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Religions of East Asia: China, Japan, Tibet

As a clue to the characteristic ways of thinking of the Eastern peoples, it will be important to study how they modified Buddhism.

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IT IS AN illusion to think of Asia as a cultural unity, as 'the Orient' or 'the mysterious East' to be contrasted with the ways of 'the West'. Against such clichés and monolithic concepts it is important to recognize the diversity of peoples, cultures and religions in Asia.² Such unity as these do possess is a result of their common humanity and their historical contacts. Buddhism brought about such contacts because it was a missionary religion arising out of the Hindu tradition and becoming pan-Asian in its influence. The point of Nakamura's suggestion is that Buddhism was received differently by the Asian peoples according to the differing character of the recipients. We can learn important things about them by taking Buddhism as a probe. Nakamura's illuminating investigation is concerned with 'ways of thinking'; but we may use the same approach to advantage to study the religious iconography of China, Japan and Tibet. The advent of Buddhism in each case brought a new awareness to the existing religious traditions of these lands and a new iconography; at the same time Buddhism and its iconography were altered. In this chapter we shall use this contact with Buddhism as a convenient focus for the iconographic riches of these east-Asian religious cultures.

China

The two great religions native to China, Taoism and Confucianism came to be conventionally grouped with Buddhism in 'the three doctrines'

after the entry and assimilation of Buddhism in the early centuries AD. But these two derived from a much more ancient common Chinese tradition of culture and folk-religion expressing man's relationship to the cosmos; the sense of wholeness embracing man, society and nature in the dynamic of a harmonious naturalistic universe has been called 'universism'.³ This underlies the elusive term *tao* (the Way, the eternal order) in the classical text of philosophical Taoism, the *Tao Te Ching*. It underlies also the *I Ching*, an ancient treatise on divination from the twelfth century BC which became the core of the Confucian Canon after Confucius in the sixth century BC had written a commentary on it; as the *Book of Changes* it sets out a system of signs for the changes in the universe resulting from the interaction of the two basic forces, Yang and Yin.⁴ This tradition can be seen in some ancient symbols which are basic to Chinese religions.

The complete cosmic circle comprises two complementary forces - Yang representing the more male characteristics and Yin the female. These correspond to polarities such as father-mother, sky-earth, dry-wet, bright-dark which are involved in the constant creative interplay of forces in the cosmos. The fact that the circle is divided not by a straight but a wavy line points subtly to the interpenetration of these opposites which share in each other's characteristics. This abstract symbol is applicable to all phenomena constituting the wholeness of Tao. Hence it came to be used by Taoists and Confucianists as the *T'ai Chi* symbol of the 'supreme ultimate'. It could decorate everyday objects, gates, ritual objects for exorcism, the robes of a Taoist priest and even a wrap for babies in the belief that the design would be a protective charm against demons.⁵

Around the circle are the eight trigrams (*pa-kua*) made up of variant combinations of a single line, representing Yang, and a broken line for Yin. These are orientated to the eight directions and also symbolize basic elements of the cosmos - heaven and earth, wind and thunder, fire and water, mountain and lake. As hexagrams these two lines give sixty-four variants, used for consultation of oracles but also the subject of philosophical interpretation for harmonious living.⁶

An ancient Chinese symbol of heaven is the circle, in contrast to the square for earth. The circular jade *pi* is interpreted as a symbol for heaven, the hole in the centre being the path of transcendence; if marked by spirals and raised dots these would signify the stars. It was one of six jade shapes used in the worship of heaven and was also placed on the corpse in burials. However, in this period (late Chou and Han, from the fourth century BC onwards) there were no images of gods. The highest deity



150. Yin-yang symbol with the eight trigrams.



151. Pi, jade disc, originating probably in the Shang period.



152. Bronze dragon resembling a winged horse.

was Shang Ti, the Supreme Ruler in heaven, the source of the emperor's legitimation and of blessings and punishments; he was conceived of in anthropomorphic terms, perhaps as a royal ancestor, but not as a creator god or an absolute principle like Tao. Tablets from the Chou period with markings for the face have been interpreted as symbols of the earth god or of a sage; but otherwise in the first millennium BC the gods were not depicted anthropomorphically. Indeed there was little interest in depicting the human form. By contrast there was abundant interest in depicting animals - most probably through the concern of popular religion for fertility, but also for their powerful significance for astrology and magic, as in the 'Chinese zodiac' of twelve animals.

Foremost among the fabulous animals and monsters is the dragon, which is like the serpent in having an ambivalent and cosmic significance. (The Indian Naga Kings were transformed into Dragon Kings when they entered Chinese religion.) Dragons dwell in the air, in the waters and the earth's recesses; they are therefore able to link up the levels of the cosmos, from the highest to the lowest. The dragon brings rain and is thus a source of fertility; removal of misfortune is a further function of the great wood-and-paper dragons featured in Chinese traditional folk-religious processions at New Year; but the dragon is also a creature of speed and dangerous power. The bronze dragon, sixth to third centuries BC, is similar to a horse but is winged and shows a menacing watchfulness. The dragon normally had only four claws on each foot, but with five it became the exclusive emblem of imperial power.

These ancient symbols illustrate some of the themes basic to Chinese religion in both its popular and aristocratic forms. One other theme must be mentioned: the cult of ancestors. The family was of central importance in China and filial duties were taken seriously. Fear of the dead and the hope that they would become benevolent gods led to the deification of ancestors which has coloured Chinese religion.⁷ Man is therefore surrounded by hosts of gods and demons, benevolent *shen* and harmful *kuei* and he needs to deal with them by various appropriate means - from solemn rituals to the use of charms, spirit-mediums and exorcists. These are mainly ritual activities which do not imply or require the use of images to worship.

The advent of Buddhism in the first century AD brought religious features which were new to China and modified this scene. Coming from India with a message of individual salvation propagated by monastic orders and a growing treasury of scriptures and images of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, it made a great appeal to the strife-torn China of the early centuries. The example of its impressive images and of the devotion the

inspired among Buddhists led to the development of images in a popular Chinese pantheon. It was at this same period that religious- or neo-Taoism was engaging on the quest for the magical elixir of life, for longevity and immortality; soon it acquired a whole cultic pattern, a canon of scriptures, temples, priests and monasteries modelled on Buddhist practices. The many deities⁸ relating to the aspects of Chinese life and the cosmos were depicted in vivid images in temples and domestic worship from the second century AD onwards. Buddhism and Taoism flourished together in these centuries leading to a merging of deities in the popular Chinese folk religion. In the later folk pantheon the supreme deity was the Jade August One under whom were the Five Controllers of the Five Sacred Mountains of China; these were portrayed in imperial ceremonial costume, and the hierarchy was structured like the imperial court and the administration. Other popular figures such as the Eight Immortals were protectors of Taoism who while not worshipped in the full sense were attached to the pantheon and much featured in legend, art and drama.

The response of the Confucian tradition was very different. It shared of course in the common heritage of Chinese 'universism', and had been pressed into the service of the ancient state religion with its sacrificial rituals linking heaven, earth and man. But its more rationalistic temper and humanistic ethic were opposed to the ethos of Buddhism and Taoism with their temples devoted to Buddhas and gods. The Confucian temple was a civil temple of culture.

For Confucius was the patron of learning, of the high culture, and consequently of the scholar-bureaucrats who ruled the civil government of China. It is most interesting that these educated élite resisted all efforts to deify their Master and that in a land where it was common to turn men into gods, Confucius remained a human figure. Perhaps he could most aptly be called the spiritual ancestor of the literate.⁹

The Confucian temple was therefore a memorial hall containing the spirit tablets of Confucius and the great sages. In the form of temple officially established in AD 505 wooden images of Confucius and later of the sages, including wall-painting portraits, were introduced. These were replaced by clay images in 960, and finally removed altogether in 1530 by a return to the simple wooden tablet of the 'ancestral' tradition.¹⁰ The tablet of Confucius himself, standing in the centre of the hall facing the entrance-way to the south was inscribed: 'Most Holy Former Master, The Philosopher K'ung'.

However, it should be pointed out that neither in the Confucian nor the Taoist traditions does the use of writing imply an absolute contrast to the visual image or symbol. Chinese has been called a 'picture language'

and the characters of its classical scripts arose out of ideograms. Chinese writing can be used as a form of visual symbolism and the art of calligraphy came to be much admired after the time of Confucius. There is a strong link between Chinese writing and painting, not least because they both apply brush to paper in rapid rhythmic strokes. Calligraphy and ink-painting were important artistic and spiritual media which Buddhism acquired in China and developed through Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism in Japan as well.

We turn now to ask what effect the religious culture of China had on Buddhism in return. Clearly it meant adapting to a very different culture from that of India. Just as Buddhist teaching and scriptures had to be translated from their Sanskrit originals into the thought-forms possible within the Chinese language, so the Buddha-image had to find indigenous styles which preserved the artistic power and iconographic features of the Indian originals from Gandhara. Buddhism won both popular support and imperial favour during its early centuries in China; but it still had to live with political uncertainty (culminating in the great persecution of AD 845), and it had to live with the other religions of China. Socially it had to come to terms with Chinese familism and ancestor-cults which were initially hostile to Buddhist monasticism and celibacy. The Chinese Buddhist monastery adjusted to this by becoming more sedentary and playing its part in the religious culture as a whole. This process of accommodation to Chinese culture has been suggested earlier by the example of the popular bodhisattva Kuan-yin. Another instructive example is that of Maitreya (Mi-lo) whose progress in China we shall now trace.



