywhere in traditional Japanese arts—for instance in *noh* drama, sermon literature, puppet drama, and kabuki 歌舞伎—is this sense of impermanence. Moreover, when we reflect on the totality of the world of traditional Japanese literature and art, we find that the lyricism of the *Hōjōki* occupies a position at the source or starting point of this pervasive view of impermanence.

In this sense, when we consider the history of Japanese Buddhism or Japanese religion, it is inadequate to focus exclusively on the understanding of certain charismatic leaders. If we seek to discern the nature of the widespread, popular Buddhism in Japan—the Buddhism of the ordinary person—then it is necessary to include in our field of vision the lyrical sense of impermanence that permeates the world of Chōmei's *Hōjōki*. His view of impermanence forms a sort of deep note that transfuses the Japanese popular consciousness.

5. The Character of Chōmei's Ten-Foot-Square Space

In the latter part of the *Hōjōki*, Chōmei reflects on his life up to that point and speaks of his daily activities in his hut at Hino, a hill in the southeastern part of Kyoto city. His record of his thoughts—a view of human life in its practical aspects—forms a deeply impressive document. Needless to say, his life was quiet and secluded, the life of a recluse. The Hino hermitage was indeed a tiny hut only ten feet square, with a narrow bamboo veranda along the southern side and eaves extending about three feet on the eastern side. The interior was roughly divided

into two areas: a north area and a south area. In the north area, on the western wall, hung images of Amida Buddha, the central object of worship in Pure Land Buddhism, and Fugen Bodhisattva, who was thought to protect those with faith in the *Lotus Sutra*. A copy of that sutra was enshrined in front of the images. This area formed what one might call a religious area. To the south of this religious area stood a partition, and on the other side of the partition Chōmei placed his musical instruments—a koto and a biwa. In the southwest corner he built suspended shelves on which he placed leather covered baskets (*kawago* 皮籠). These held collections of poetry, musical instruments, and important passages drawn from *Essentials for Birth in Amida's Pure Land* (*Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集), the work by the Tendai monk Genshin 源信 (942-1017) which had laid the foundation for Japanese Pure Land teaching. Further, at the western corner of the bamboo veranda he constructed shelving for the flowers and water to be placed as offerings before the buddha images.

The interior space of the hut was thus divided into two areas: a religious area on the north and an area for arts on the south. Along the eastern side of the space, bedding was laid so that it straddled both these areas. The thatched hut was not sturdily constructed, but was a kind of simple, prefabricated shelter put up of collapsible parts. If the hinges were removed, it could easily be taken apart and moved. One imagines that a strong wind could have swiftly flattened it.

Chōmei's way of life, then, was one in which the elements of religion and art, the worlds of faith and of beauty, did not stand in opposition but, while maintaining their distinctive characters, coexisted simultaneously. This fusion of diverse worlds lay at the foundation of his life as a recluse. He did not choose between religion and art as two alternatives, but sought to incorporate both of them into his daily activities. Surely we see here a very human ambition. Thus, Chōmei lived in his hut as a musician or a poet in monk's robes, or as a hermit who played music and composed poetry. He did not see himself as a professional monk, nor did he choose the life of a professional musician. He aspired to live a life in which both sides were harmonized somehow

into a unified existence.

It is interesting to note the tasteful divider—a single, low screen—that separated the northern area of the hut, which served as a space for religious activities, and the southern area, devoted to the arts. The two sides were distinguished, and yet Chōmei freely passed from one side to the other. In his spiritual life, also, he freely came and went between the two realms. The deeper part of the hut was reserved for Buddhism, the front for the arts: this made for a eminently skillful partitioning of space.

