

# Indra's Net: The Spiritual Universe of Miyazawa Kenji 因陀羅の網

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## Indra's Net: The Spiritual Universe of Miyazawa Kenji

Miyazawa Kenji

Translated and introduced by Roger Pulvers

Postscript by Jane Marie Law

### The Phenomenon Called Miyazawa Kenji

Miyazawa Kenji must certainly be the world's only author who described himself as a single illumination of light. The actual lines—the very first in his “Preface to *Spring and Ashura*—go this way.

The phenomenon called I

Is a single blue illumination

This ray of light comes from “karma's alternating current lamp”...

Flickering unceasingly, restlessly

Together with the sights of the land and all else

Or is Kenji describing all of us with this “I”? After all, the “blue” in this poem is the blue of the other world, the place where we are all headed (albeit not necessarily in an upward direction). Blue is the most commonly used

color by Kenji in his works; and the sky appears as a transit medium for all living creatures.

Among his poems, perhaps this “Preface” best describes his take on life. This take is all-encompassing. He does not view human life—or any other form of life, for that matter—as separate from the rocks, mountains, rivers, the light, the wind.... This is what he means by “Together with the sights of the land and all else.”

If “Preface” is his clearest pronouncement of this in verse, then “Indra's Net,” which appears in English here for the first time, is his most inspired and direct shot at his universe in prose. Fiercely lyrical and unmistakably devotional, it describes a vision of Paradise as seen at the Tsela Pass in northern India. At 4215 meters above sea level, he may be halfway to Paradise already.

How did this man, born into a well-to-do entrepreneurial family in the provincial Iwate Prefecture town of Hanamaki at the end of the 19th century, come to envision himself in such a remote spot, ecstatic at the floor of heaven?



**Osawa Onsen just outside Hanamaki.  
Kenji often went to the rotenburo  
(outdoor bath) there.**

Though he never left Japan in his lifetime, that didn't stop him from pursuing a gamut of interests that transported him to what we call "the outside world." This is an apt phrase for Kenji, whose outside world extended into the cosmos.

He studied German, English and Esperanto. He was obsessed with classical music, Beethoven in particular. (He owned the largest collection of records in Iwate.) Many of his characters have non-Japanese names; many of his stories take place outside Japan.

Years ago I described Kenji as "a dilettante typical of the Taisho Era," and I would still stick to this description. Millions of his compatriots at the time were into foreign languages, Western music and fantasies about foreign places they did not have the opportunity or means to get to. Kenji, in this, was no exception. The exception was his fanaticism for these things, his obsessiveness. He was generally a highly obsessive individual; and today, psychiatrists would have a justifiable field day with his symptomatic hyperactive behavior.

But the focus of this hyperactivity in a myriad

of spheres is, in his case, unique: faith. Kenji was a devout and dogmatic Buddhist. He was also a dedicated proselytizer. He wanted to see all of us, someday, gathered around that big bonfire in the sky, sending heat and light out to this world, laughing together and singing songs, preferably one of his own compositions, "Once Around the Stars."

We often encounter in Kenji's phenomenology rivers and rocks in the sky. As an amateur geologist—there is now a museum in Hanamaki featuring a collection of the minerals mentioned in his works—he knew his rocks well. His nickname at school was "Rocky" (石ころ賢). One of the themes in his poetry and prose is that reality cannot be portrayed merely in the present and that a description that does not consider what the scene or object was like in the past and what it will be like in the future is, at best, fragmentary and, at worst, inaccurate.

When you read the descriptions in "Indra's Net" please bear this in mind. You are looking not at the surreal. There is no surrealism in Kenji's world. Everything that is is a part of everything that was or will be. The universe may be chaotic, but it makes perfect sense.

As the Buddha says to the two little brothers in his exquisite story "Barefeet of Light" (「ひかりの素足」)...