153. Standing Maitreya.

In both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism Maitreya was accepted as the future Buddha to whom one could turn in hope. In the distant future – maybe in thousands of years – the world would be on an upward surge of its cycle and Maitreya would then come down from his waiting place in the Tushita heaven to become incarnate on earth for the last time. He would live out the same pattern of life as did Gautama, the last Buddha, and bring a time of joy and blessings – above all, the opportunity of hearing his three preachings and of thus being fired to attain nirvana. Hence the note of eschatological longing: 'Come, Maitreya, come!' Especially with the development of the Mahayana cult of great bodhisattvas, Maitreya became a messianic saviour, a god of light illuminating the minds of the Mahayana sages and a friendly consoler and guide to the pious follower who sought his paradise to wait for rebirth at his favoured time. He was the focus of much devotion in north-west India in the early centuries AD, as evidenced by art at Gandhara and in central Asia, by which route the

devotional cult came to China. One of the formative leaders in Chinese Buddhism was Tao-an (312-385) who as a monk assembled seven disciples before an image of Maitreya to vow collectively that they would be reborn in the Tushita heaven to obtain Maitreya's guidance; and they continued this cult with the repetition of Maitreya's name. Moreover this received support from the Emperor Fu Chien at Chang'an who donated Maitreya images, and these must have done much to popularize Buddhism among the unlettered masses (fig. 139, p. 161).¹¹

This fervour can be seen embodied in the many images of Maitreya (Mi-lo) made in China from the fifth to the seventh centuries. Out of this troubled period under the Northern Wei dynasty (AD 477) comes a majestic bronze conveying the splendour and spiritual command of the coming Buddha; one can well imagine the sense of vital hope and exaltation aroused in the worshippers. Stylistically this standing figure shows the cumulative heritage of the Buddha-images developed in the more Indian style of Mathura, the Hellenistic Gandhara style and that of central Asia,¹² but as a cult image it shows the Chinese tendency to portray Maitreya as already a Buddha and not simply as a waiting bodhisattva.¹³ The details of the iconography can be traced from the numerous Maitreya images in their development during this period.¹⁴ Several of these features are shown in the stone relief from the first half of the sixth century. The crossed ankles became a mark (for some, at least) of how Maitreya sat in heaven; he was shown enthroned with attendants at his sides and lions by his feet. Apart from the stylized folds of his garment, the most striking feature is the great nimbus decorated with flame and lotus patterns, the head of Maitreya is surrounded by miniature reliefs of the seven previous Buddhas, showing that he is their successor, and still living, a saviour waiting to come. The meditative aspect is beautifully expressed in the wooden image from Korea, early seventh century, to be further developed in the famous images of 'Miroku bosatsu' (the bodhisattva Maitreya) in Japan. There is an ambiguity about the pensive figure with flexed leg, for it could also represent the young Shakyamuni whose pattern he will follow.

Meanwhile in China the devotion of people and emperors issued in some colossal images among the cave sculptures of Yün-Kang and at Lung-men.¹⁵ The cult of size derived not only from the desire for a permanent monument to Buddhism but also from the earlier belief that Maitreya was of tremendous size, linked to future well-being; and such colossi continued to be made down the succeeding centuries in China and Korea. In a less durable form the belief in Maitreya's coming inspired 'rebel ideologies' from time to time, from the early Maitreya societies



154. Seated Maitreya with halo, lions and attendants.



155. Meditating Maitreya (or Shakyamuni) from Korea.

whose leaders claimed to be incarnations of Maitreya to the later influential White Lotus Society (based on his traditional colour).¹⁶ But as a devotional cult Maitreyanism declined in the seventh century. A count of images in such centres as Lung-men shows that by AD 650 the popularity of Maitreya had been replaced by that of Amitabha and Kuan-yin; these no doubt offered hope and blessings in a more appealing and immediate form, especially as preached subsequently by the 'Pure Land' school of Buddhism. After the greatness of the T'ang period Buddhism played a less creative role under the Sung dynasty (tenth to thirteenth centuries). At the same time it can be maintained that 'it is in the Sung dynasty that Buddhism began its most active period of involvement with the life of the Chinese people'.¹⁷ In this period of popular religious sects there also emerged a form of devotion to Mi-lo. The older stately images of the future Buddha survived, but a completely different aspect is presented by Mi-lo Fo, the pot-bellied 'Laughing Buddha' of later popular Chinese religion depicted prominently in temples and domestic images.

The turning point of this metamorphosis was the story of a fat and jolly picaresque monk called Pu-tai who was a mendicant in the province of Chekiang and died in AD 916.¹⁸ He carried around a hemp-cloth bag (Pu-tai, hence his name) and attracted children who clambered over him. When asked about the bag he would give mysterious non-answers in the style of his Ch'an Buddhist sect - 'How old is your bag?', 'As old as space'. He was a popular, if undignified figure, wandering with uncovered protruding belly and smiling face.¹⁹ When he died it was rumoured in legend that he was still wandering and had the marks of a Buddha, or at least was an incarnation of Mi-lo. Wise sayings and Ch'an poems were attributed to him. The disreputable monk was really a saint, if a rather nonconformist one. This type of picaresque saint appears three centuries later in a traditional Chinese novel set in Chekiang about a drunken Ch'an monk Tao-chi.²⁰ It fits in with the tradition of spontaneity and unconventional answers and actions used as ways to enlightenment in early Ch'an (meditation) Buddhism.

These enlightened masters born Buddha-images and sutras, laugh in the face of inquirers or suddenly shout at them, and indulge in a thousand absurdities. Though they may behave like fools and possess nothing, yet they feel themselves to be true kings in their free mastery of enlightenment. They have no fear since they desire nothing and have nothing to lose.²¹

The nature of Zen iconoclasm will be further discussed in the following section on Japan. Meanwhile it should be noted that it took place within a framework of monastic discipline and belief in the Buddha-nature



156. Pu-tai, laughing pot-bellied monk.

pervading all things; this holds also for the Ch'an painters of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries such as Liang K'ai who could infuse this spirit into simple landscapes or shambling lumpish figures.²² Freedom and traditional practice went together.

In the broader stream of Chinese culture and religion, however, the figure of Pu-tai took on other meanings. He was identified with the earthly incarnation of Mi-lo as a fat reclining figure, sometimes with children clambering over him; these jolly and folksy features are balanced by marks of Buddhist iconography such as the long ear-lobes, posture of royal ease and rosary in the hand. He could also be placed among the broad class of Lohan, the saintly Buddhists (Arahats) who could include incarnations of Bodhidharma the Ch'an master or of Mi-lo. The point is that he was now seen and acknowledged as an earthly figure; in terms of the Mahayana *trikaya* doctrine he was a manifestation of the Buddha-nature at the Nirmana-kaya level, the 'Body of Change' (Hua Shen in Chinese). The consequences of this for Chinese Buddhist temples were important in so far as the new form of Mi-lo was no longer suitable for the sacred rearmost hall which had been dedicated to Maitreya as the glorious Buddha-to-come. This earthly form had to be given a lesser and lower



157. Mi-lo, the 'laughing Buddha'.



158. Shou-hsing, Chinese god of longevity.

place - at the entrance to the temple building where a new front hall was developed. This naturally was more prominent from the worshipper's viewpoint; and thus the popular cult of Mi-lo Fo was enhanced and institutionalized.²³ Pu-tai was now so much identified with Mi-lo as the friendly figure of mercy and hope that the original Maitreya was forgotten. For instance at the Yung-ho-Kung ('Lama Temple') in Peking in the 1930s the colossal traditional image of Maitreya in the back hall was no longer recognized by the guide as Maitreya but designated as a more general 'manifested Buddha', Ju-lai.²⁴ In Japan the name of Pu-tai in Chinese characters was pronounced 'Hotei' and he became one of the Seven Gods of Good Luck, often represented in painting and carving.

The historian of religions might view this metamorphosis of Mi-lo as an example of a perennial tendency: the tendency of a spirituality, orientated towards the future and the world beyond, to become identified with material forms and worldly benefits. It is as if the colossal Maitreya had exchanged his height for an enormous stomach, with a bag denoting prosperity and material wealth, reclining in peace and contentment, happy with the children around him. But when we ask what these features meant for the average worshipper we can see that they are familiar 'Chinese life-ideals'.²⁵ The fat figure and his love of children and families come to the mind of a mother when she proudly calls her fat baby a 'porcelain doll'.

So another step towards the Sinification of Buddhism had been taken: the first god to greet the Chinese worshippers was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh, and it was on him that the hope of Buddhism rested.²⁶

Even monks could model themselves on Mi-lo Fo. In recent times they had their photographs taken in typical seated posture with protruding stomach, sagging breasts and a happy smile explicitly compared in the caption to that of the Laughing Buddha. The great Chinese Buddhist leader T'ai-hsü had an almost identical photograph taken in 1935.²⁷

This extended example, by tracing the story of Maitreya through some 1600 years of Chinese Buddhism, has served to illustrate the process of 'assimilation' of a new religion to existing religious and cultural values.²⁸ Buddhism was accepted in China by taking its place alongside the existing religions and not by replacing them. Hence the early cult of Maitreya could not remain an independent Buddhist system but merged into other cultic practices and syncretistic sects. The Mahayana Buddhist pantheon was Sinicized and Mi-lo took his place in the popular Chinese pantheon. Thus a popular Shanghai lithograph of the 1920s-30s shows Mi-lo at the lowest level of four Buddhist tiers, guarded by the gods



159. One of the door guardian gods (men-shen).

Kuan-ti and Wei-t'o; and a devotional pantheon scroll places him, a distinctive bald-headed oddity, among eighteen so-called Buddhas.²⁹ The Mi-lo transformation also exemplifies one of the means of assimilation of the Buddhist pantheon – the category of the earthly Lohan applied to Pu-tai. Here is a process of 'euhemerization':

the tendency of a history-loving people to invest a god with the character and pedigree of a historical personality. . . . The Maitreyas, Amitabhas and other divinities had been transformed from symbols of religious ideas and aspirations into the pot-bellied patrons of one earthly concern or another, pawnbroker guilds, local industry, expectant motherhood.³⁰

It will be appropriate to refer now, in conclusion, to some of these gods of Chinese folk-religion. They include a wide range of such deified men, nature divinities and gods governing the departments of man's life on earth.

