

## "Menstruation Sutra" Belief In Japan

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### INTRODUCTION

The *Bussetsu daizō shōkyō ketsubon kyō* ("The Buddha's correct sutra on the bowl of blood") is a rather short (totalling some 420-odd characters) sutra found on p.2999 of the fourth volume of the eighty-seventh section of the first part of *Dai nihon zoku zōkyō* ("Great storehouse of Japanese sutras, continued"). A sutra that teaches the way of salvation for women who have fallen into Hell because of the pollution of blood, this document appears to have had widespread circulation in China from the time of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). There is, however, a variety of works referred to as "Ketsubon kyō" (lit. "Blood bowl sutra"), including those from Buddhism, Taoism or certain individual Shinto shrines, and the content of each of these differs somewhat from all the rest.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I will limit my investigations to the sutra as it was circulated in Japan, but there are a variety of Japanese versions as well, all of which differ slightly. First, then, I will clarify the nature of these differences, and then discuss "Ketsubon kyō" belief in Japan after attempting to date its transmission to this country.

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Translated by W. Michael Kelsey from "Nihon ni okeru Ketsubonkyō shinkō ni tsuite" 日本における血盆経信仰について in *Nihon Bukka* 日本仏教 8, 1981: 37-49.

1. There is also a good number of texts in use in the Taoist religion. See Soymié 1965 for details.

THE CONTENT OF THE "KETSUBON KYŌ"

I am aware of sixteen versions of the "Ketsubon kyō" that have been discovered in Japan (See Table 1).<sup>2</sup>

I have not been able to confirm the content of the eight versions listed in Table 1 as "H" through "O," and here will limit myself to a discussion of versions "A" through "G."

To this end I will first introduce the text of "A," or the *Bussetsu Mokuren shōkyō ketsubon kyō*.

**Bussetsu Mokuren shōkyō ketsubon kyō**

Once the Buddha took 1250 biksus into the middle of the Deer Park. At that time, the venerable Mokuren put the following question to the Buddha:

Once I went to such-and-such a prefecture, and saw in the middle of a large field there a Hell composed of a pond of menstruation blood. This pond was some 84,000 jujana wide, and in the middle women who were wearing handcuffs and ankle chains were undergoing hardships. The demon who was the lord of this Hell came here three times a day and forced the women sinners to drink the polluted blood; if they refused to do so, he would beat them with an iron rod. Their screams of anguish could be heard from great distances away. The sight of this made me very sad, and so I asked the Lord of the Hell why the women were being forced to undergo such hardships. He replied that the blood the women had shed during the birth of their children had polluted the deity of the earth and that, furthermore, when they washed their polluted garments in the river, that water was gathered up by a number of virtuous men and woman and used to make tea to serve to holy men. Because of these acts of uncleanness, the women were now

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2. The information in this chapter is essentially the same as I presented in an earlier work (Takemi 1976), but since preparing that essay I have had the opportunity to view the Tanba Fukutokuji manuscript (C).

## Belief in the Menstruation Sutra

Table I  
Texts of the Ketsubonkyō (KBK)

Text	Name	Location	Period
A	Bussetsu Mokuren Shōkyō KBK*	Sōkenji (Niigata)	
B	Bussetsu Daizō KBK	Shōsenji (Chiba)	
C	Bussetsu Daizō* KBK	Fukutokuji (Kyoto) <sup>a</sup>	Early Edo
D	Bussetsu Daizō Shōkyō KBK	Gankōji (Nara)	Muro- machi <sup>3</sup>
E	Bussetsu Daizō Shōkyō KBK <sup>b</sup>		
E <sup>1</sup>	Bussetsu Daizō Shōkyō KBK <sup>c</sup>		
F	Bussetsu Daizō Shōkyō KBK	Saidaiji <sup>d</sup> (Nara)	Edo
G	Bussetsu Daizō Shōkyō KBK <sup>e</sup>		Edo
H	KBK <sup>f</sup>		
I	KBK	Jorakuji <sup>g</sup> (Kanagawa)	Edo
J	KBK	Entsūji <sup>h</sup> (Aomori)	
K	KBK	Hitohata Yakushi <sup>i</sup> (Tottori)	
L	KBK	Nagataki/Hakusan Jinja (Ishikawa)	
M	KBK	Mt. Taihei/Miyoshi Jinja (Akita)	
N	KBK*	Mt. Haguro Monks' Quarters (Yamagata)	
O	KBK*	Nikko Rinnōji	