6. The Influence of Pure Land Buddhism

Let us now turn to the nature of Chōmei's Buddhist faith and practice. The religious area of his hut reflected the atmosphere of the contemporary Buddhist center on Mt. Hiei 比叡. In other words, the influence of the faith practiced on Mt. Hiei in Chōmei's day reached to the world of Chōmei's hut at Hino. Basically, the Buddhism of Mt. Hiei belongs to the Tendai school and is based on the *Lotus Sutra*. This scripture was diligently studied and interpreted, and detailed annotations and commentaries were applied to every word. The Buddhism of Mt. Hiei was, in other words, scholastic in orientation, while it also involved various forms of religious practices and disciplines based on the concepts taught in the *Lotus Sutra*. On Mt. Hiei in Chōmei's time, however, equal weight was also given to the study of the Pure Land teachings, and one of the central writings of the Tendai Pure Land tradition, Genshin's *Essentials for Birth*, occupied a place on the shelving in the southern area of Chōmei's hut. Further, among Genshin's disciples was Yoshishige Yasutane 慶滋保胤, who took the religious name Jakushin 寂心 and together with his master developed a nenbutsu movement on the mountain. Yasutane wrote an essay, "Record of My Pond and Hut" (*Chiteiki* 池亭記), which deeply influenced Chōmei. Indeed, Chōmei's own record of his hermitage may be seen as a refinement of Yasutane's original piece in Chinese (*kanbun*). Further, Yasutane compiled a collection of biographies of people who attained birth in Amida's Land, *Japanese Records of Attaining Birth in the Land of Bliss* (*Nihon ōjō gokuraku ki* 日本往生極樂

記). Influenced by this work, Chōmei assembled his own collection of tales of Pure Land practitioners, titled *Tales of Aspiration* (*Hosshinshū* 発心集).

The world of Tendai Pure Land Buddhist faith, which became widespread through the work of Genshin and his disciple Yasutane, formed an important and distinctive element of the Buddhism on Mt. Hiei, and strongly colored Chōmei's life in his ten-foot-square hut. This is clearly seen in the method in which he handled the religious and artistic space in his hermitage. In spite of this, however, Tendai Pure Land Buddhism differed from Chōmei's own conception of "the path." It is important to bear in mind this divergence between the character of the nenbutsu movement advanced cooperatively by Genshin and Yasutane and the world of faith as conceived by Chōmei.

Genshin and Yasutane's nenbutsu movement was a group movement. They formed a nenbutsu society called the Nenbutsu-Samadhi Fellowship of Twenty-five, in which twenty-five carefully selected members came together to form an association. By contrast, Chōmei built a thatched hut and carried on his life in reclusion as a hermit. He pursued his practice of the nenbutsu in solitude and passed his time in the world of poetry and music. In other words, he sought to put into practice a life of the nenbutsu incorporating the path of artistic refinement and aesthetic cultivation. Herein lies his originality and his importance in Japanese cultural history.

7. The Interaction of the Sacred and the Profane

In his *Hōjōki*, Chōmei carefully describes his daily life in the environment of his hut in Hino. He depicts with artistry the natural scenery around him in all its changes through the four seasons. On the south side of the hut was a bamboo trough through which water constantly ran. Nearby was a forest where he could freely gather firewood, so that he was never at a loss. In spring, the wisterias bloomed, and in the summer, the cuckoos sang. In autumn, the calls of the cicadas sounded everywhere. In winter, snow covered the landscape. Through these sea-

sons, he turned his thoughts to the Pure Land in the west, thinking of the afterlife and deeply reflecting on the sadness of this world. Thus he records: "When I do not feel like saying the nenbutsu or being diligent in reciting the sutras, I rest and am lazy. There is no one to prevent me from this, and no one who makes me ashamed."

At those times, Chōmei composed poetry and played the biwa in solitude. As he did so, gradually he would regain his composure. He writes: "My artistic skill is poor, but I do not seek to please the ears of others. I play alone, compose poetry alone, and thus bring peace to my own spirit." Chōmei declares that it is enough if his playing the biwa and koto, and his own poetry, please himself. It may be called a thoroughgoing individualism, or perhaps even selfishness. However, we must also recognize his freedom. For Chōmei as recluse or hermit, this freedom was probably the ideal. Perhaps one might say that he lacked a certain severity with regard to himself.

As we have seen, Chōmei was not completely committed to the nenbutsu alone, nor to sutra-chanting alone. But neither was he satisfied to merely play the biwa or compose poetry. It was not enough for him to immerse himself in the world of artistic interests. Both worlds—religion and art—were necessary, and he sought to live freely passing from one to the other; this was the life as a hermit that he pursued. Chōmei developed his own unique view of human life and surveyed his own life. After discussing the impermanence of human life and describing the realm of his daily life in his ten-foot-square hut, he turns his attention to his own life. He states that, looking back on his life, he sees that it can be divided into several stages.