Shou-hsing, the god of longevity, is not an object of temple worship but is much revered because of the Chinese regard for the blessing of old age, as at the birthday of an elderly person. He is shown as an old man with a white beard and an outsize forehead and bald head. He holds the peach of immortality in one hand and is often accompanied by a venerable turtle or stork; he may hold a dragon-headed staff with a gourd containing the elixir of life. He is believed to have decided the date of each person's death and written it on tablets.

Domestic protection is offered by the door-guardian gods (men-shen) just as the images of the celestial kings guard the vestibule of a Buddhist temple. These were also mythical beings originally but were replaced by deified generals. As two armed soldiers whose task is to keep away evil spirits, their pictures may be painted on doors or, for poorer homes, just stuck on in the form of cheap prints.

Kuan-ti is a clear example of an historical figure – the brave general Kuan Yu (d. AD 220) – who was renowned in stories and plays but not deified until the sixteenth century. He may be represented with his horse, in a green dress and with red face. His appeal was to both the group of scholars, officials and soldiers, as god of war to whom the official cult made spring and autumn sacrifices, and to the masses as a judge and protector to whom they could appeal. He is here a Taoist god and is also valued for predicting the future and as patron of literature and commerce.

Since the emphasis in the worship of these deities is on the practical benefits they will confer, it is not surprising that the god of wealth, Ts'ai-shen, is very popular not only with bankers and merchants but with any desiring financial prosperity. Taoism made him head of a ministry of wealth, following the idea of a heavenly hierarchy based on



160. Kuan-ti, god of war.



161. Ts'ai-shen, god of wealth



162. Tsao-wang, god of hearth and kitchen.

earthly models. This idea applied also to the realms of hell in the Buddhist-Taoist system of hells presided over by the Yama kings (Yen-wang); these were related to ten law-courts which judged crimes and allotted the fearsome variety of tortures.³¹

Worship of the kitchen-god is of particular interest among the 'paper gods' of Chinese popular religion.³² Although often crudely and gaudily depicted on the cheap prints, Tsao-wang and his wife are worshipped with circumspection for they witness all the words and deeds of the family and report accordingly to the Jade Emperor at the year's end to allot the next year's fortune. Before the annual report a sacrifice of sweets is offered to ensure sweet words from the god's mouth. During his few days' absence in heaven he does not see what goes on in the kitchen, which leaves room for freer behaviour. The old picture having been burned, a new one replaces it in the shrine over the hearth at the god's return at New Year, accompanied by fire-crackers and a sacrifice.

This indicates a very down-to-earth sense of the presence of the deity in the image, whether it be a paper god or the more usual clay image. Life is given to the image by placing small objects representing the internal organs into openings through the back, also by priestly ceremonies and the painting of the eyes. This recalls the use of images in India and a similar variety of images if found, including the worship of stones. The image is felt to guarantee the presence of the god, capturing this spirit and making it vivid and tangible to the worshipper. 'We make images of the gods so that we can see them and know what the gods are like.'³³ There are numerous temples which serve as palaces for the gods, ranging from tiny shrines to resplendent brightly-painted buildings housing the principal deity and an array of others of both Buddhist and Taoist origin.³⁴ Worshippers come to obtain the help of the gods by lighting incense, bringing sacrificial offerings and seeking their will by divination. Additional fervour and vividness are added by festivals such as that for the god's birthday and by theatricals - which are thought to entertain the gods as well as men.

Although certain deities such as Kuan-yin and Kuan-ti have led the field in popularity, it is clear that there is a tremendous variety of local and departmental gods according to place and time in China. Graham's survey in Szechwan over the period 1921-1948 indicates the changes that were happening before the advent of Communist rule.³⁵ The variety and the changes result from the Chinese functional view of their gods. Their cults wax and wane according to whether they work; if not, the gods can be neglected or dismissed. 'The gods are alive because they have manifested themselves through their works.'³⁶

Japan: Shinto and Buddhism

It is appropriate to lead on from China to Japan which derived so much of its culture from China. The advent of Buddhism in the sixth century AD gave Japan its script in the form of Chinese characters and a new art, architecture and iconography. Chinese influence on the arts and religions of Japan continued over the centuries with the result that some early Chinese forms have been better preserved in Japan than in China itself.

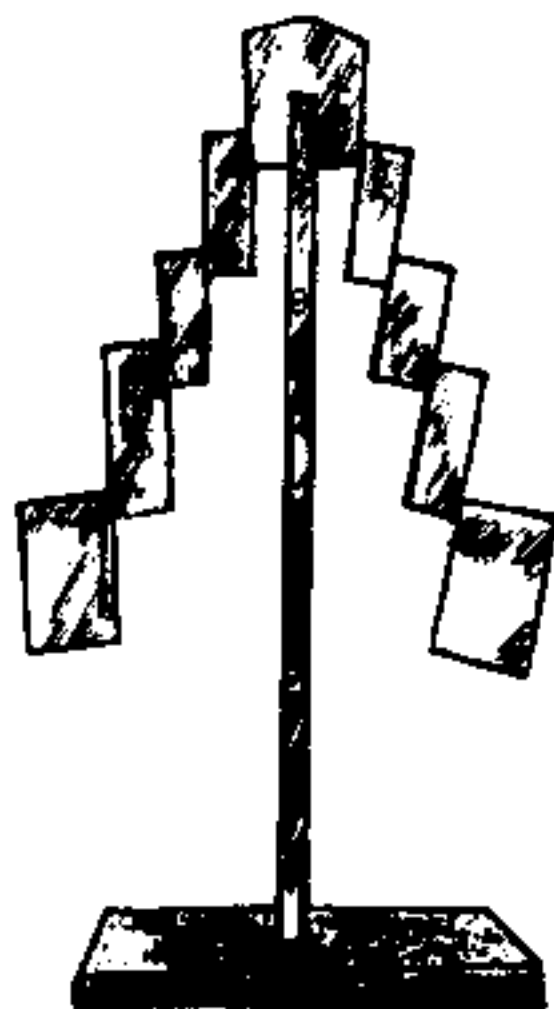
Nevertheless Japan had its own cultural roots which developed with the ingrafting of foreign elements. In the realm of art where it is sometimes hard to distinguish Japanese and Chinese works, the following general trends are contrasted by Paine and Soper: Japan gave more play to feeling and emotional longing in contrast to the ethical high-mindedness of Chinese arts influenced by Confucian standards; Japan favoured the concrete and the particular, the simple statement close to life itself, whereas China sought the universal, the symbolic and the intellectual representation; Japan long remained feudal with strict artistic traditions based on school lineage and master; Japan brought to a high pitch the art of decorative designing with a characteristic sensitivity, simplicity and charm.

To the Japanese the world was an object of beauty and pleasure. The satisfaction and the gaiety, which were basic, were sometimes tinged with Buddhist ideas of transitoriness or sometimes they reflected the ethical valuations of the Chinese, yet the pride of living in a country created physically by the gods, myths which in their day arose to explain the wonder the early inhabitants felt towards their bountiful land, derived from Shinto thought and gave to many forms of art an expression peculiarly Japanese.³⁷

Likewise the various religious influences from China - not only Buddhism but Confucianism and religious Taoism - were interwoven with Japanese folk religion and become part of the heritage of Japanese life. 'The various traditions became so deeply rooted in Japanese life, that the ordinary villager considers every aspect of local religion as indigenous to his village.'³⁸ Local festivals and cults, the importance of clan, family and ancestors and a sense of national feeling all helped to relate these traditions to everyday life and reinforce a sense of cosmic harmony. As in China, and even more so, there is a basic sense of the closeness of man, gods and nature; man is related to the sacred powers whether they be Buddhas or Shinto 'gods' (*Kami*); all alike share in the beauty of nature.³⁹ Folk religion must be seen as a pervasive and continuing influence binding the plural traditions through such features as



163. Haniwa, baked clay figure of the tomb guardian.



164. Gohei, Shinto symbolic offering.

seasonal festivals, domestic cults, mountain religion and the sacred powers of nature.⁴⁰ Bearing this in mind we shall now look at some of the distinctive Japanese developments in the Shinto and Buddhist traditions.

The indigenous religion of prehistoric Japan is obscure. Clay figurines from the Jomon period reaching back to the third millennium BC include quaint fish-eyed female images which may indicate a domestic cult of the Mother-goddess.⁴¹ In the protohistoric period (second to sixth centuries AD) the Yamato people of central Honshu developed large tombs in which they placed terracotta figurines called *haniwa*; these served as tomb-guardians, perhaps substituting for people and possessions once buried with the deceased, and they represent soldiers, women, horses, monkeys and houses. The art of stylized representation was therefore not lacking, but the early religion of the clans out of which Shinto emerged made no use of images in worship. Cult-centres were extremely simple, without buildings and consisting of a sacred tree, stone or natural object marked off as a sacred space. This simplicity of the 'pure' element of nature is still a feature of Shinto, as is the use of ropes and the *Torii* arch as sacred markers. Sacred objects embody the divine powers which hallow all life and confer the blessings of harmony, rightness and co-operation on the varied enterprise of man. Shinto is not primarily a 'nature religion' but rather a community religion of family, clan and nation grounded in a sense of the harmony of the universe and of awe at the mystery of all life. It is an amorphous type of religion with no fixed theology and scripture. The multitudes of *Kami* are not so much gods as sacred powers embodied in cosmic forces, superior men, natural objects and even abstract principles. They take up their abode in objects which symbolize their presence, such as a special stone or mirror; these are regarded as the 'divine body' (*shintai*) which is housed in the innermost sanctuary of the shrine and constitutes it as a sacred place of worship.⁴² Because of this direct presence of the *Kami* in sacred objects and symbols providing a bond between the human and sacred worlds there was no need for Shinto to develop images to represent the *Kami*. Shinto remains primarily aniconic, with the later addition of some images but not developing a distinctive Shinto iconography.

