



The Excremental Imagination: Disgust, Compassion, and Laughter in Medieval Japan

Public Lecture

by Prof. em. Rajyashree Pandey

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This lecture analyses the many meanings assigned to faecal matter in the diverse Buddhist and literary narratives of medieval Japan. It addresses a subject which, for the most part, has been excised from public and intellectual life because it is seen as too disgusting or infantile to merit serious academic attention.

Excrement, it argues, was a pliant and malleable signifier, used as a metaphor for the foul and evanescent nature of the body, while at the same time working as a positive force, as an instrument of compassion, that ensured the salvation of humans, animals, and hungry ghosts who were associated with it. It was even mobilised to trouble the binaries of purity and impurity and attachment and enlightenment, and to generate laughter. The humorous tales about shit and farts in medieval Japan, it suggests, were less about transgressing social norms and more in the nature of literary games.



Rajyashree Pandey is Professor Emerita in Asian Studies at the Politics department of Goldsmiths, University of London, and a Visiting Fellow at the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh. She received her education in India, the United Kingdom, The United States, and Australia and has taught at many academic institutions across the world. She is the author of *Perfumed Sleeves and Tangled Hair: Body, Woman, and Desire in Medieval Japanese Narratives* (2016) and *Writing and Renunciation in Medieval Japan: The Works of the Poet-Priest Kamo no Chōmei* (1998). Her latest monograph, *The Excremental Imagination: Disgust, Compassion, and Laughter in Medieval Japan* is in press, to be published by University of Hawaii Press in August 2026.