CODE

\* Indicates woodblock print.

a. Found in the temple roof.

b. Contained in *Dainihon Zokuzōkyō*.

c. Referred to in footnote of E.

d. Found in jar of bones in the temple's crematorium.

e. Contained in Japanese-language translation of sutra ("KBK wage") (*Tōyō Daizō*).

f. I have been unable to personally examine the texts which follow.

g. Found inside statue of Bodhisattva Kannon.

h. Hidden in platform of seated stone image of Amida.

i. Hidden in platform of offering tower; name of object of worship not appended.

3. Gorai Shigeru places this text in the mid-Kamakura period (Gorai 1964, p. 162). There are other interpretations, however, and I follow that of *Nihon minzoku kiso shiryō shūsei*, which holds that it is of Muromachi vintage. Final agreement has yet to be reached as to the precise dating of the text.

forced to undergo sufferings.

Thus Mokuren used his holy powers to come to the seat of the Buddha and to inform him of what he had seen with his eyes. He asked, then, what he needed to do for the women to be saved from their punishments in the pond of blood.

The Buddha then answered, teaching Mokuren how to save the women. He said it would be necessary for them to respect the three treasures of filial piety, to call on Mokuren, to hold a Blood Pool Liberation service, to hold a Blood Pool Feast, to read sutras, to have an esoteric ceremony, then to make a boat and float it off. At that time a five-colored lotus flower would appear in the middle of the Blood Pond. Then, he said, all of the women sinners would be saved, and reborn in the Buddha's land.\*

In terms of form, these eight sutras can be broken into three groups:

1. Those which contain both *darani* (Sanskrit spells) and prayers (*ganbun*): A, B, C.
2. Those which contain only prayers: D.
3. Those which contain neither spells nor prayers: E, E<sup>1</sup>, F, G.

The sutras can also be classified according to their content from a variety of perspectives. First we have the motif of Mokuren's inquiry about the way in which to affect the women's salvation. This takes two forms. The first of these is the stories in which Mokuren sees the Blood Pool Hell in the Ushū Tsuiyō-ken plain, goes to the Buddha by using his spiritual powers, and, in order to repay his debt of gratitude to the benevolent mother who gave birth to him, asks how the women might be saved from their sufferings. This group encompasses sutras A, B,

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\* The long prayer which follows this story has been omitted. *Translator.*

and C. The second group is the stories in which Mokuren sees the Blood Pool Hell and asks the lord of the Hell directly how to save the women. In these stories (sutras D, E, E<sup>1</sup>, F, and G) the motif of Mokuren's travels by spiritual powers between the Hell and the Buddha is missing.

Another form of division is based on the reasons given for the women to have been condemned to the Hell in the first place. Again two divisions are possible: first is the stories that explain this merely in terms of the women having first polluted the earth god by blood when they were giving birth, and then polluting the river by washing their soiled clothes in it; in these stories the blood shed during childbirth first pollutes the deity, then tea made from the water of the river in which the clothing has been washed pollutes Buddhist holy men, and this is the sin for which the women are being punished. Second is the group which explains the pollution in terms of not only childbirth blood, but also adds that their menstrual blood shed each month was polluting. The first group encompasses A, B, C, D, and E; the second is E<sup>1</sup>, F and G.

These three different classifications yield what could be called four textual families. The first of these, which I will call the Sōkenji family, is composed of texts which contain both spells and prayers; which have the motif of Mokuren traveling between the Buddha and Hell by his spiritual powers, and which explain that the women are in Hell because of blood associated with childbirth. This family consists of texts A, B, and C.