Although the *Kami* and their symbols are numerous and diverse, classic Shinto symbols are the mirror, the jewel and the sword. The mirror is a profound symbol of purity and clear light, and as the *shintai* of the Grand Shrine at Ise it is derived from the Sun-goddess Amaterasu whose spirit was caught by the mirror outside her cave. The *gohei* is a symbolic offering which can also be a symbol of the sacred presence. It is a wand with strips of paper folded in zigzag form hanging on each side and

stands in a central position before the inner doors of a shrine; in some shrines there may be more than one, representing several enshrined *Kami*. It is usually of white paper, but may also be coloured and of metal or cloth.⁴³ Miniatures of the Shinto symbols are found on the 'god-shelf' (*Kamidana*) of domestic worship. Here also may be found an *ofuda*, a sheet of paper folded over a supporting stick and imprinted with the name of the 'god' represented. When a person has made a pilgrimage to a Shinto shrine he can bring back this symbol of the *Kami* and place it either in his household shrine or over the entrance to the house to benefit from the continued protection of the family.

The more developed form of Shinto resulted from the example of Buddhism and the influence of Chinese culture. Thus the name Shinto is itself of Chinese origin (*shen-tao*, 'way of the gods') while referring to the distinctively Japanese *Kami* in contrast to the newly arrived 'way of the Buddha'. Chinese architectural forms were imposed on the simplicity of the earliest wooden shrine-buildings in the ancient traditions preserved at Ise and Izumo, leading to elaborate complexes of buildings and ornate curved roofs instead of thatch. As Buddhism became the dominant religion of the imperial court and state it supplied a more sophisticated pattern for Shinto, not only in its organization of temples and priests but also in its sacred hierarchy. In the eighth century period when Nara was the capital, the 'great Buddha' (*Daibutsu*) image was built there at the temple Todai-ji; and as Lochana and the so-called Sun Buddha, Vairocana, it was identified with the Shinto sun-goddess Amaterasu. This developed

to a process of fusion whereby the Buddhas and bodhisattvas were regarded as counterparts of the Japanese *Kami*. In the following centuries of syncretistic *Ryobu* (two-way) Shinto the influence of Buddhist priests and practices was widespread. From this came the occasional use of images of Shinto gods and goddesses. The wooden image from the Kyoto area in the ninth century has its ultimate inspiration in Chinese Buddhism; but the face shows a mysterious puffiness characteristic of some Japanese images and the robe and headdress are not Buddhist.

The confluence of these traditions in religion and art is seen in the Toshogu shrine, a mausoleum to the great shogun Ieyasu (d. 1616). He was much influenced by Buddhism and his tomb is in the form of a bronze stupa, but he was regarded as a *Kami* at this Shinto shrine. The ornate polychrome carvings are not typical of the normal Shinto shrine, especially since the Shinto revival of the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries and the modern emphasis on ancient purity and simplicity of style. Shinto shrines do not usually feature paintings, but calligraphy may be used as an art-form along with the aniconic symbols. The popular shrine of the rice-



165. Ofuda, folded paper representing Shinto deity.



166. Shinto goddess from Kyoto region.



167. Inari, Shinto god of the rice harvest with foxes as messengers.



168. Shaka-nyorai, infant Buddha.

harvest god Inari at Kyoto (the Fushimi-Inari Taisha) occupies a whole hillside with its pathway, arched by many red-lacquered Torii, leading the pilgrim by sacred stones and the beauty of nature; the fox is here depicted frequently in images as the messenger of the *Kami* holding a jewel in its mouth. Shinto is a this-worldly 'way' of religion in which the *Kami* bless all aspects of man's life, but its distinctively Japanese tradition has incorporated many foreign elements in religion and art.⁴⁴

Turning now to the Buddhist tradition we find explicit iconography as part of Buddhism from the outset of its establishment in Japan. When it was formally admitted in the mid-sixth century Buddhism came via Korea on the wave of Chinese culture with its script and scriptures, its impressive art and its promise of spiritual and material blessings. These were all new to Japan and proved very appealing to the ruling powers such as Prince Shotoku whose constitution of AD 604 made both Confucianism and Buddhism pillars of the state. The famous monastery of Horyuji which he founded in 607 near Nara not only became a centre of learning and community life but developed Buddhist art in the form of remarkable bronze images and wall-paintings based on the earlier Chinese style. These indicate that worship in early Japanese Buddhism was directed to a basic pantheon of four Buddhas: Shaka (Shakyamuni) the historic Buddha, Amida of the Western Paradise with his popular bodhisattva Kannon, Miroku the future Buddha and Yakushi the healing Buddha. The murals at Horyuji depict them receiving believers into their four Paradises. Bodhisattvas, saints, disciples and the four Guardian Kings fill out this familiar Mahayana Buddhist group which was to continue as the basis of Japanese developments in the following centuries.

Little more need be said about Kannon whose abundant compassion is expressed in many images (fig. 146, p. 164). The figure of Shaka is also central cultically. An interesting variant is the famous eighth-century bronze of the infant Shaka preserved at Todaiji, Nara. This is displayed at the festival of the Buddha's birthday on 8 April, for it depicts the scene of his 'seven steps' taken at his birth; here he points to the sky with his right hand and to the earth with his left claiming lordship over them. The Yakushi Buddha was lord of the Eastern Paradise but no rival to Amida; his renown was for healing, which is depicted by his attribute of a small medicine-jar, here held in his left hand but sometimes held in both hands of a seated Yakushi. It was primarily through the compassion of Kannon and the healing power of Yakushi that Buddhism made its appeal at the popular level. For the ruling class Buddhism offered protection for the state through its spiritual power, its teachings and its priests, as well as the prestige of high culture. Among the Buddhist rituals one which

affected all levels of Japanese society was the memorial service, as Shinto left the important area of funeral rites to Buddhism. This accords with the basic emphasis of Buddhist teaching on salvation beyond this world; but the history of Buddhism in Japan made it more world-affirming, more deeply involved in Japanese family life and culture and more diverse and expressive in iconography. This was the achievement of the emerging Japanese Buddhist sects.⁴⁵

Shingon or esoteric Buddhism made an important contribution. As 'Chen-yen' (true word, mantra) Buddhism, it flourished for a short period in China, drawing on Tantric rituals and symbols as well as magical and cosmological aspects of Chinese Taoism. These were brought to Japan by the great religious thinker Kukai in the early ninth century who developed a system of 'Ten Stages of Religious Consciousness' leading to the supreme knowledge of Vairocana, the Cosmic Buddha. This made an intellectual appeal to some, while the Tantric emphasis on secret teachings to initiates had the added attraction of mystery. The Shingon readiness for syncretism of practices from India, China and Japan reflected the movement at this time for synthesizing Shinto and Buddhism. In addition to its appearance at the courtly level, Shingon could appeal to the masses with its magical practices, ritual formulae and richly expanded pantheon. Kukai's genius was able to harness these features to iconography; he himself excelled in the arts and appreciated them as a means of opening up profound truths to the understanding. The nature of the Buddha included the beautiful, and mastery of the 'three mysteries' – the actions, speech and thoughts of the Buddha – would enhance the ability of the artist.⁴⁶ This interrelation of nature, art and religion came to characterize not only Shingon Buddhism but the wider Japanese aesthetic attitude. Some examples will show the atmosphere of mystery and the specific iconographic contributions of esoteric Buddhism to Japanese art.⁴⁷

The Great Sun Buddha Vairocana (Dainichi or Ichiji Kinrin in Japanese) is the primal source of all; his body is the universe which is understood in Shingon in the sense of pantheism or cosmotheism. Images such as the one from the late Heian period (c. 1100) express something of the awesome radiance of visions; he sits on a lotus with circles of light around his head and body, and the glittering crown on his head illumines the universe. He is also the source and revealer of truth – the higher esoteric truth of Shingon – and this is represented by the 'knowledge-fist', the Tantric *vajra-mudra* which is interpreted as the five elements of the world (the fist) clasping the sixth element, consciousness (the forefinger). The style of the earlier Shingon works is continued here, austere spiritual and at the same time alluring 'with a kind of heavy Indian sensuousness, appeal-



169. Yakushi, healing Buddha with his medicine jar.

ing but still foreign';⁴⁸ this foreignness has now been absorbed into a Japanese style which is more lifelike and charming but suffused with a sense of mystery derived from the esoteric Tantric tradition.