The first stage is his childhood and early adulthood. During this period he succeeded to the house of his grandmother on his father's side, but this relation was soon severed, and he also parted from his family. The second stage centers on his building a hermitage at about the age of thirty. He describes it as small, and states that at this time he came to the realization that his own fortune in the world would not be prosperous. Then, in the spring after his fiftieth year, he abandoned his home and left the world of society. This is the third stage in his life. He took up

residence at Ōhara and remained there for five years. Of course he did not have his wife or children with him. From the outset he discarded any expectation of government appointment or stipend. He speaks again of his residence, stating that it was even smaller than before.

The fourth stage occurs in his sixties, when the "dew of life departs." It was at this time that he built his hut in the depths of Hino. With profound reflection, he withdrew to a thatched hut that was even smaller than the hermitage of his fifties. He states that he was aging and in his sixties, but actually it is thought that his move was made when he was fifty-four. He portrays himself as sixty, perhaps affecting old age out of some wish to quickly become an old man. By becoming an old man, it would become possible to go out into a freer world; his words reveal such feelings. At the beginning of this stage of his life marked by his turning "sixty," he experienced an unexpected encounter. At the foot of the mountain on which he had constructed his hermitage, a watchman had made a rough hut. Living there with him was a lad of about ten years of age who occasionally visited Chōmei. Chōmei speaks naturally of the friendship between himself, a sixty-year-old man now become a true recluse, and the boy of ten.

In these passages in which Chōmei reflects on the stages of his life, we see that from his thirties to his fifties he still retained an attachment to the world of society. During this period, he passed back and forth between the realm of worldly life and the realm of a hermit. Then, during his fifties and into his sixties, his life as a hermit gradually moved from a worldly sphere to the world of reclusion. His bonds with secular life were severed bit by bit. Nevertheless, his activities in the ways of poetry and music continued. Here, in his artistic endeavors, it may be said that he moved freely in a space between the sacred and the profane, the pure and the mundane.

This changes slightly in his sixties. Fundamentally, he does not abandon his activities in the paths of artistic activity and refinement, in poetry and music, but these activities gradually become purified. In this process, his depiction of his relation with the young lad is deeply impressive. The innocent association between the old man and the

young boy stands out as a time of great happiness. At the age of “sixty” in Chōmei’s text, he reaches a deep maturity. His sense of resignation has deepened. He has become able to look on the world of society and mundane life with greater distance. He seeks to go beyond the secular world. It may be said that the spirit of artistic endeavor has withered; this is the opposite face of his wish to become an old man.

8. Spiritual Maturity and the Concept of the Four Stages of Life

Since ancient times, the gods of Japan, when they have manifested themselves in the world, have often taken the form of old men or of children. For example, although it is said that the god Hachiman 八幡 does not reveal a form in the world, old texts state that a priest who had prayed for a revelation once saw him appear in the form of a child. It is also said that his usual form was that of an aged person. It appears that gods were thought to be close in nature to the aged. At the same time, they were thought of as similar to children. Old men and young boys were looked upon as human beings with a character close to that of divine existences. As existences apart from mundane life and approved by the gods, they had long been regarded as objects of faith.

To give another example, from the Heian period into the medieval period, various records of birth into Amida’s Pure Land (*ōjōden* 往生伝) and biographies of eminent monks (*kōsōden* 高僧伝) were compiled. The *Japanese Records of Attaining Birth in the Land of Bliss* (*Nihon ōjō gokuraku ki*) by Yoshishige Yasutane was one of these, and it includes the following story: There was once a monk who performed austerities in the mountains with great diligence. A young boy suddenly appeared and began performing various tasks to aid him, such as preparing meals, gathering firewood for the bath, cleaning, and so on. But when the monk grew lazy in his practice, the boy stopped coming. He had been closely watching the monk. Boys who have the ability to look into the hearts of people frequently appear in legends. They may be considered manifestations of gods or Buddha. Such incarnations frequently appear

in the world and observe the lives of human beings. It is important to note this religious tradition here, for Chōmei unconsciously inherited it and was influenced by it. We also find stories of boys in his *Tales of Aspiration (Hosshinshū)*.