**Miyazawa Kenji. Kenji had this photo taken with him consciously imitating the pose and clothing of Beethoven. Collage**  
Photograph by Oshima Hiroshi

“There’s nothing to be frightened of. Compared to the great virtue that envelops the world, your sins are what a little drop of dew on the point of a thistle’s thorn is to the light of the sun.”

The life of one of the brothers in “Barefeet of Light” is saved by the Buddha, thanks to his spirit of self-sacrifice. Kenji’s kaleidoscopic visions of the real world were grounded in his sharpened sense of moral justice. In that way, his faith was as down-to-earth as it was visionary.

## Indra’s Net

It seemed then that I had collapsed, out of utter exhaustion, on a bed of green grass and wind.

In that faint autumn wind I exchanged bows, courteous to a fault, with my tin-colored shadow.

Then, I stepped alone onto a dark cowberry carpet and traveled about the Tsela Plateau.



**Tsela pass**

The cowberry boasted red fruit.

The white sky blanketed the entire plateau. It was a cold white, whiter than kaolin china.

The rarefied air sang in a high-pitched whirr, no doubt due to the sun making its lonely way beyond the white porcelain clouds. The sun had already sunk below the black barbed ridges in the west, creaking in the dim light of a late afternoon.

I looked around, gasping like a fish.

Wherever I looked, there wasn’t even a shadow of a bird, nor was there so much as a trace of any gentle beast.

“What on earth am I visiting here in the upper reaches of the atmosphere, moving around in this air that cuts through me?”

I asked this of myself.

The cowberry was, before I knew it, gone, and the ground was covered in a sheet of dry ash-colored moss. Red moss flowers were blossoming here and there. But all this did was to intensify the cold grief of the plateau.

Before long, the late afternoon was in twilight, the moss flowers appeared reddish black, and the color of the sky above the ridges turned a faint and somber yellow.

It was then that I caught sight of an all-white lake far in the distance.

“That’s not water! It’s natrium salt or something that’s crystallized,” I said to myself. “I mustn’t lose heart by getting all happy and taken in.”

Even so, I hurried over there.

The lake came closer, glittering. Before I knew it I was gazing at pure-white quartz sand and, beyond that, a place brimming darkly with real water.

The sand squeaked. I picked up a pinch of it and examined it in the dim light of the sky. It was made up of dihexagonal pyramid grains.

“This has come from dacite or rhyolite.”

That’s what I figured, whispering to myself, standing on the water’s edge.

“Hey, this is supercooled water!” I whispered in my mind. “This is the granddaddy of water in both a liquid and a solid state!”

My palm absolutely gave off a pale phosphorescence in the water.

Suddenly there was a high-pitch ring all

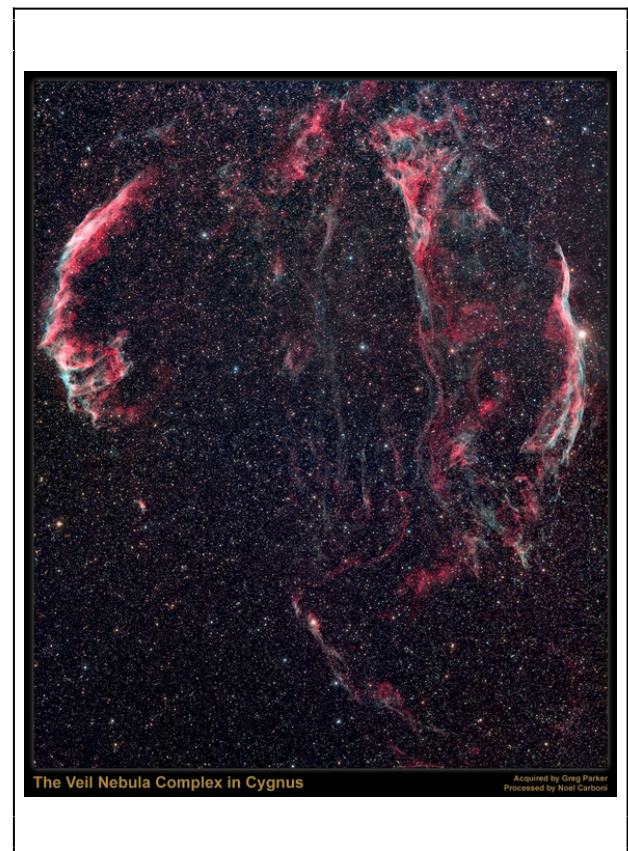
around.