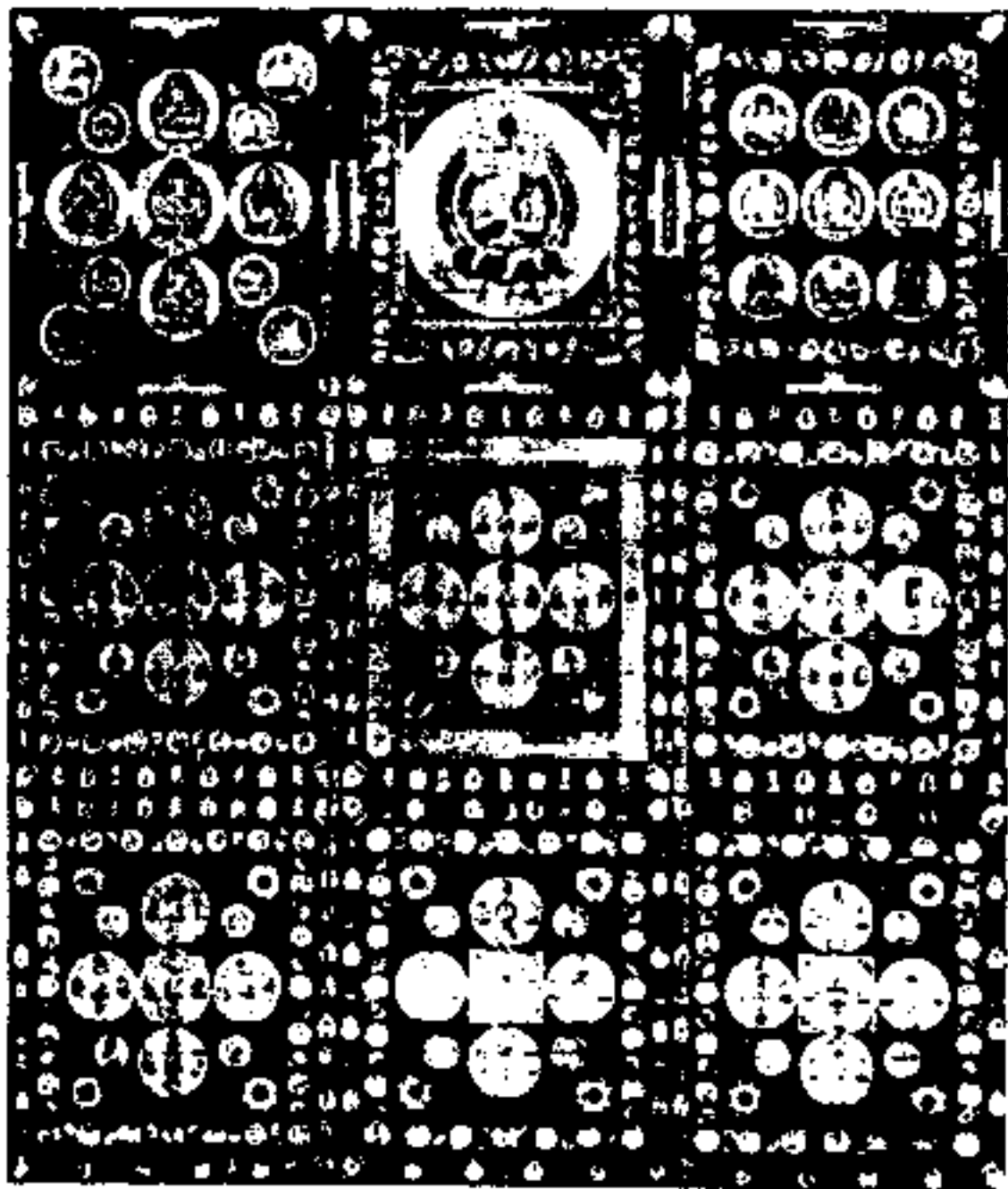
An important innovation which Kukai brought back from China was the mandala, originating in India as the magic circle used for Tantric meditation. Since the world is based on dualities there are two complementary mandalas in Kukai's system of 'Ryokai' (both-circles) designed to frame the great pantheon of Shingon Buddhism. The 'Kongo-Kai' represents the Diamond or Vajra circle of the eternal 'indestructibles'; this refers to Vairocana who is shown as the Great Illumination in the centre of the upper row of nine squares, with the four hundred and thirty-seven Buddhas who are his emanations arranged in the squares and circles beside and below him.⁴⁹ The correlative 'Taizo-Kai' represents the womb circle of the changing world with its rows of deities who are partial manifestations; these came to include Shinto *Kami* under the



170. Ichiji Kinrin (Dainichi).

Buddhist theory of their being manifestations of the original substance ('Honji-suijaku').⁵⁰ The centre part shown in detail places Vairocana at the centre of an eight-petalled lotus for the four 'Dhyani' Buddhas and their bodhisattvas (Monju, Kannon, Miroku, Fugen). This pair of large mandalas is a feature of Shingon temple worship. It is intended as a cosmogram summing up the complementary eternal and dynamic categories of the Buddhas; absolute wisdom and redemption in the world. In meditation it is intended as a psychogram by which the viewer identifies his own innermost being with the cosmic essence, the microcosm with the macrocosm.⁵¹ The mandala also serves as a model in some Shingon altar rituals, and it has wider applications in traditional architecture and town planning, but its primary religious purpose is to aid the worshipper to find his way to the Buddha-centre of the universe and thus be reintegrated.

This is brought out most clearly in the Shingon discipline (yoga) of ritual and meditation which Carmen Blacker aptly sums up as a method of 'symbolic imitation'.⁵² The esoteric rituals, formerly secret to initiates, are an external performance of imitating the symbols and icons of the Buddha in order to release the Buddha-nature within and thus bring about a shift of consciousness. In Shingon the Three Mysteries provide the



171. Kongo-kai (diamond-circle) Shingon mandala.



172. Taizo-kai (womb-circle) central lotus section.

basic framework of symbols – the bodily actions in the form of mudras with many forms and esoteric meanings, the Buddha's speech in the form of sound ('sonorous forms of the divinity') and the thoughts of the Buddha symbolized by visualized shapes and forms: When the disciple visualizes a lotus, just as when he utters a mantra, he is rousing up an image already latent within. In the intensive re-enactment of the ritual drama the disciple has to use these symbols. He has to visualize a mandala as a universal Mount Meru, a lotus, a palace and finally Vairocana; he then summons the Buddhas into his mandala until Vairocana is fused with the disciple, 'entering me and me entering'. The ritual drama thus symbolizes an inner awakening.

The repeated 'acting out' of this climactic union is believed to bring about its own reality, so that the disciple achieves his final end of *sokushin-jobutsu*, becoming a Buddha in this very body.⁵³

One can recognize the Indian Tantric origin of this discipline. Likewise the much-expanded pantheon of Shingon shows the incorporation of Hindu deities with multiple arms and faces, such as Brahma (Bon-ten). Guardian Kings are depicted with fearsome visages and terrifying displays of power. An important figure of this type is one of the Wisdom-Kings, Fudo ('the Immovable') whose wooden image was said to have been brought by Kukai to Japan. The iconographic marks are a sword with a *vajra* symbol on its handle, a rope or lasso to capture the evil demons and a glaring fearsome appearance. Later features shown here include a dragon on the sword and a nimbus of fierce flames to burn up illusion. All this is in the service of Vairocana whom he manifests in Japan; wrath against evil is for a benevolent purpose, that of bringing all beings to attain Buddhahood, in this respect using his power like the compassion of a bodhisattva. This tension contributes to the numinous power of Shingon images and one can sense the impact of such a flame-surrounded Fudo when shown amid the firelight and incense of a late night ceremony. Mystery of a quieter sort is felt in some other esoteric images where the half-opened eyes convey the sensuous enchantment of a day-dream. Of the six-armed Nyoirin-Kannon kept in a dark cupboard at Kanshin-ji, Osaka, Yashiro comments:

The limbs seem to move in mysterious rhythms, pulsating with warm blood beneath the white skin of the plump arms.⁵⁴

In its art as well as in its ritual Shingon Buddhism exerted the appeal of its 'magic and mystery'. It gave its images special importance as embodying the Buddha-essence and the powers which the believer could appropriate in himself.



173. Fudo, Shingon 'King of Wisdom' (Myo-o).

Contemporary with Shingon in the Heian period and equally influential was the eclectic Buddhism of the Tendai sect, likewise derived from China in the early ninth century. Its great Japanese founder Saicho gave the *Lotus Sutra* a central place and also brought from China the way of faith in Amida and the practices of Ch'an Buddhism. These were all to prove important for the new medieval sects, even if Tendai iconography is less vividly impressive than that of Shingon. The interplay of the two major sects produced some inspiring images of Amida as the gracious Buddha of the Western Paradise whose name the faithful glorified by repeating the 'Nembutsu'. The gilded wooden image by the eleventh-century sculptor Jocho shows Amida meditating on a lotus but not in remoteness from man. His half-closed eyes seem to be fixed on the worshipper who is subtly related to him as the receiver of his promise





