

For Departing and Departed Loved Ones: Images of Amitabha Buddha's Welcoming Approach

Throughout history, people of all cultures have asked the existential question, “Where do we go after we die?” A popular Buddhist response to this question in medieval Japan was the western Pure Land (J. *saihō jōdo*) of the Buddha Amitabha (J. Amida). The idea of being born in a resplendent, distant paradise and envisioning departed loved ones there gave hope and solace to many facing the fear of death. These sentiments contributed to the popularity of Pure Land beliefs and resulted in the production of numerous *raigō zu* (“welcoming approach” paintings), in which Amitabha Buddha attended by a multitude of bodhisattvas appears before devotees at the time of their death, and *jōdo zu* (Pure Land paintings), which depict scenes of Amitabha’s paradise that awaits devotees after death.

The Asahi Shimbun newspaper agency founder, Murayama Ryōhei (1850–1933) whose personal collection comprises the core of the artworks in the Kosetsu Museum of Art, also collected many examples of Pure Land Buddhist art. This exhibition highlights the paintings of Amitabha Buddha’s Welcoming Approach and the Pure Land, together with other related artworks and artifacts. Also presented here are two unusual paintings that have recently restored—*Amitabha Buddha and Assembly of Bodhisattvas Returning to the Pure Land with the Departed* and *Amitabha Triad in Lotus Pond*.

I. The Welcoming Approach Paintings Attributed to Priest Genshin

In Japan, Buddhists believed that *mappō*, or the “latter days of the Dharma,” began in the year 1052. In this degenerate age, only the Dharma, or Buddhist teachings, remained but no one could practice it or attain enlightenment. Pure Land Buddhism, which flourished around this time, however, taught that those who prayed to the Buddha Amitabha (J. Amida Nyorai) would be born into Amitabha’s Pure Land of the Western Paradise. Within this milieu, Eshin Sōzu Genshin (942–1017) authored his influential treatise *Ōjōyōshū* (Essentials for Birth in the Pure Land) and purportedly made *raigō zu*, or paintings of the Welcoming Approach of Amitabha Buddha. This section features works associated with this eminent priest.



Welcoming Approach of Amitabha Buddha and Bodhisattvas
Nanbokuchō period, 14th century
Kosetsu Museum of Art



Important Cultural Property
Welcoming Approach of Amitabha Buddha and Bodhisattvas
Kamakura period, 13th century
Konbu-in Temple, Nara Prefecture

II. The Development of Welcoming Approach Paintings in Circular Formation

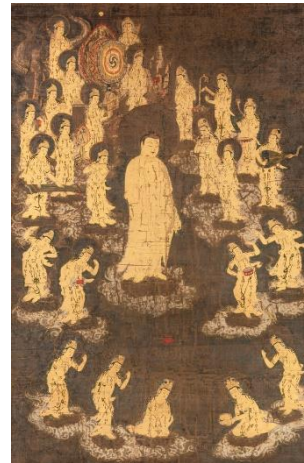
Enjin raigō (literally, “circular welcoming approach”) represents an iconographic style of *raigō* paintings. In *enjin raigō* paintings, the assembly of bodhisattvas creates a circular formation around Amitabha Buddha as they make their descent or approach together. Although reproductions are often made in Buddhist art, reproduced sculptures or paintings of Buddhist deities renowned as miraculously efficacious central images have come to have historical significance. Similarly, *raigō* paintings have iconographies that have been continued to be reproduced over time, *enjin raigō* are included among these. The Kosetsu Museum of Art’s *enjin raigō* was originally consecrated at Shōjōke-in, a temple of the Pure Land sect Jōdo Shū in Kyoto, during the Muromachi period (1336–1573). Here, we explore the development of this style of *raigō* paintings.



Welcoming Approach of Amitabha Buddha and Twenty-five Bodhisattvas

Muromachi period, circa 1430

Kosetsu Museum of Art



Welcoming Approach of Amitabha Buddha and Twenty-five Bodhisattvas

Kamakura period, 13th-14th century

Sanzen-in Temple, Kyoto

III. The Welcoming Approach of the Bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara and Kshitigarbha

Amitabha Buddha is not the only deity that appears before and welcomes devotees. Known as a bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara (J. Kannon), a central deity in Amitabha’s assembly, carries a lotus pedestal to welcome devotees to the Pure Land at the time of their death and acts as an intermediary in their afterlife. This deity, however, is essentially believed to save people in this world and appears in various transformations. Kshitigarbha (J. Jizō), another bodhisattva of compassion, who rescues those in hell, also appears in *raigō* paintings. This section showcases the Eleven-headed Kannon of Hase-dera and the Jizō of Yata-dera (Kongōsen-ji), two temples in Nara. Also presented here are Welcoming Approach images associated with these two compassionate bodhisattvas.