The second family is that text with only prayers; which lacks the motif of Mokuren's spiritually powered flight, and which explains the damnation of the women in terms of childbirth blood. This is the Gangōji family, and it consists of text D.

Third is the Zokuzōkyō family; it consists of Text E, in which we have neither prayers nor spells; no appearance of the spirit flight, and an explanation of the damnation in terms of childbirth.

Finally there is the Saidaiji family, which contains

neither prayers nor spells; does not have the motif of Mokuren's spirit journey, and which attributes the damnation to both childbirth and menstrual blood. This family is made up of texts E<sup>1</sup>, F, and G. This information is summarized in Table 2.

If we were to then attempt to date these sutras by the families established above, it becomes evident that the Sōkenji family is the oldest, followed by the Gangōji family (including the Zokuzōkyō family), then the Saidaiji family. There are numerous opinions concerning the dating of the Gangōji text, but seen in terms of both form and content it would be difficult to call it older than the Sōkenji family. When we further take into consideration the fact that the woodblock manuscript of the "Ketsubon kyō" discovered at Tanba Fukutokuji has virtually the same form and content as the Sōkenji manuscript (with lacunae), then it seems most reasonable to consider this text to date from the late Muromachi or early Edo period.

An examination of the reasons given for the women to have been condemned to the Blood Pool Hell by time period

Table 2  
Ketsubonkyō Families

TEXT	A	B	C	D	E	E <sup>1</sup>	F	G
Family	Sōkenji			Gangōji		Saidaiji		
Period			early Edo	?			Edo	Edo
Form	prayers+spells			P	neither			
Spirit flight	motif present				motif missing			
Reason	Childbirth blood					childbirth and menstrual blood		

P = Prayers only

reveals that the earliest texts explained this damnation in terms of blood shed at childbirth, but that from the beginning of the Edo period the idea of menstrual pollution seems to have been added to the explanations. There are, additionally, documents such as stories of the origin of the "Ketsubon kyō" and various Buddhist hymns of praise which, while not directly connected to the sutra, do contain explanations as to why the women have been damned.

For example, the *Kaie rakusōtan—Ketsubon kyō ūshitsu enyu no suishu* ("Random stories about the Buddhist ceremonies—the origin and transmission of the Ketsubon kyō"), which was published between 1801 and 1803, explains it as follows:

Because they were born as women, their aspirations to Buddhahood are weak, and their jealousy and evil character are strong. These sins compounded become menstrual blood, which flows in two streams each month, polluting not only the earth god but all the other deities as well. Thus after death they will certainly fall into this Hell, where they will undergo unlimited suffering.

Further, *Yūkoku ya'in*, published in 1821, says in a section entitled "The origin of the Ketsubon kyō":

All women, even those who are the children of high families, have no faith and conduct no practices, but rather have strong feelings of avarice and jealousy. These sins are thus compounded and become menstrual blood, and every month this flows out, polluting the god of the earth in addition to the spirits of the mountains and rivers. In retribution for this women are condemned to the Blood Pool Hell.

And according to the story of the origin of the temple Shōsenji:

This red blood flows for seven days each month. In twelve months this amounts to eighty-four days.

In all these sources we will find that there is no mention of "childbirth blood," and that all is explained in terms of the sin of menstrual blood. If we look further into hymns such as "The Hymn for Women's Rebirth in the Western Paradise," we find:

Beckoned by the floating cloud of the body,  
Becoming an obstacle to the sun.  
How painful! Those seven days of travail.  
And the polluted garments, too, one by one  
Turn to dust, then go to flame.  
When washed in pure river water.  
They pollute the water god and the fire god.  
This flow is scooped up  
And given to the gods and the Buddha.  
These sins have their retribution,  
And the women are condemned to the Blood Pool Hell  
(Takano 1928, p.383)

In addition, the "Hymn for the Salvation of Barren Women" (*Umazume jigoku wasan*) says that even childless women will fall into the Blood Pool Hell (Takano 1928, p.382). These examples make it clear that since the Edo period the chief reason that women were condemned to the Blood Pool Hell has been thought to be menstruation.