“It’s the wind. It’s the green grasses. There was a rumble and a roar.” These were the words ringing in my head. It was pitch dark, pitch dark with a faint red tinge.

I opened my eyes wider.

Night had fallen and the sky was as transparent as it could be. The water of the galaxy flowed silently over the sky’s plain, which was made up of beautifully fired, polished steel. Little corundum pebbles shined, and every grain of sand on the banks could be counted.

The cold dark-violet plate of the sky was studded with the cleavage planes of diamonds and pointy grains of sapphire, and fragments of silicon the size of smoke tree seeds had been picked up in exquisite tweezers and inlaid into it, and all of this separately and on its own breathed in and out, trembling and quaking.





When I took another look at where my feet were, small yellow and blue flames were flickering and twinkling in the grains of sand in the sky. I suppose that supercooled lake in the Tsela Plateau was a part of the galaxy itself.

Yet, dawn seemed to come quickly on the plateau.

It was very clear that something like glass molecules you could see right through were floating up into the air and, above all, what looked like a fountain in the sky surrounded by nine small blue stars in the east was quickly transformed in the terribly dim light of the sky from steel to amazonite.

I saw an angel fly through space that had a dark-violet, subtle sheen.

"At last it's slipped in," I thought, my heart jumping with delight. "It has suddenly made its way from the Tsela Plateau of the realm of humans to that of the heavens."

The angel soared straight ahead.

"It's covering 10 kilometers in the blink of an eye!" I whispered to myself. "But look! It isn't even budging. It's soaring ahead so far without moving, without changing place, without changing form."

The angel's robe was as thin as smoke, and its holy necklace absorbed whispers of light from the dimly-lit plate of the sky.

"Got it," I thought. "The air here is rarified almost to the point of becoming a vacuum. That's why there's no wind to disturb the folds in that delicate robe."

The angel opened its dark blue eyes wide but didn't blink them once. It soared absolutely straight ahead with the faintest smile on its lips. Yet, it was neither moving, nor changing place or form.

"This is the place where all hopes are purified.

The number of wishes is alleviated. Gravity is neutralized within itself, and a cold scent of quince floats through the air. And so, the cord on the angel's robe neither ripples, nor does it hang straight down."

But then the amazonite in the sky was transformed into a weird plate of purple agate, and I could no longer see the figure of the soaring angel.

"This is the Tsela Plateau after all," I said, explaining it to myself. "You can't count on just one single episode."

But what was strange was that the cold quince-like scent was still permeating the sky. And once again I sensed that this mysterious world in the sky was like a dream.

"There's something really funny here!" I thought to myself, standing there. "This celestial space seems to be right beside my sensations. As I walk on the path here and fragments of mica gradually appear in great number, it seems to me that I am getting closer and closer to granite. It may be just a fluke, but the more often it appears this way, the more true it gets. I'm sure I'll be able to sense this celestial world on this plateau again."

I turned my eyes from the sky to the plateau. The sand was now as pure white as can be. The blue of the lake, now more ancient-looking than verdigris, gave my heart a chill.

Suddenly I saw three heavenly children before me. They wore the thinnest robes, woven, it seemed, from frost, and transparent shoes, standing on the water's edge, peering intently into the eastern sky, as if waiting for the sun to rise. The eastern sky was already alight with whiteness. From the folds in their robes I could tell they were from Gandhara. I recognized them as being from a fresco that I had excavated at the ruins of the great Khotan Temple. I approached them quietly and greeted them in a very low voice, so as not to frighten

them.