Further, we should note that old men have traditionally been revered as persons closest to the gods. This faith in old men reached its apex with Zeami 世阿弥 in the fifteenth century. The *okina* 翁 (old man) is the representative of the elderly sage in Japan, and the person who has lived splendidly as an old man is thought to become a god or buddha after death. Further, through becoming an old man, the person becomes able to look back over his life and reflect on each of its stages. The basic lineaments of his childhood, or thirties, or fifties become apparent to him. Chōmei's late years were quite solitary, but I sense a movement toward a brightness. The process of spiritual maturation in these last years is depicted in his life in his ten-foot-square hut at Hino on turning "sixty," with the dew of life beginning to disappear. It is seen in particular in his encounter with the young lad.

In ancient India, already before the time of Śākyamuni, the ideal human life was described in terms of "four stages." Chōmei, as we have seen, showed a deep interest in the impermanence of human life and human dwellings, in what kind of home a person resided and how a person passed his life. These same concerns were given careful thought in India. The first of the four stages was that of the student. This is the time when a person studies under the guidance of a teacher. In devotion to study, one lives a life of continence and discipline. The second stage was that of householder. One marries and becomes the head of the house, attending to its affairs. These first two stages may be considered as focusing on the mundane.

The third stage was that of forest dweller. The householder, after establishing a home by marrying, raising children, and carrying on an occupation, temporarily leaves the house and pursues a free life of artistic activity and religious endeavor. Bearing a musical instrument, he makes a pilgrimage to sacred sites. Or going into the Himalayas, he practices religious contemplations. During this stage, he devotes himself to such a

life of freedom. In other words, the man who has borne the burdens of mundane life goes out to enjoy freedom through artistic and religious activity. In this way, he is freed from the bonds of secular life that have confined him up to then.

Finally, one out of a thousand, or perhaps ten thousand, of those who have passed through the stage of forest-dwelling go on to the fourth stage, that of the sage. This is called the stage of wandering. The person in this stage becomes an itinerant sage who wanders constantly. He completely severs his life together with others in society, leaves his family, and travels in solitude. An example of such a sage is Śākyamuni Buddha. Most human beings, however, after passing a time as forest dweller, return to normal life in society.

In this concept of human life in four stages, we see on the one hand the world of mundane life, and on the other the realm of the sacred. While passing from one to the other, a handful of the religious elite advance into the path of the sage, the final stage, but most people return to life in the mundane world. Most return, but by passing again between the sacred and the profane, they are able to touch the artistic and the religious realms. In this way, spiritual maturation and richness emerge. This was the expectation. In considering Chōmei, who is representative of the recluses of medieval Japan, one is reminded of the stage of the forest dweller in the Indian scheme of the four stages.

9. The Concept of *Ōjō* in *Hosshinshū*

Let us now turn to Chōmei's view of the phenomenon of *ōjō*, or birth into Amida's Pure Land (the Land of Bliss), and death. In Chōmei's day, the problem of how to attain birth in the Pure Land was of major concern. In other words, the matter of how one should come to life's end—the conditions of one's death—was extremely important. This was a concern that the medieval Japanese shared with their contemporaries in Europe. In Japan, however, the foundation of the medieval concept of death was laid in the preceding era. There had been, for example, the wandering Amidist holy man Kūya 空也 (903-972), who traveled from

village to village and town to town spreading the Pure Land teaching among the common people. And the previously mentioned Tendai monk Genshin had propagated the teaching among the nobility and intellectuals.

By the eleventh century, this diffusion of the Pure Land teaching started giving rise to the creation of Buddhist paintings of the Pure Land and of the various hells. These included depictions of Amida's coming to receive the dying person into the Pure Land (*raigō zu* 来迎図, see page 301). There are a variety of such depictions that are still extant. Large numbers of paintings of hell were also made. Such paintings played a large role in deepening the concept of death in the medieval period.