In this respect, there is an interesting observation of Nakayama Tarō: "The tendency of belief to advance from mothers, then to childless women, then to women in general is, thus, a point of great interest to those who would study the Japanese Blood Pool Hell" (Nakayama 1928, p.74).

Most certain the progress that can be traced through the "Ketsubon kyō" texts—from childbirth blood, to childbirth and menstrual blood, then to menstrual blood alone—is closely connected to the popular beliefs noted by Nakayama.

#### THE "KETSUBON KYO" IN JAPAN

It is time to say a few words about the transmission of the "Ketsubon kyō" to Japan. I will conduct this investigation



on three levels: the stories of origin (*engi*) of the "Ketsubon kyō," the manuscripts of the sutras to have been discovered, and the existence of the idea of the Blood Pool Hell, in order to determine when this belief complex first became known in Japan.

The following four documents contain information concerning the origin of the "Ketsubon kyō":

- A. *Ketsubon kyō ūshitsu enyu no suishu "Kaie raku sōtan"* (1801-1803).
- B. *Ketsubon kyō engi "Yūkoku yain,"* Vol. 5 (1824).
- C. *Nyonin jōbutsu Ketsubon kyō engi,* Shōsenji (1857).
- D. *Ketsubon kyō Nihon ruden kaiban no yurai, "Daizō-shōkyō Ketsubon kyō wage"* (1713).

With the exception of "D," they have virtually identical contents, and could be summarized as follows:

The head priest at Hosshōji in Hatto village, Nakasōma County, Shimofusa, was called to save a young lady suffering from a strange disease caused by the spirit of a dead Hosshōji nun who had possessed her. He prayed to a life extending Jizō erected by the official Hojō Tokiyori and was given the sutra at Teganuma.

Text A puts the year this happened at 1397, B also has this date, and C makes it 1417.

The "D" text, however, contains a totally different origin tale. According to this source an immigrant monk who opened Mt. Seichō in Arima County of Settsu Province, one Jishinbō Sonsui, brought the sutra back with him after a visit to the Palace of King Yama (Enma) of the underworld. This holy man Sonsui is said to have been a person of the Eien era (987-989). There is another version in "D" also, in which the monk Kakugen of the temple Jakkōji on Mt. Nikkō is said to have suddenly died in 1475, then to have spent seventeen days touring Hell, after which he received the sutra from King Yama and was sent back to the world of the living. After this he is said to have transmitted it to a certain monk at Mt. Nakahaguro in Dewa Province, and that monk is said to have made the

sutra known to the world.

According to Michel Soymié, the "Ketsubon kyō", or the ideas behind it, can be traced back to an 1194 document in China (Soymié 1965, p. 132). If this point is taken into consideration, it seems best to drop the 987-989 thesis of text D at this juncture. This leads us to the supposition that the origin of the sutra in Japan would have been from the late fourteenth century to the fifteenth century.

As far as the dating of the sutras that have thus far come to light, so far as I have been able to determine, a version of the "Ketsubon kyō" that was discovered at Gunma Prefecture can be shown to be earlier than late Muromachi. A woodblock manuscript discovered in a roof at Gangōji has been dated between the mid and late Muromachi period.<sup>4</sup> All other manuscripts known now are from the Edo period, so current knowledge would place the sutra's first presence in Japan at about the middle Muromachi period.

The belief that a woman who died in childbirth would be condemned to Hell has been present in Japan for quite some time. Story 9 of Volume 3 in *Nihon ryōiki*, for example, tells of how a woman who died in labor before the birth of her child went to Hell. There is, however, nothing in this tale to suggest the presence of a Blood Pool Hell. There are also several tales in *Konjaku monogatari-shū* about women who are condemned to Hell, but none of them talks of a Blood Pool Hell.<sup>5</sup> When exactly, then, did the idea of a Blood Pool Hell first appear in Japan?<sup>6</sup>

There is no mention of a Blood Pool Hell in *Ōjō yōshū*, which was so important in spreading the idea of Hell in

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4. I owe my information on these two texts to Sakata Tomoya of the Gangōji Gokurakubōnai Bukkyō Minzoku Shiryō Kenkyūjo (Center for Research on Popular Buddhist Materials of the Gangōji Gokurakubō).