Important Cultural Property

***Chigo Kannon engi emaki* (Illustrated Tale of the [Eleven-headed] Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva Manifested as a Child)**

Kamakura to Nanbokuchō period, 14th century

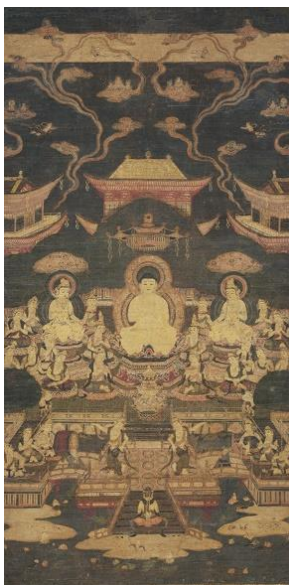
Kosetsu Museum of Art



Yata Jizō engi emaki (Miraculous Tales of the Bodhisattva Kshitigarbha of Yata-dera Temple)
 Muromachi period, 15th century
 Kosetsu Museum of Art

IV. Reflecting on the Pure Land of Amitabha

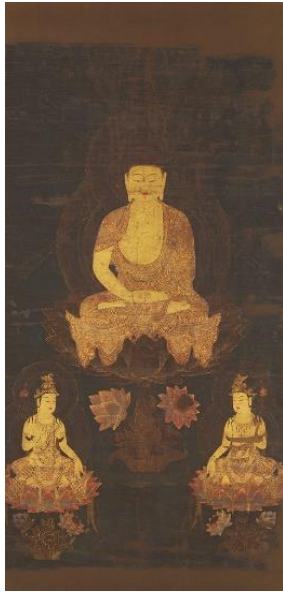
Pure Land Buddhists believe that after they die, they will be guided by Amitabha Buddha and be born into Amitabha's Western Paradise. This paradise or Pure Land is a glistening, pure place, where there is no suffering or pain. After death, devotees are immediately born from lotus buds, growing in lotus ponds in the Pure Land, where they can see and hear Amitabha Buddha. In life, devotees contemplate on this paradise and aspire to be born there. Amitabha's welcome, however, is not the only way to the Pure Land. Another way, according to a Pure Land commentary, is to cross the white path between the raging rivers of water and fire. Paintings known in Japanese as *nigabyakudō*, or "the White Path between Two Rivers," represent visualizations of this method to reach Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land. Beyond the thin white path lies a resplendent, expansive Pure Land.



Important Cultural Property
Chikō Mandala
 (Pure Land mandala envisioned by Priest Chikō)
 Kamakura period, 14th century
 Ministry of Cultural Affairs



Amitabha Triad
 China, Southern Song to Yuan dynasty, 13th century
 Kosetsu Museum of Art



Amitabha Triad
Kamakura period, 14th century
Kosetsu Museum of Art



Important Cultural Property
**The White Path to Amitabha Buddha's
Pure Land between Two Rivers**
Kamakura period, 13th century
Kosetsu Museum of Art

V. Visions of the Welcoming Approach

Raigō or Welcoming Approach paintings can be found in a rich array of variations. These images include Amitabha Buddha appearing alone; Amitabha attended by Avalokiteshvara (J. Kannon), the bodhisattva of compassion, and Mahasthamaprapta (J. Seishi), the bodhisattva of wisdom; Amitabha arriving with an assembly of twenty-five bodhisattvas; and scenes in which a multitude of bodhisattvas make an appearance with human figures. The scale of these paintings also range from large-scale works that create a sense of realism to small formats with mesmerizingly opulent ambiances. Devotees had these images made for themselves or for a beloved person, and had them displayed by their deathbed to aid them in visualizing Amitabha's welcome to the Pure Land.



Welcoming Approach of Amitabha Buddha and Twenty-five Bodhisattvas
Kamakura period, 13th-14th century
Kosetsu Museum of Art



Welcoming Approach of Twenty-five Bodhisattvas
Kamakura period, 13th century
Fukui Fine Arts Museum



**By Zhang Sigong (n.d.)
Amitabha Triad**
China, Southern Song dynasty, 13th
century
Zenrin-ji Temple, Kyoto

VI. For the Beloved Departed and Departing Ones

Raigō paintings have been made for those wishing to be born in the Pure Land Paradise of Amitabha Buddha as well as for their beloved ones and for those who love them. These works have repeatedly been displayed during the lifetime of the devotees and after their death. In life, devotees may have used them as objects of daily devotion and prayer. On their deathbeds, devotees may have depended on them to aid in their visions of Amitabha's welcome, and after death, these paintings were hung to recall the departed loved ones during memorials. Some Welcoming Approach paintings include the devotee in them. These represent experiences of Amitabha's welcome and promise of happiness for our loved ones in the afterlife. These images eased the pain and fears of the departing and the grief of those mourning the departed.



Designated Cultural Property of Shiga Prefecture
Welcoming Approach of Amitabha Triad
Kamakura period, 13th century
Kōmyō-ji Temple, Shiga Prefecture



Important Art Object
**Return of Amitabha Buddha and
Bodhisattvas**
Nanbokuchō period, 14th century
Kosetsu Museum of Art

Admission

Adults

¥ 1,000 (¥ 800*)

High school and university students

¥ 600 (¥ 400*)

Elementary and junior high school students

¥ 300 (¥ 100*) *For groups of 20 or more