Chōmei was, of course, influenced by the medieval view of death. In his own way, he sought to deal with the question of how one should meet one's end in order to be received into the Pure Land, and he expressed his own solution. His answer, however, was unique, and it may be said that his view of the phenomenon of birth in the Pure Land occupies a special position in Japanese medieval thought.

In considering the problem of how a person should die, Chōmei had in mind a model whom he revered, Yoshishige Yasutane. Like Chōmei, he had been a member of the Kamo clan and was at first active as a court scholar. Due to his origins in the lower nobility, however, his political prospects were limited and he achieved no success. Because of this, and also because he was strongly influenced by Buddhist thought, he renounced secular life and, climbing Mt. Hiei, became a disciple of Genshin. Together with Genshin, he formed the group of nenbutsu practitioners called the Nenbutsu-Samadhi Fellowship of Twenty-five (*Nijūgo zanmaie* 二十五三昧会). The members of this fellowship gathered in the middle of each month to perform uninterrupted nenbutsu recitation together throughout the night and aspire for an auspicious death and birth into the Pure Land.

As mentioned previously, Yasutane's writings served as models for Chōmei. In addition to the essay "Record of My Pond and Hut" (*Chiteiki*), in which he treated the impermanence of the world, Yasutane composed the *Japanese Records of Attaining Birth in the Land of Bliss*, which records the lives of people who performed practices to attain birth

in the Pure Land, including many ordinary, unknown people. The work records in detail how they spent their final moments. The compilation as a whole may be considered a kind of encyclopedia of death, giving illustrations of how people die; that is, how they attain rebirth in their final moments. Influenced by Yasutane, Chōmei sought to compile his own such record. There were many kinds of practitioners—those who splendidly attained birth in the Pure Land at the end, and those whose final moments were accompanied by worldly attachments. Chōmei put together a collection of such biographies in his *Tales of Aspiration*. Through examining the figures depicted in Chōmei's tales, it is possible to grasp his ideal method of attaining birth in the Pure Land.

10. Attaining *Ōjō* by Self-immolation and Self-drowning

Awakening the aspiration for enlightenment (*hosshin* 発心) implies abandoning mundane life, performing practices, and seeking to approach the world of enlightenment. Chōmei's *Tales of Aspiration* is a collection of stories of people who had awakened such aspiration. One tale is entitled "The Attainment of Birth into the Land of Bliss through Fasting by a Monk Visiting Mt. Shosha 書写" (volume 3, tale 32).

Mt. Shosha is in present-day Himeji 姫路 city, and is included among the sacred sites devoted to Kannon Bodhisattva. It is called the western Mt. Hiei, and is well known as a place of religious practice. Once, a wandering monk whose chief form of practice was to chant the *Lotus Sutra* climbed this mountain. He said to the leading elder of the mountain: "The time of my death is approaching, and every day I recite the nenbutsu and aspire for birth in the Pure Land. I often hear stories of people who have attained birth through self-immolation, or through throwing their bodies into the sea or into rivers. However, I personally dislike such painful, conspicuous, and unusual forms of birth in the Pure Land. I want to attain it with as little suffering as possible. Thus, I want to enter a complete fast and attain birth peacefully." The monk further said that he did not want anyone to know of his intentions, but the elder allowed the story to slip out. Thus, people given to gossip gathered

about the monk, spreading rumors and venting criticism, thereby creating an unsettled atmosphere. Then, the monk disappeared. Disliking the fuss of a curious world, he left behind no indication of his whereabouts. When people searched for him, they found only his sacred texts and wretched clothing. They all realized that he had splendidly fulfilled his fast and achieved birth in the Pure Land.

As indicated by this story, attaining birth in the Pure Land by self-immolation, though rare, did in fact occur. The idea of making an offering to the Buddha by burning one's body and thus attaining birth in his Land of Bliss is taught in the *Lotus Sutra* as a type of practice. It was first performed in Japan by a monk named Ōshō 応照 at Mt. Nachi 那智 in Kumano 熊野. The site is still preserved today. Further, Taira no Koremori 平維盛 (1157-1184), a member of the Heike, is an example of someone who attained birth in the Pure Land by self-drowning. He sought to escape after defeat by the Minamoto, finally fleeing to Kumano, where he cast his body into the sea at Kumano Nada 熊野灘. Such deaths by drowning in rivers and seas frequently appear in the literature of the day.