5. *Konjaku monogatari-shū* VI.22, VII.30, XII.36.

6. I will postpone a more general treatment of the question of women and hells, and in particular women and the Blood Pool Hell, until a later occasion.

Japan, nor do we find any reference to it in later works such as *Hōbutsu-shū* or *Aimōshō*, both of which were influenced by *Ōjō yōshū*. When one takes into account the fact that there is a clear account in the work *Mokuren sonjā no jigoku meguri* ("Mokuren's tour of Hell"), considered to be a late Muromachi product, of the relationship between women who die in childbirth and the Blood Pool Hell (Nakayama 1928, p.197), the natural conclusion seems to be that the idea was brought from China during the Muromachi period.

Soymié is of the opinion that the sutra was circulating in Japan by the period 1250-1350. This speculation is postulated on the fact that the Gangōji "Ketsubon kyō" manuscript is considered by some to date from the mid Kamakura period, and that the temple usually taken as the point of origin for the sutra's dissimulation in Japan, Hosshōji (now called Shōsenji), is supposed to have been erected in 1262 for the daughter of Hojō Tokiyori. Additionally, Tokiyori had a relationship with the Sung dynasty Chinese monk Funei (who stayed in Japan from 1260 to 1265), and his son Tokimune had a relationship with another Chinese monk, Sogen (who was in Japan from 1277 until his death in 1286). He speculates that these monks may well have brought the sutra with them from China (Soymié 1965, pp.137-138).

As I have noted, however, an investigation from three points of view—the tales of origin, uncovered manuscripts, and belief in the Blood Pool Hell—would indicate that it is not likely that the sutra arrived in Japan before the Muromachi period. I would conclude that present evidence fixes its arrival in the Muromachi period or later.

#### BELIEF IN THE "KETSUBON KYŌ"

Belief in the "Ketsubon kyō" has practically died out by now, and the lack of sufficient extant documents also makes it a difficult question to examine thoroughly. I would, however, like to attempt a discussion of what can be learned from the documents that are available.

Roughly speaking, "Ketsubon kyō" belief can be classi-

fied into the following three areas.

1. Belief in the "Ketsubon kyō" as a sutra which could save the souls of the dead.
2. Belief in the sutra as an instrument to obtain rebirth in the Western Paradise.
3. Belief in the power of the "Ketsubon kyō" as an amulet.

I will deal with each of these in turn.

**Belief in the "Ketsubon kyō" in the salvation of the dead.**  
The belief that the "Ketsubon kyō" could work to save women who had been condemned to the Blood Pool Hell after dying in childbirth is realistically depicted in a part of the Tateyama Mandala titled "Illustration of a Ketsubon kyō dedication service" (Numa 1976). This text illustrates the dead women who are said to have been condemned to the Pool of Blood, monks who are throwing copies of the sutra to these women in the pools, and women who have been reborn on lotus petals as the result of the services conducted by the monks. In point of fact, this is a concrete rendering of a dedicatory ceremony performed at the temple Ashikura Chūguji, at which the sutra would be thrown into the river from the Nunobashi Bridge, or a ceremony of floating the sutras in the water which was conducted under the bridge.

The "Illustration of a Ketsubon kyō dedication service" also depicts women reborn on lotus petals. These women are thought to be patterned after a stone statue of Amida Nyorai (with part of the "Ketsubon kyō" carved on the stone platform) at Mt. Osorezan's Entsūji, in a dike in a blood pool, and on a stone dedicatory tower to Yakushi (with the "Ketsubon kyō" carvings on the stone platform). Even today at Mt. Osorezan the office of the temple Entsūji puts out "Ketsubon kyō" amulets and there is a ceremony during which these are thrown into a blood pool within the grounds of the temple for the salvation of women who died in childbirth. There is currently no trace

of "Ketsubon kyō" belief left at Hitohata Yakushi, but it is thought likely that a similar ceremony was once conducted there.