175. Yamagoshi-Amida (Amida appearing behind the mountains).

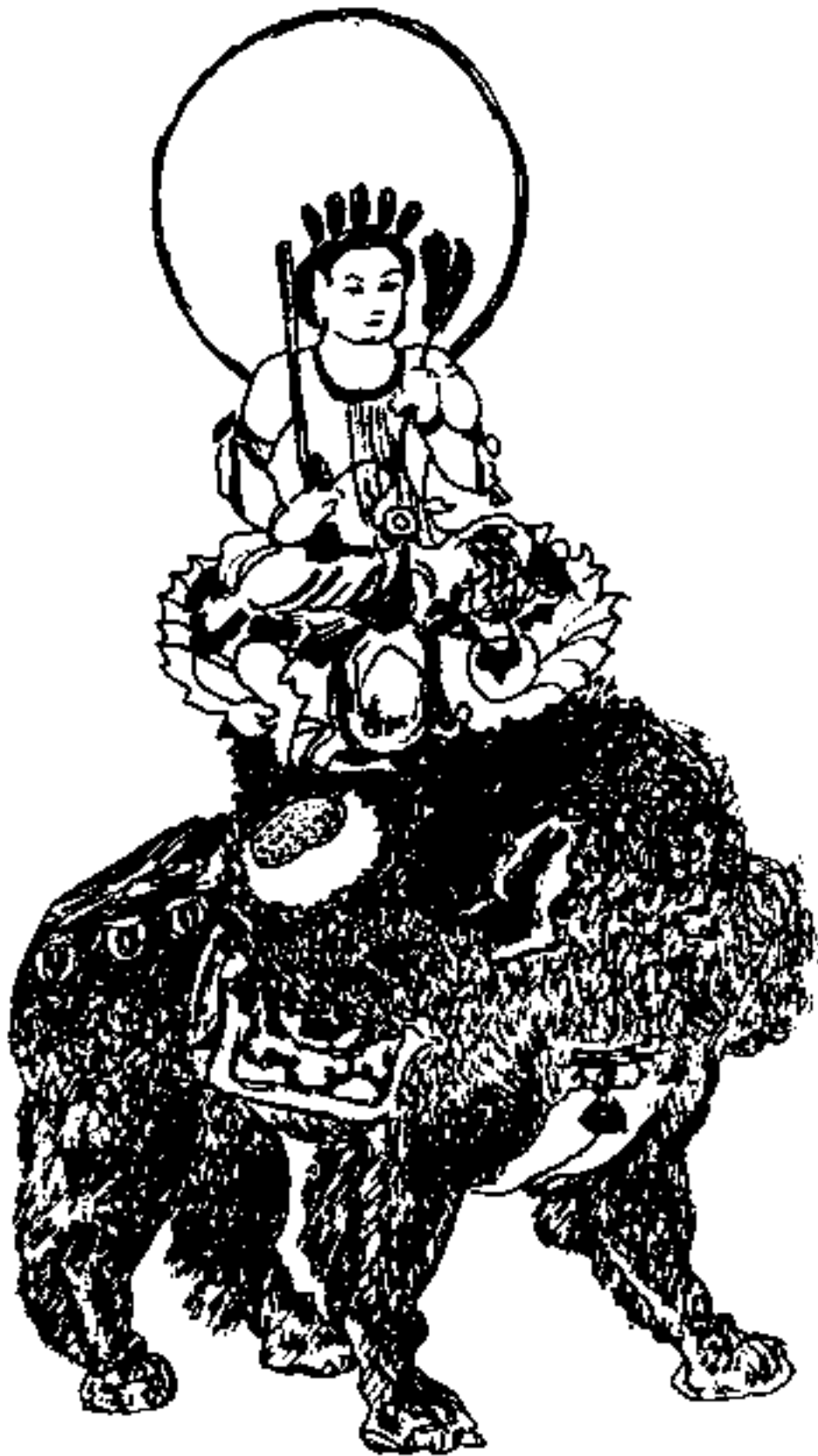


176. Fugen (bodhisattva Samantabhadra) on elephant mounts.

and gentle mercy. The glories of his paradise are symbolized by the ornate flame-like nimbus backing the image. More colourful and dramatic again are the paintings depicting the 'Raigo' (descent) of Amida who is not only approachable but in dynamic movement, rushing downwards to save men; he is accompanied by some twenty-five bodhisattvas whose plumy and cheerful expressions as well as their joyful music welcome the faithful to paradise.⁵⁵ An interesting use of this theme is the 'Yamagoshi-Amida' who appears from behind the mountains resplendent with an enormous halo, as the Buddha of Infinite Light; in the foreground stand the smaller figures of the two accompanying bodhisattvas, Seishi praying and Kannon bringing a little lotus throne for the believer. This is a large scroll-picture from the thirteenth century when Amidism had gained a large popularity following through the evangelists of 'Pure Land' Buddhism. One can imagine the intense devotion inspired by such a scroll at times of approaching death when strings could be drawn from the hands of Amida to the hands of the believer on his deathbed. Earth and its troubles are dwarfed by the huge Amida, of whom a text says: 'Sounds of celestial melody are heard far off, and from the regions of the setting sun Amida comes to save the world'.⁵⁶

It is appropriate to mention some other figures popular in Japanese Buddhism. Among the bodhisattvas (*bosatsu*) the major ones were brought from China at an early date and it is possible to compare the iconographic forms with paintings from the seventh to tenth centuries preserved at Tun-huang on the crucial central Asian entrance to China where the Indian traditions of Buddhism mixed with others.⁵⁷ Avalokiteshvara proved to be no less beloved in Japan as Kannon. Samantabhadra (or 'omnipresent goodness') was associated with Shakyamuni in the Lotus sutra and as Fugen was emphasized in Japan by the Tendai sect as the protector of all devotees of this sutra. He could be taken as the representative of the Buddhist discipline of reason and concentration; but his wider popularity was associated with his power to save women and even to prolong life. Fugen is attractively shown seated on a lotus on his characteristic mount, a white elephant, which may have several heads each with six tusks. The bodhisattva Manjushri personifies supreme wisdom, said to be symbolized by the five knots of his hair for the collective teachings of the five Buddhas. He carries a sword (wisdom striking down the obstacles to enlightenment) and a sutra scroll. Seated on a lotus, his mount is a lion, here shown crossing the sea from India to China; his sacred mountain, Wu-t'ai in China, was a pilgrimage place. As Monju in Japan his greatest popularity came in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries as a guarantor of salvation through his wisdom.

Most popular of all after Kannon, was Jizo. Of minor importance in India as Kshitigarbha (meaning 'earth-womb') his name connected him to the earth and lower world where he became counsel for the dead, consoling and alleviating their sufferings in hell and also helping bereft children there. This power to dispel darkness below led to his being a curer of darkness above as the healer of eye diseases and as guide of the dead he also became a guardian of travellers. Because he had been a woman in previous existences he was renowned as a helper of women and children, while some small images of him reflect a phallic cult. It is not hard to account for the continued popularity of Jizo since the eleventh century. He is depicted in kindly human form in a monk's robe with shaven head, a holy man who had vowed to devote himself to helping mankind until the coming of Miroku. His status as bodhisattva is indicated by his halo and lotus stand and even by an *urna* on his forehead. In one hand he holds a staff to open the doors of hell, surmounted by six tinkling rings to warn living creatures in his path, and in the other the inexhaustible jewel for granting human wishes.



177. (left) Monju on lion mount (bodhisattva Manjushri).



178. (right) Jizo (bodhisattva Kshitigarbha) in monk's garb.

Complementary to Jizo but at a lower level is Emma-o, originally Yama, King of the dead and master of hell in the Hindu tradition continued by Buddhism. In China and Japan he is depicted as a Chinese judge meting out punishments, red-faced and angry though occasionally relaxing and granting an extension of life. Sitting at his judge's table with an official tablet he has secretaries in attendance to supply the records and subordinate kings of departments of hell. Emma-o is also aided by a mirror reflecting people's past deeds and a staff with accusing faces. He is just one of many figures from India, China and Japan which expanded the Buddhist pantheon by the addition of deities popularized in legend and folk-lore. In Japanese popular religion of later centuries there developed the group of 'Seven gods of Good Luck', mainly of Chinese origin and representing the desire for wealth, happiness and long life, such as Hotei and Daikoku.⁵⁸ Their pictures lend themselves to humour and caricature, and while they are not used as objects of worship they are often charms and omens of good luck and business prosperity.

Meanwhile the main stream of Japanese Buddhism was deeply affected by the emergence of the great popular Japanese sects in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries. Confronted by troubled times and a sense of crisis in what was believed to be the cataclysmic last age with the 'decline of the law', leaders trained in Tendai Buddhism developed new methods and teachings to meet the needs of farmers, fishermen and military men of Japan. They selected for emphasis certain teachings, scriptures and forms of discipline and devotion which gave their sects a more intense and exclusive tone. While this did not lead to any real iconoclasm it led to a selective use of images with new practices and interpretations. The popular 'Pure Land' evangelicalism of Honen and Shinran focused all on faith in Amida alone, with a corresponding simplification of worship. In the temples of the widely followed Jodo Shinshu sect there are no images of Buddhas apart from Amida and the bodhisattvas, enshrined in a side building; Shaka is neither represented nor worshipped, presumably being identified with Amida.⁵⁹ The main hall is dedicated to the founder Shinran whose image is enclosed behind the golden-decorated high altar.

Nichiren Buddhism takes an opposite line, opposing Amidism and proclaiming the *Lotus Sutra* as the exclusive scripture and hope for the nation, with the historic Shakyamuni as the Buddha. Nichiren temples therefore feature images of the seated Shaka and the former Buddha Prabhutaratna as recorded in the *Lotus Sutra*. But between the two is the distinctive mandala (*mandara*) of Nichiren which expresses in vertical writing the invocation of the title of the sutra which is the true object of worship: 'Hail to the wonderful Law of the Lotus!' The mandala includes



179. Emma-o (Yama-rama), King of the dead, judge and master of hell.

the names of the two Buddhas and the kings of the four directions, thus representing in Japanese characters the all-encompassing truth.⁶⁰ It is an inscription of the Buddha body in aniconic form. Nichiren himself, in taking his name meaning 'sun-lotus' was identified with this and saw himself as a bodhisattva in Japan's time of need; his image in a central cabinet in Nichiren temples is displayed briefly during rituals. It is even claimed that Nichiren wrote himself into the mandala, inscribing his life in ink, so that he is a true Buddha fulfilling the work of Shakyamuni. This is the view of the influential modern Soka Gakkai movement attached to the Nichiren Sho sect through its patriarch Nikko. Consequently the Soka Gakkai altar displays images of Nichiren and Nikko, both reading the *Lotus Sutra* whose glory is proclaimed in the central mandala. The supreme object of worship (Gohonzon) as the Buddha is thus represented visually in the mandala and repeated verbally in devotional recitation of the invocation (Daimoku); these are both sources of power to be received in the body of the worshipper.⁶¹

The third sectarian movement, Zen, has already been mentioned in its Chinese form of Ch'an (Dhyana or meditation) Buddhism. It set little store on traditional doctrines and sought the attainment of enlightenment by meditation and insight into everyday experience. This practical directness, itself a return to the original emphasis of the teaching of Gautama, appealed to ordinary folk, and the Rinzai Zen school's method of sudden enlightenment, through concentration on the stimulus of the master, appealed to the warriors of the Kamakura period. The Zen style influenced not only the martial arts but the whole culture of Japan through its simplicity, intuition and feel for nature, derived partly from Taoist influence in China.⁶² The most characteristic Zen works represent nature and everyday objects, but also in depicting human figures Zen could draw on the grotesque and even the comic to express the immediacy of experience. We have already seen this in the figure of Pu-tai, and in a similar way Zen gave a novel twist to traditional Buddhist iconography.