To give one more example of such attempts at attaining birth in the Pure Land, there was the phenomenon of sea-crossing. This also took place at Kumano. It was thought that the land of Kannon Bodhisattva, Fudaraku 補陀落, lay across the sea, and with it as their goal, people set out in small boats. Anticipating death, they stocked their boats with a few days' provisions and put out to sea, gradually fading away. It was believed that, through such acts, they were reborn in the land of Kannon. It was precisely such a method of attaining birth in the Pure Land that the monk visiting Mt. Shosha disliked, preferring instead the quiet, inconspicuous way of fasting. This sentiment seems to well reflect Chōmei's own preference.

In reading the medieval collections of examples of the methods by which people sought to attain birth in the Pure Land, it appears that there were those who deliberately chose the most conspicuous and violent methods possible. Chōmei, however, chose differently. His inclusion of the "Monk Visiting Mt. Shosha" story is a reflection of his

belief that there must be a more humane means of attaining this goal.

11. *Ōjō* and the Life of Refinement

Tales of Aspiration also includes a story entitled “Attaining Birth into the Land of Bliss through Reclusion: Tōnomine Sōga Shōnin 多武峰僧賀上人” (volume 1, tale 5). Tōnomine is in present-day Nara prefecture. Sōga 僧賀 is a well-known figure. He first climbed Mt. Hiei and trained under the head abbot, Ryōgen 良源 (912-985). But he performed many strange acts and eventually descended the mountain. Among religious eccentrics, he is surely one of the most extreme examples in Japanese Buddhist history. While on Mt. Hiei, he performed the thousand-day practice, and he is also said to have eaten refuse with beggars. He bestowed precepts on an imperial consort, but also performed violent acts within the palace. He was an eccentric who certainly could not have served in the formal practice halls of Mt. Hiei. He left the mountain, wandered throughout the provinces, and finally performed practices at Tōnomine, where he lived as a recluse.

When nearing death, Sōga called his disciples and told them to bring a *go* board, on which he proceeded to play by himself. After finishing, he told them to bring a crown, which he donned to perform a dance called “butterfly.” When his disciples asked what he was doing, he answered: “When I was young, I wanted to play *go* and dance. But I was told that I wasn’t allowed to, and so I couldn’t. Those things have remained in my heart. If death were to come, the thoughts of wanting to play *go* and dance would become attachments and prevent me from attaining birth in the Pure Land. So I have finally played *go* and danced.” Chōmei relates this story and adds a comment: Sōga’s actions may appear to us as the actions of a crazed man. When we reflect, however, we see that he sought to end his delusional attachments. We should recognize this as exceedingly rare and venerable.

Ōjō 往生 is not to be attained with stiffness and solemnity, thinking only of enlightenment. One may lead a life of austerity and in the end attain the goal, but this is not all there is to attaining birth in the Pure

Land. If one wants to play *go* or dance, then, while doing so, one gradually meets one's end. While living out one's interests or demonstrating an attachment to the world of the arts, one can also little by little approach the world of birth into the Land of Bliss. Chōmei calls this method "birth in the Pure Land while leading a life of *suki* 数奇 or artistic cultivation." While playing the koto or the biwa, one can draw closer to the realm of birth, he concludes.

Suki refers to the path of artistic activity, of elegance and refinement. If, through such activities, one purifies the mind by totally devoting oneself to them, they hold significance for the attainment of birth in the Pure Land. What is to be avoided in life is the harboring of unfulfilled attachments that will linger on. While describing the story of a religious eccentric, Chōmei presents his own ideal of an aesthetic manner of birth in the Pure Land—the attainment of birth through artistic devotion.