**Buddha subdues the serpent and converts onlookers. Gandhara 2nd-3rd century**

“Good morning, children of the fresco at the great Khotan Temple.”

The three of them turned toward me. The radiance of their holy necklaces and their imposing and magnificent black eyes....

I spoke again, continuing to approach them.

“Good morning, children of the fresco at the great Khotan Temple.”

“And who may you be?” asked the child on the right, looking straight at me without blinking.

“I am Aoki Akira, who excavated the great Khotan Temple from the sands.”

“And what are you doing here?” said the same child, looking sternly at me straight in the eye.

“I want to worship the sun together with you.”

“The sun? It won’t be long.”

The three of them turned away from me. Their

necklaces briefly shined like yellow and bitter-orange and green needles, and their robes fluttered in the colors of the rainbow.

In the fiery platinum sky, from the edge of the olive green field beyond the lake, something that looked like it was melted, something seductive, as old as gold, crimson like that seen in a kiln, a single ray of light appeared.

The heavenly children stood perfectly erect and brought their hands together, looking toward it.

It was the sun. It was the sun of this heavenly realm, solemnly rocking its strangely round body that was like a thing melted down, in an instant climbing properly up in the sky. Its light now flowed in needles and bundles, and everywhere you looked you could hear a clicking and clacking.

The heavenly children jumped up and down in rapture, running over the silica sand of the pure-blue lake of True Enlightenment. Then suddenly one of the children bumped into me, and jumping back, screamed out while pointing up to the sky.

“Look, look, look at Indra’s net!”

I looked up at the sky. The zenith was now azure blue, and from it to the four corners of the pale edges of the sky, Indra’s spectral net vibrated radiantly as if burning, its fibers more fine than a spider’s web, its construction more elaborate than that of hypha, all blending together transparently, purely, in a billion intermingled parts.

“Look, heavens, it’s the drums of the wind!” said another child, bumping into me and running off in a flurry.

What can only be seen as the sun’s minus counterparts, shining indigo dark and gold and green and ashen, drums seemed to fall from the sky, and, impervious to human striking,

pounded out a sound with all their might; and while those countless heavenly drums called out, they seemed to be making no sound at the same time. I watched it all for so long that my eyes clouded over and all I could do was stagger about.

“Look, look at the blue peacock!” quietly said the same child who was on the right as he walked by me. Sure enough, beyond Indra’s net in the sky, on the far edge of those countless resounding heavenly drums, an enormous and strange blue peacock, fanning out its jeweled tail feathers, sang out in an ethereal voice.



That peacock was most certainly present in the sky. Yet, it was not to be seen at all. It was certainly crying out. Yet its cries were not to be heard at all.

After that, there was no way that I could see the three heavenly children.

Far from it, I vaguely recalled my own figure collapsed deep into the green grass and the wind.

*Roger Pulvers is an American-born Australian author, playwright, theatre director and translator living in Japan. He has published 40 books in Japanese and English and, in 2008, was the recipient of the Miyazawa Kenji Prize. In 2009 he was awarded Best Script Prize at the Teheran International Film Festival for “Ashita e no Yuigon.” He is the translator of Kenji Miyazawa, [Strong in the Rain: Selected Poems](#). He translated this story for The Asia-Pacific Journal.*

### **Wisdom, Beauty and Compassion in Miyazawa Kenji’s “Indra’s Net”**

**Jane Marie Law**

Miyazawa Kenji’s story “Indra’s Net,” in title and content, calls forth one of the most appealing visual references in Buddhism. Indra, sitting in his palace atop Mt. Meru (Sumeru in Buddhism, a mythical abode of deities, buddhas and bodhisattvas), unfurls a net above himself in the endless, empty, radiant sky. In the eye of each connection of the net hangs a jewel, and each jewel has countless facets. A brilliant sun illuminates the net, and each facet of each jewel reflects in it all the other jewels and all their facets. The image is one of radiance, of endless reproduction of reality, of interpenetration, of visual and imaginative emergence. It is also grandiose and clearly challenges our usual intellect and imagination as we try to grasp each facet containing the entirety of the rest of the field of refractions within it. Everything is as real as light.