There is, further, a pool called "Blood Pond" in the grounds of Risshakuji ("Yamadera"), and it is said that in former times the "Ketsubon kyō" was used there for dedicatory services to women who had died in childbirth (Tsukudo 1966, p.259). The same kind of ceremony was likely held at Gangōji, as well (*Nihon Bukkyō kiso shiryō shūsei* V, p.40).

Until relatively recent times, a "Ketsubon kyō" ceremony for those who had died in childbirth was held at the temple Shōsenji, mentioned above as the temple said to be the point of origin of "Ketsubon kyō" belief in Japan. It is said that until about twenty years ago, there was a location for the riverside ceremony to relieve the sufferings of the dead (*kawasegaki*), and that here a wood image of Jizō was implanted, a stupa was erected, and an altar was constructed. The "Ketsubon kyō" was then intoned and thrown into the river.

Also, in the neighborhood of Shōsenji, there was once a practice of enclosing a copy of the "Ketsubon kyō" in women's coffins in order to save them from being condemned to the Blood Pool Hell. A copy of the sutra discovered at Saidaiji appears to have been intended for similar use.

Finally, copies of the "Ketsubon kyō" have also been discovered at Hagurosan (woodblock), Taiheizan (woodblock) and Hakusan (woodblock print), and it seems likely that they, like the Tateyama examples, were also intended for use in ceremonies of dedication to the dead.

From the above, then, it is clear that when it was used for the salvation of the dead, the "Ketsubon kyō" services took three forms: riverside services, water purification (floated off in rivers or ponds) and casket use.

**The "Ketsubon kyō" for rebirth in the Western Paradise.**  
Let us consider another section of the Tateyama Mandala mentioned above, the "Illustration of the confession

ceremony at the Nunobashi Bridge" (Numa 1976). This illustration depicts the service of crossing the river Sanzu on the Nunobashi Bridge from the Enma-dō to the Uba-dō. It was said that there was tremendous merit in crossing this bridge, and that not only could the most extreme sinners and women with deep sins obtain both Buddhahood in this body and rebirth in the Western Paradise as a result of it, but that the act performed in this life would carry its merit through to the next. There were a number of such services,<sup>7</sup> but during the Edo period most of them were transformed into services for women. It is worth noting that it was believed that undergoing them would not only assure women safe healthy births, but in the event that a woman did die in birth, she would not be condemned to the Blood Pool Hell (Gorai 1976, p.201). Here the association of blood shed at childbirth and the idea of a Blood Pool Hell is obvious, which gives us a reason to believe that the Tateyama Nunobashi purification ceremony held from Edo times primarily for women is one example of the tying of "Ketsubon kyō" belief to prayers for the rebirth of women in the Western Paradise.

Another instance of "Ketsubon kyō" belief being used in conjunction with prayers for rebirth in the Western Paradise can be seen in the copying of the "Ketsubon kyō." There are at Shōsenji two volumes of a copy of the sutra dated 1783 made by the hand of the mother of Matsudaira Sagami no Kami. This is an elegantly displayed copy, and is also of some interest in that it is one of only a small number of sutras copied in Chinese by a woman.

The "Ketsubon kyō" as an amulet. There are two primary uses for the sutra in these cases, which I will discuss in turn.

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7. This is similar to the material used by Hayakawa (1930) in his discussion of the relationships between Hakusan and rebirth in the Western Paradise.

First, the sutra apparently played a great role as a protective charm for pregnant women who wanted to have a safe birth. In the area around the temple Shōsenji, mentioned above, when a woman became pregnant she would go to the temple and receive a "Ketsubon kyō" charm, which she would place inside the waistband worn by pregnant women, keeping it close to her body. After birth, then, she would cut the seven characters representing the Sanscrit sounds for the Bodhisattva Jizō from the Sanscrit charm in the sutra out one at a time, putting each in water which she would drink; this was continued for seven nights. The sutra from which the seven characters had been cut would then be returned to the temple, and the woman would receive a new copy of the sutra, which she would keep close to her body until her health had completely returned. This custom was carried out regularly until about 1937, and did not entirely die out until about ten years ago.