There is an anecdote concerning Chōmei that resembles the story about Sōga. It is recorded in a work entitled *Bunkidan* 文机談, which dates from about fifty years after Chōmei's death. According to this, Chōmei's teacher in music, that is, the koto and biwa, was a man named Nakahara Ariyasu 中原有安. When Ariyasu died, Chōmei organized a gathering of music lovers and well-known musicians of the day as a memorial. It was a meeting exclusively for the performance of "secret music," or pieces that were not to be played before unrestricted audiences. At this meeting, he performed the secret piece, "Takuboku 啄木." However, he was criticized for this. Although his ability as a musician was recognized, he had not received official transmission of the secret music "Takuboku." In spite of this, he had performed the piece before others. This incident was later related to the Retired Emperor Gotoba, and Chōmei was summoned. Chōmei tried to defend himself: "I am by nature inclined toward music and poetry. My desire to play the secret piece was extremely pressing, and the thought was upon me day and night. In order to free myself of this desire, I invited people to the gathering and played the piece." However, Chōmei's explanation was not accepted, and eventually he entered on the path of reclusion.

Although there is some question as to the truth of this anecdote, Chōmei implies here that his desire to play the secret music would turn into an attachment that would prevent him from attaining birth in the Pure Land. The resemblance to the earlier story concerning Sōga is clear. Together, these two anecdotes serve to depict Chōmei's thoughts about attaining birth. Literature and the arts liberate one from depression; they free the spirit through beauty. The freeing of the spirit through deep aesthetic emotion may be seen as fundamentally one with the attainment of birth in the Pure Land. From early in his life, Chōmei held the conviction that they were not in contradiction.

12. The Way of Artistic Endeavor and the Path to Emancipation

Next, let us turn to a story titled "The Artistic Endeavor (*Suki*) of the Monk Eishū 永秀" (volume 6, tale 7), which relates how a monk attained birth in the Pure Land while devoting himself to art. Eishū lived in poverty, but he had an understanding of the flute. In other words, he was inclined toward the world of aesthetic refinement and poetic beauty. A distant relative of his named Yorikiyo 頼清 was the administrative head of the Iwashimizu Hachiman 石清水八幡 shrine, and on seeing Eishū's life of practice devoted to the flute, which the latter played morning, noon, and night, he offered him anything he wished. After a time, Eishū went to Yorikiyo and said that his wish was to play a flute made of bamboo brought from China. Yorikiyo happened to have a manor in Kyushu, from which missions to China departed, and he was able to order Chinese bamboo, which he delivered to Eishū.

Yorikiyo was all the more impressed by Eishū's way of life, and he began to send provisions and ordinary necessities almost daily. When he received these, Eishū shared them with the musicians of the Hachiman shrine, passing the days in performance with them. When the provisions were depleted, he played the flute alone. It is said that he became the foremost flutist in the country. Chōmei adds the comment: "How can such a spirit be the source of grave transgression?" That is, how can such

deep devotion to refinement and aesthetic sensibility as shown by Eishū be a transgression of the Buddhist path? The heart that loves beauty is free of sin; it is precisely such a spirit that is in accord with the resolution of one who has left worldly life. I have spoken of Chōmei's interest in an aesthetic attainment of *ōjō*, of birth into the Pure Land through artistic practice. Here, while describing the way of life of Eishū, Chōmei reveals his own thoughts on the attainment of birth in the Pure Land through the discipline of music and artistic sensibility.

Finally, there is the story entitled, "The Monk Hōnichī 宝日 Composed Poetry as His Religious Practice" (volume 6, tale 9). Hōnichī regularly composed poetry three times every day—morning, noon, and evening. He composed one poem at each of these times. Thus, he devoted himself to poetry just as one would perform a religious practice. Concerning this, Chōmei says: "Poetry is a way by which one can attain a thorough grasp of the way things are. It is a means by which to purify the mind and perceive the impermanence of the world. This is the working of poetry." In other words, poetry has a special power to lead a person toward aspiration for enlightenment.

Following this is a story concerning Genshin, who, as we have seen, spread the Pure Land teaching on Mt. Hiei, where he led a life devoted to the practice of the nenbutsu. His words are quoted, "Poetry is deceptive language." That is, it is no more than fallacious word-play. From this point of view, poetry is an obstruction to Buddhist practice, and Genshin admonishes against succumbing to its lure. This story is well known, but Chōmei continues: "One morning, Genshin noticed a boat out on the waves and, deeply impressed, unconsciously recalled the verse, 'To what can it be likened, the dawn. . . .' Thus he realized that the world of poetry cannot be lightly dismissed. On occasion, it can closely approach the realm taught in the Buddhist scriptures. Thus he said, 'The sacred teaching and poetry are one.'"