**Mount Sumeru and other mountains  
illuminated by Amida's light**

Why did the early composers of Mahayana literature use such images, designed, almost perfectly, to blow our minds? What is at stake, beyond incomprehensibility, in an image such as Indra's net?

A powerful meditative tool, this visual device actually depends on a number of important philosophical ideas that coalesced in Mahayana Buddhism around the turn of the Common Era, as Buddhism became a pan-Asian phenomenon and absorbed ideas centered on a cosmic scale. All of these ideas, which continued to be expanded upon by religious thinkers over the next several centuries, challenge us with a simple Mahayana claim, in which EVERYTHING

is at stake: To penetrate the true nature of reality is to activate the ground of compassion. Conversely, to be truly compassionate, one must penetrate the true nature of reality. Wisdom, the ability to penetrate the true nature of reality and compassion, the ultimate goal in Buddhism, are like two wings of one bird. One cannot fly without both wings. What text presented us with Indra's net and what are some of the core Mahayana ideas that undergird this reflexive claim?

### The Avatamsaka Sutra

The image of Indra's Net appears in a text called the Avatamsaka Sutra (a shortening of the Sanskrit title Buddhâvatamsaka-nâma mahâvaipulya sūtra, Huayan-jing in Chinese and Kegon-kyô in Japanese) a composite text, sections of which circulated and continue to circulate independently.



**Avatamsaka Sutra painting, Korea, c. 1350**

Because this brief discussion concerns a Japanese writer, translations of Buddhist terms from here on will be limited to the Japanese. The components of the text were composed, most likely in Khotan (or a wider range of Central Asia), over a long period of time, probably around the third or fourth century CE. They were collected and redacted into a single text and appeared as a Chinese collection completed by Buddhahadra in about 420. Subsequent versions appeared over the next



several hundred years, bringing the text to its current form of forty chapters. The Huayan School of Buddhism in China, which centers on this text, had wide influence on other schools of Chinese Buddhism and influenced the emergence of Chan (Zen) as well. The Kegon school of Buddhism, based on this scripture, was one of the six schools of Buddhism in Nara Japan (710-794), and although Kegon never gained widespread popular worship in Japan after this period comparable to Tendai, Shingon or Zen, the school continues to exist in Japan today. This sutra is considered to be one of the most influential sutras in East Asian Buddhism. As a whole, it follows a two-part strategy: visual imagination followed by doctrinal exposition. The themes are the interdependent and interpenetrating nature of all reality and the stages of the cultivation of the bodhisattva path. The common English name for this sutra is The Flower Garland Sutra.

### **Unique status of the text in Mahayana Buddhism**

According to Mahayana Buddhist tradition, the text as a visual and doctrinal reality occupies a unique status. When the historical Buddha achieved enlightenment under the bodhi tree, the teaching he expounded was THIS one: the Avatamsaka Sutra. He entered into a state where the realm of enlightened beings surrounded him, and he not only described its fantastic, radiant beauty, but also preached the doctrines of emptiness and interpenetration, namely that all phenomena participate in and contain all other phenomena. Soon, however, he realized that what he was preaching was not accessible to the sentient beings in our buddha field. The very idea of interpenetration is too sublime, on too cosmic a scale for ordinary consciousness to understand. He then modified his pedagogical method, and preached the sermon we know today as “The First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma,” which contains the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, the Middle Way, the Three-fold Nature of Existence, what

is regarded in later Mahayana Buddhism as the “provisional doctrine.” Provisional to what? To what he first expounded as he entered his state of enlightened mind: the Avatamsaka Sutra. Part of the task of all Mahayana literature is to demonstrate that the new formulation of Buddhism, while emerging from early Buddhism, regards this very early Buddhism as an impartial and incomplete teaching, to be fully unfolded (even revealed) in the teachings of Mahayana. And to sell that idea, this text resorts to a visual and aesthetic appeal on a cosmic scale.