These features are evident in the famous ink-painting of Bodhidharma, the founding patriarch of the Ch'an sect in China who had come from India in the sixth century AD. He is the archetypal meditator, resolutely sitting in the solitude of a cave for nine years. His eye has a fierce glare which expresses his spiritual concentration and his piercing challenge as a master to pupils.⁶³ His would-be-disciple Eka seeks to prove his earnestness by cutting off his own forearm. Legends recount how the tea-plant sprouted from the eyelids of Bodhidharma who had cut them off to keep himself awake, and how his legs withered away through years of disuse in meditation. This is the explanation behind the popular dolls of Daruma



180. Bodhidharma meditating in a cave.



181. Red painted clay doll representing Daruma (Bodhidharma).

(his abbreviated Japanese name) which display his unmistakable glaring eyes. The stumpy legless doll is so weighted that when rocked it always rights itself like the imperturbable patriarch himself; an inscription reminds one of the saying: 'Seven falls and eight recoveries'. In this respect the doll is a bringer of good luck, and one custom is to paint in the eyes only after the good luck has eventuated. Daruma has here been absorbed into folk religious custom⁶⁴ which may well derive from ancient belief in the magical power of doll-like ancestral deities. Even as a charm and a children's toy the popular doll in its various forms pays silent witness to the Zen master and the power of disciplined meditation.

Another important emphasis in Zen art was the humanization of iconography. Traditionally Buddhas and bodhisattvas were portrayed with the idealized features of their 'glorified body' in the second realm of the three bodies (*trikaya*) of the Mahayana cosmos, but in Zen doctrine these distinctions did not hold. All beings belonged in all three bodies if they had an earthly body, were freed from attachment and were one with the absolute Buddha-nature; therefore the most ordinary people and things could be expressions of the supreme truth. The bodhisattvas did not need to be shown with the traditional marks of the world above, so the Ch'an painters broke through the conventions to depict them in unorthodox clothes and settings. Likewise the figure of Shakyamuni, traditionally idealized as the completely enlightened one reassuring the faithful with his power, was now shown as the earthly Buddha in his experiences of striving as an Indian monk in search of enlightenment. The picture of 'Shussan Shaka' became a typical theme of Ch'an painters in twelfth-to-thirteenth-century China such as Liang K'ai and in Japanese Zen painting also. This is the scene of Shakyamuni descending the mountain where he has been fruitlessly searching for enlightenment through ascetic austerities; he is emaciated by the fasting, roughly bearded and huddles in his windswept robe - a lonely and battered earthly figure who still presses on. This expresses the Zen interpretation of Shakyamuni as the historical founder of Buddhism to whom the Ch'an masters traced their succession through the twenty-seven patriarchs prior to Bodhidharma.

The Zen emphasis on transmitting teaching by personal contact between master and pupil produced many portraits of monks and patriarchs who represented the spirit of wisdom and enlightenment. Such portraits did not originate with Zen, as shown in the fine sculpture of the priest Ganjin in the Nara period⁶⁵ and paintings of great *lohan* and patriarchs in China and Japan,⁶⁶ but these were usually idealized in the service of Buddhist teaching and magical powers. With Zen the figure is portrayed

with simple realism on the one hand – a monk sitting in a tree meditating – but also suggesting that in his earthly body he is able to realize enlightenment as one already sharing the Buddha-nature. Since Zen avoided relying on the scriptures the subject-matter of its art was not the themes of the sutras but the tradition and teachings of the Ch'an masters, their contact with ordinary people and their everyday activities in the world of man and nature.⁶⁷ Here was a clear departure from traditional Buddhist iconography in the direction of the 'secular world'.

This leads to a consideration of the iconoclastic element in Zen. When the sixth patriarch Hui-neng tore up the scriptures (shown in Liang K'ai's famous ink-painting⁶⁸) he was rejecting any written authority for Zen and relying solely on the Zen experience of intuitive insight for enlightenment as handed on in the monastic tradition from master to disciple. For anything else is liable to make one dependent and 'attached', to which the Zen answer is a relentless overturning of all idols. The rough-fisted Lin-chi, the Chinese founder of what became the Rinzai school of Zen in Japan, is reputed to have said:

When you meet a Buddha, kill the Buddha;
When you meet a Patriarch, kill the Patriarch.

As applied to idols in the tangible sense, iconoclasm is the theme of a classic anecdote of the Ch'an master Tan-hsia (738–824) who burned a Buddha-image to keep himself warm. When questioned he gave the tongue-in-cheek excuse that he was burning it to obtain its *sharira*, the indestructible 'relic' believed to reside in the ashes of holy men. This became a subject for Zen painters who brought out the comic implications – notably in the works of Fugai and Sengai (c. 1800) who depicted Tan-hsia bending over the flames warming his posterior.⁶⁹

Humour is one of the characteristic means of Zen iconoclasm, using laughter to stand idols on their head and take away their absolute claims. An element of caricature appears in the fifteenth-century Josetsu's picture of 'The Three Teachers' as funny-looking old men; these are none other than Lao-tzu, Confucius and the Buddha, viewed in the Chinese syncretist tradition as manifesting one truth.⁷⁰ Laughing monks and cross-eyed patriarchs are depicted in the same spirit as the picaresque figure of Hotei, carefree and full of the peace of Zen.⁷¹ Later paintings of Hotei continue this tradition in a somewhat more secularized form – Hotei on his enormous round bag (symbolizing perfection) pointing to the moon, kicking a football or playing cat's cradle. Thus playfulness is an integral part of the Zen tradition with its origins in China epitomized both in Bodhidharma, with his stern discipline of meditation, and in



182. Shaka (historical Buddha) descending the mountain.

Pu-tai with his pot-belly and carefree smile. Both belong in Zen experience and art, for the laughter is not opposed to seriousness but 'in tune with seriousness', 'a frivolity which emerges out of the harmony of spontaneity and discipline'.⁷² This is the proper perspective in which to place Zen 'iconoclasm', for it is not customary in Zen to chop up the images for fire-wood. On the contrary, they are treasured and given due reverence, in accordance with Buddhist tradition and the monastic discipline. But the images are not worshipped with attachment; they are reminders of the Buddha's way to enlightenment which each person must follow for himself.

Thus in Zen the Buddhism of the Far East returns full-circle to the archetypal experience of the historical Buddha. Although it is only one of the influences in Japanese religion and iconography, as we have seen, its influence has been pervasive and it represents a recovery of some basic Buddhist teachings in a Japanese form. It even returns to the aniconic forms of early Buddhist art in its symbolism and calligraphy. In depicting simple things such as a fly-whisk, a tea-pot, a bird or a cloud, in a landscape, Zen art can suggest the oneness of all things in the great emptiness and thus transcend the tangible. Here lies the power of such a master of ink-painting as Sengai⁷³ (1750-1837). His three linked symbols may be read as a picture of the universe in its three basic forms - the square for man with his earthly house, the triangle for the fixed law of nature and the circle for the infinite, heavenly. There are other interpretations which see them as symbols of schools of Buddhist teaching (Zen being the circle). These forms are also basic to the traditional mandala, but in the spirit of Zen they express the unity of all realms in the one Buddha-nature. Again in the art of calligraphy⁷⁴ Zen drew on the ancient tradition of Chinese



183. Square, triangle, circle - fundamental forms of universe.



184. Zen Buddhist symbol 'Mu' (emptiness).

writing to express the Zen method; after meditation and concentration one draws the characters in rapid succession and in an apparently effortless flow as if guided by the 'Zen mind'. The characters thus drawn have a significance over and above any beautiful technique of writing. A character may even be given the highest place in iconography when it is set at the top of a scroll above other figures in the sacred hierarchy (in descending order from Buddhas and bodhisattvas to wisdom-kings and gods) ranged below. The simple character, like the form of the circle, becomes a non-representational symbol:

Both of these imply the highest positive form of true reality: something that can no longer be expressed in words, but may be experienced in every object encountered and at every moment of time.⁷⁵