We cannot take up the question of the veracity of this story here, but it is important to note Chōmei's introduction of it into his *Tales of Aspiration*. He was profoundly in agreement with the way of thinking expressed in the statement attributed to Genshin. He comments in

conclusion:

We find here the spirit of artistic dedication (*suki*), in which a person ceases to delight in joining socially with others, or to sorrow at declining fortune. He is moved to deep compassion by the opening and scattering of blossoms, and his mind is made lucid whenever he thinks of the moon's rising and setting, so that he seeks above all to remain unstained by worldly defilements. Thus, the reality of arising-and-perishing naturally manifests itself to him, and attachments to fame and profit completely die away. This is indeed the gateway to freedom and emancipation.

Thus, a life of reclusion in devotion to art shares a common spirit with the Buddhist path. The cultivation of aesthetic sensibility is not merely a life of emotion, but enables one to grasp the nature of human life and the transience of nature. Through artistic practice, attachments and desires are washed away, and one is led to emancipation.

13. Seeing the Religious in Beauty

Concerning the character of Chōmei's concept of *ōjō*, we have considered his ideals of aesthetic cultivation and music as means of attaining birth into the Pure Land. This may be called an aesthetic attainment of birth, in which a sensitivity to beauty is not denied, but rather embraced within the movement towards the attainment of birth into the Land of Bliss.

From the Heian period, there were two general methods of religious practice undertaken by Japanese Buddhists. The people performed various practices and disciplines in order to finally attain emancipation and enter the realm of enlightenment, or, in the case of the Pure Land teachings, to attain birth into Amida's land. These practices and disciplines were means for eradicating worldly desires and attachments, and so it may be said that there were two methods by which people strove to free themselves of desires. The first method consisted of a way of life in

which they performed practices while suppressing their desires. The Tendai school formed a world pervaded by an exceedingly strict and austere suppression of desires. By contrast, the second method turned not on the suppression of human desires, but rather on liberation through the artistic sublimation of those desires. This method is seen in the esoteric teachings of Kūkai 空海, who founded the Shingon 真言 school on Mt. Kōya 高野.

According to the first method, one finally, through severe discipline, turns oneself into a “withered tree” and, in the extremity of austerity, attains birth into the Pure Land. According to the second method, one attains birth into the Pure Land through an aesthetic sensibility—through a profound apprehension of nature and the cosmos. One achieves this by refining one’s human feelings and perceptions so that they gradually become sublimated. Flowers blossom and scatter. While perceiving the beauty of the changes in nature, one grasps the nature of one’s own existence. This was the sort of view that Chōmei possessed. Experiencing beauty deeply, one composes poetry or plays the biwa, and while doing so one moves toward birth into the Land of Bliss. Here, it is important to note that when one devotes oneself to artistic practice and refinement, one is freed of attachments and becomes pure in heart and mind. This is the source of the difficulty of this path. It is only when one approaches the world of beauty with a mind free of self-attachment that the way of artistic cultivation can become a path to liberation.

We must also note that at the foundation of Chōmei’s view of human life lay the problem of art and religion, or of aesthetic values and faith. These were, for him, not in a relationship of opposition or mutual exclusion, demanding a choice of one or the other. Rather, he considered religion, or beauty, or art, or faith to be within a world in which they co-existed, a world of religion within art, or faith within beauty. According to the perspective of the dominant Buddhist thought of the day, these—religion and art—were in mutual opposition. But Chōmei, taking the stance of an ordinary person, perceived a world in which they were harmonized. At work here is a spiritual attitude—an aesthetic awareness

or view of religion—that runs deep in Japanese tradition. In beauty one perceives faith, in faith one perceives beauty. The belief that aesthetic awareness and faith were in opposition—that a person must choose one or the other—was strong during the Kamakura period, but this other attitude may be said to have formed the basic spirit of the Japanese, and when we consider it, Chōmei's achievements give us valuable insights.