The core idea of the Avatamsaka Sutra is that all things, all phenomena, all dharmas contain in them all other things, all other phenomena, all other dharmas. The rich visual imagery of the Avatamsaka Sutra, of which the imagery of Indra’s net is but one celebrated example, make it clear that this interpenetration is both beyond our ability to grasp with our usual intellects and is also extraordinarily beautiful. Far from being nihilistic, interpenetration and this radical interdependence of all things is something we should aspire to know. We WANT to know it: it is so sublime and expansive. It is an awareness the realization of which has the power to transform one entirely. And it is the foundation of the bodhisattva path: the cultivation of enlightened mind and compassion for the benefit of all sentient beings. This idea, as expounded in the Avatamsaka Sutra, is dependent on (and assumes) a number of Mahayana developments.

### **The cosmic Buddha and the historical Buddha**

According to Mahayana Buddhism, the buddha from our realm, Shakyamuni Buddha is the historical manifestation for our buddha field of the cosmic principle of the universe: the Dharmakaya (Dainichi in Japanese). Our Buddha achieved enlightenment, and far from just “snuffing out” of the cycle of birth and death, he exists in the great space of mind, and

is in the presence of other enlightened beings from other buddha fields, which are as endless as the number of grains of sand in the river Ganges (to use a common Mahayana expression). This idea not only situates our Buddha in a much wider cosmic context, it also means that all of these buddhas and bodhisattvas from other buddha fields are interpenetrating one another in all of their sublime forms. The possibility for the complete Mahayana doctrine in this formulation is guaranteed: Beings in our buddha field can receive the teachings from other buddhas and bodhisattvas, and even resonate with the cosmic resonance of the cosmic Buddha itself (an idea developed through esoteric ritual, most directly through Shingon and also Tendai).

Far from being unique, our Buddha is one of billions and billions of enlightened beings in the universe. This idea provides Mahayana Buddhism with legitimacy, and also holds out to us that enlightenment is possible.

The Dharmakaya, this cosmic principle in Mahayana Buddhism, in Japanese is referred to as “The Great Sun Buddha” (Dainichi Nyorai). When we experience the nature of reality in all its entirety, it is as blinding and all illuminating as the Sun.

### **The great the bodhisattva ideal and the bodhisattva path**

Mahayana Buddhism also shifted the very goal of Buddhist practice, from a quest for personal liberation out of the cycle of birth and death and the ocean of suffering, to the goal of great compassion embodied in the bodhisattva ideal. One should enter the path of Buddhist salvation for the sole purpose of achieving enlightenment so that one can alleviate the suffering of other sentient beings. One vows, upon entering the path (as a monk originally and later with provisions for lay people) to continue to choose rebirth after enlightenment, until ALL sentient beings are saved from the ocean of suffering. If

one sentient being is left behind, one’s own enlightenment was for selfish ends.

Such a lofty and altruistic idea could sound naïve if that was all there was to it. In Mahayana Buddhist doctrine, a significant discourse developed which grappled with the very difficulty of that process. Beyond the eightfold path of “provisional” Buddhism as preached in the “First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma,” the bodhisattva path explores the nature of the human psyche and the cultivation of moral, devotional and meditative prowess, and also the cultivation, after enlightenment, of supernatural abilities, designed to make the assistance of sentient beings possible. In other words, to put it bluntly, if you are an ordinary, unenlightened person and you try and save sentient beings, chances are you will simply contribute to the problem. But as an enlightened being, your powers will be much greater. And along your path toward enlightenment, you are in training to be an enlightened being.