I have already noted that a woodblock copy of the "Ketsubon kyō" was discovered at the Nagataki Hakusan Shrine. This copy is said to have been a charm that was used, along with a mandala called *Nyonin zenjō mandara* from another Hakusan shrine, the Heisen shrine, for women. Unfortunately, however, we do not know exactly for what purpose the charm was used.

The second use of the "Ketsubon kyō" as a charm differs a good deal from the instances of "Ketsubon kyō" belief that I have discussed thus far. The sutra was used by the Sōtō sect as a charm against impurity.

As is specified in two Sōtō documents, the "Ketsubon kyō" is presented to a woman on the fifth day of her Sōtō initiation ceremony in order to obtain *kechimyaku*, or the "blood line teaching" of the Buddha. The words "Ketsubon kyō for the Buddhahood of women" are written on the front of the sutra, and on the back the characters representing the Sanscrit sounds for the Bodhisattva Jizō in dimensions of about six centimeters. Inside the spells that are a part of the sutra are written in Sanscrit, the content being about the same as is found in the Sōkenji Chinese version

(Sakauchi 1975, p.14).

Three temples in Niigata Prefecture, for example—Sōkenji, Daiei-ji and Untōan—all keep copies of the "Ketsubon kyō" (with the exception of Sōkenji, only the Sanscrit section that is used to ward off impurities) which they give to women during their initiation to the priesthood. The same is true at Shōsenji.

The "Ketsubon kyō" is not, however, necessarily used at all current initiation ceremonies; judging from the information I was able to gather, the vast majority of temples have never heard of this use of the sutra. Additionally, two other Niigata Prefecture temples, Chūunji and Kenryūji (currently unranked), do have copies of the sutra like the three mentioned above, but they no longer use it at all these days, and when asked what it was for, none replied that they used it at initiation ceremonies. The practice of copying the "Ketsubon kyō" remains an official part of the sect's practice, but with only very minor exceptions, is no longer conducted.

The three temples mentioned above that use the sutra in initiation ceremonies continue to have women keep the sutra on their persons because of the belief that if a woman has a copy of the "Ketsubon kyō" she can escape the sufferings of the hiding of the sun, and also that even if she should worship the Buddha or the deities in an impure state, it would be as though she were presenting flowers and incense and there would be no pollution.

ABOVE I divided "Ketsubon kyō" belief into three sections; the most important of these are those aspects tied to the idea of the Blood Pool Hell and salvation from sins. The first of these is best represented by the idea of women being saved from Hell as expressed in works on "Ketsubon kyō" services, and the other is the prayer for rebirth in the Western Paradise as exemplified by the Nunohashi purification rite. The idea of using the "Ketsubon kyō" as a charm for a safe delivery is doubtless an offshoot from the idea that the sutra could deliver women who died in childbirth



## Belief in the Menstruation Sutra

from the Blood Pool Hell; the use of the sutra to ward off impurities in Zen initiation ceremonies has basically nothing to do with belief in the sutra, and should probably be thought of as a skillful adaptation of the sutra for the purpose of women who are members of the Zen sects.

As belief in the various Buddhist hells has disintegrated, belief in the "Ketsubon kyō" has, not surprisingly, also declined, and the sutra is now being transmitted by the Zen sects in a context that has nothing at all to do with the concept of Hell.<sup>8</sup> This would seem to indicate the presence of a very interesting possibility, namely that mountain cults, such as those which can be found in particular at Osorezan, Taiheizan, Hagurosan, Tateyema or Hakusan, might begin to propel belief in the sutra along new lines in the future by being used in the activities of mountain ascetics.

## References

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8. My knowledge of the currently known manuscripts of the "Ketsubon kyō" is based on Numa's fieldwork report. I would like to thank him for sending me a copy of this report. I would also like to thank Sakai Masayuki, the resident priest of Shōsenji, for information concerning belief in the sutra at his temple.

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