These multitudes who surround the Buddha as he expounds the Avatamsaka Sutra are these enlightened beings and the world he perceives is how they experience reality all the time. Buddhas and bodhisattvas do not get their minds blown by cosmic ideas like Indra’s Net; formulations such as these are the normal order of reality, the True Dharma. Our own experience of reality, by comparison, is limited and drab and clouds the brilliant and beautiful nature of a reality fully perceived.

### **The doctrine of emptiness**

The doctrine of emptiness lies at the heart of Mahayana Buddhism. Emerging from the core idea of the interdependent and co-dependent origin and nature of all things, the doctrine states that all things (ideas, physical objects, realities) are empty of inherent existence. They exist because they are dependent on other things: they “co-emerge” and “inter-are.”

But far from being a doctrine of nihilism, Mahayana Buddhism wants to advance the idea that this idea is sublime. While things may be empty of inherent existence, they are simply FULL of other, more profound things. In short, all things are connected to all other things. Absolutely nothing exists inherently by itself without being connected in a great NET of interpenetration.

Herein lies the beauty of the image of Indra's net: all things exist as reflected realities of all other things. And they are brilliant in the sun (the rising of which is awaited in Miyazawa's story).

How does an idea like this activate the mind of compassion? To know the true nature of reality, this interdependent and interpenetrating universe, is to remove the "I", and realize a greater "We." We are all connected. We are all made of the very light that is the endlessly refracted light of Indra's net.

The "I" in Miyazawa's story falls (through sleep or dream or reverie) in a grassy field, into a temporary state when he is able to be there on the Tsela Plateau, able to penetrate the radiance of the true nature of reality, able to see the angels that he only saw in stone relief in one dimension as an archaeologist of the Khotan Temple before. But now he is there with them awaiting the rising of the sun: the appearance of Dainichi Nyorai. We can only imagine, if like "I" in Miyazawa's story, we are able to shake loose our habitual mind (through meditation, through dream, through aesthetic reverie) and see the universe in this way, how it

might transform our way of being in the world.

Perhaps this was the question Miyazawa was asking: What happens to "I" after this vision in the grassy field?

*Jane Marie Law is Associate Professor of Japanese Religions and Ritual Studies at Cornell University. She is the author of Puppets of Nostalgia: The Life, Death and Rebirth of the Awaji Ningyō Jōruri Tradition (Princeton University Press, 1997) and most recently, co-editor with Vanessa Sasson of [Imagining the Fetus: The Unborn in Myth, Religion and Culture](#) (Oxford University Press, 2008). Her current research focuses on cultural memory of atrocity and the possibilities of reconciliation. She lives with her family and horses in the sublime corner of Indra's Net known as Ithaca, New York.*

Suggested further reading:

Thomas Clearly, trans. The Flower Ornament Scripture: A translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra (Boston and London: Shambala Press, 1993).

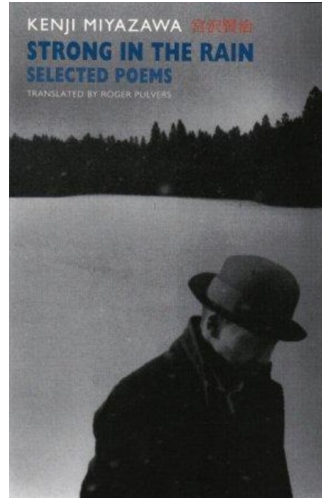
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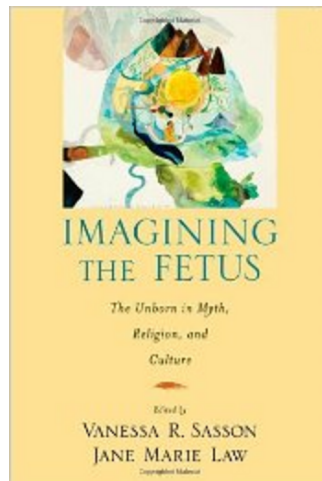
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