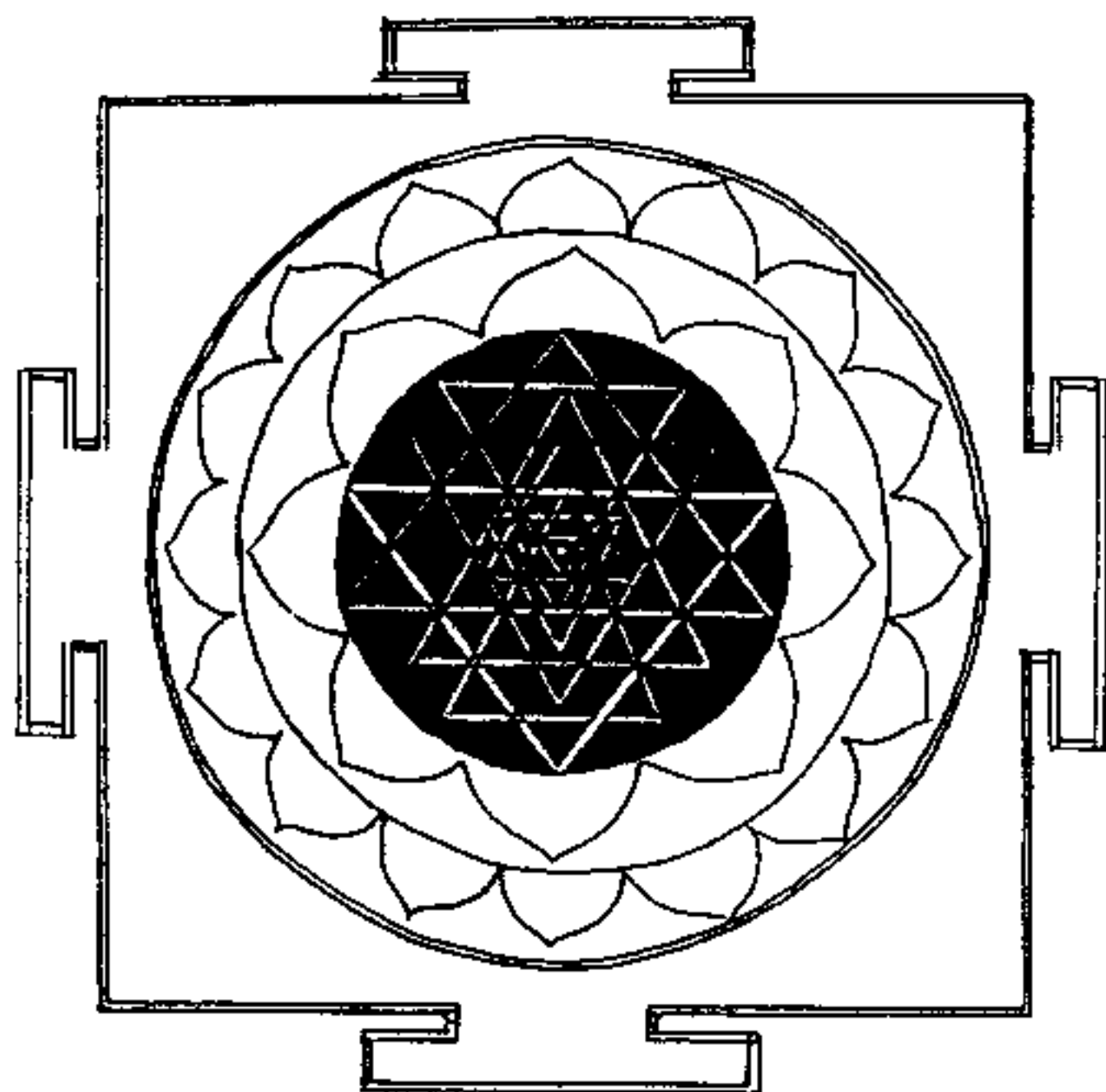
Tibet

One of the most elaborate systems of religious iconography was developed in the isolation of Tibet where its 'Lamaistic' form of Buddhism flourished for a thousand years until the theocracy ended in 1959. Prior to Buddhism the native Tibetan religion, Bon-po, centred round guardian spirits and demons, controlled by rituals and the ecstatic techniques of shamans. Among the monks who brought Buddhism to Tibet from the seventh century AD, the most famous was Padmasambhava (747) a Kashmiri trained in Bengal as a Tantric magician. He was reputed to bring the demons of Tibet under the spell of his mantras and magic thunderbolt and even to turn them into defenders of Tibet and Buddhism. This control of the demon world is characteristic of Tibetan Buddhism which features mystery plays and demon dances performed by monks in terrifying masks. The ancient religion is thereby incorporated in rituals for catharsis and entertainment, and still survives in the use of skulls, magical daggers and representations of violent demonic deities. At this point the influence of Indian Tantric practices and iconography is also involved. Tibet received the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon from India along with Hindu deities and their Shaktis and added further multiple manifestations of Buddhas and bodhisattvas to incorporate the Tibetan spirits and demons. Tibet thus preserved and elaborated the Tantric Buddhism of medieval Bengal, weaving in its native religion and further influences from Nepal, central Asia and China to create a uniquely Tibetan style of religion and art.

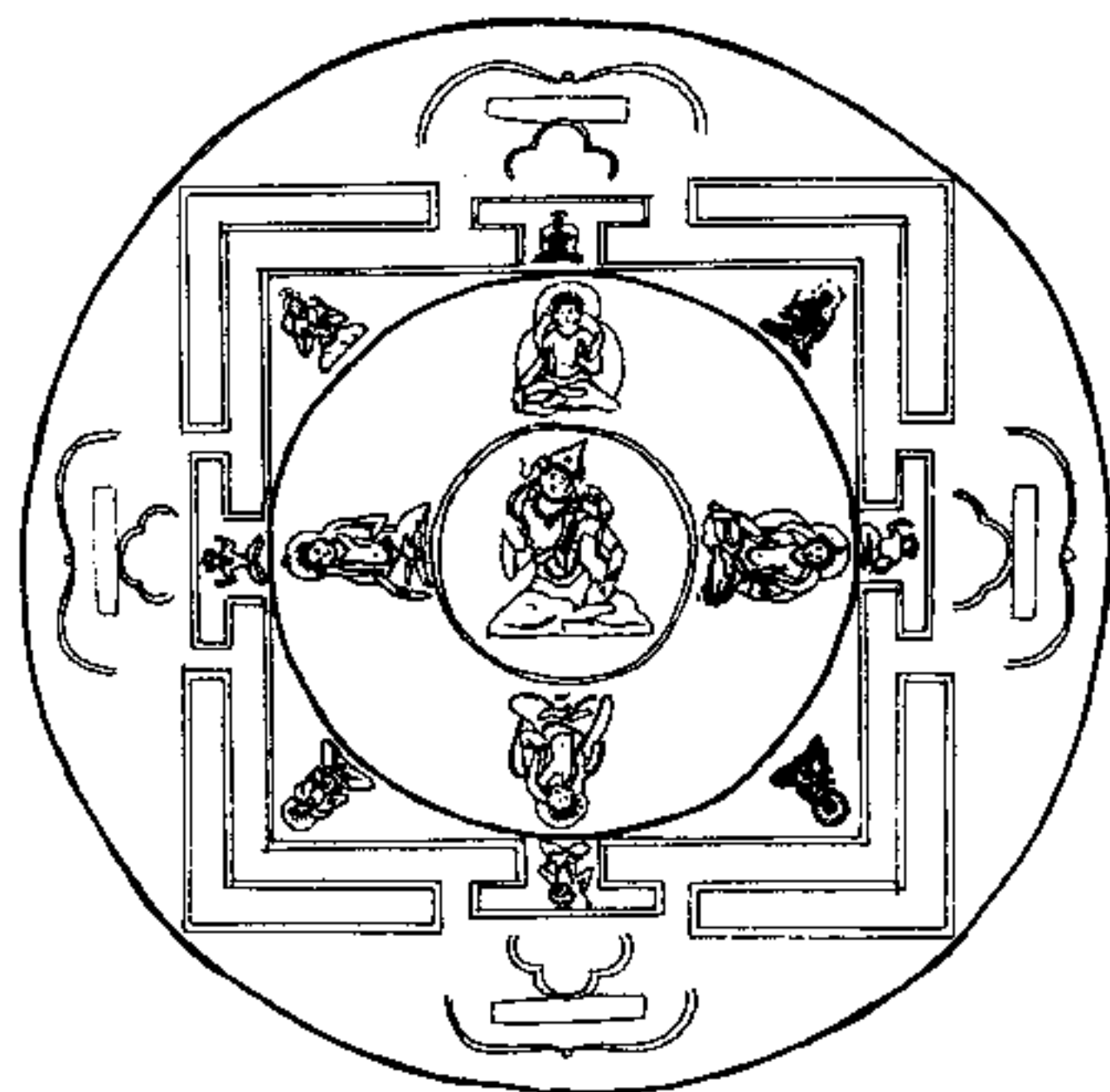
As in the case of Japan, it was Buddhism which brought writing to Tibet and fostered through its monasteries a rich development of the arts.

Tibetan art remained primarily art for ritual purposes, made by anonymous artists according to strict patterns. The resulting continuity makes works difficult to date; few can be dated earlier than the seventh century. The iconography is expressed in a rich variety of forms,⁷⁶ from paintings and banners to sculptures in metal, wood and butter, ritual objects, diagrams and calligraphy. Here we can do no more than discuss a few significant examples.

The Shri Yantra has already been described in connection with the goddess Kali and the union of Shiva and Shakti in the Hindu use of this diagram (see above ch. 4). Nine grades of revelation are symbolized by the five 'female' triangles pointing downward interlocking with the four upward 'male' triangles.⁷⁷ This union of the sexes in mystical marriage was adopted in Tibet to represent Buddha-figures in many manifestations, no longer alone but embracing their female partners (Shakti); as 'father-mother' in *yab-yum* embrace they symbolize complete union of wisdom and compassion in the fullness of being. The empty centre of this diagram represents the Absolute which cannot be visualized yet which is one with the heart of the person meditating on it. Tibetan iconography places at the centre the supreme Adi-Buddha. In the cloth-painting mandala it explicitly depicts Vajrasattva surrounded by the major transcendent Buddhas and bodhisattvas according to the teachings of Mahayana and



185. Shri Yantra, meditation diagram in Tantric Hindu tradition.

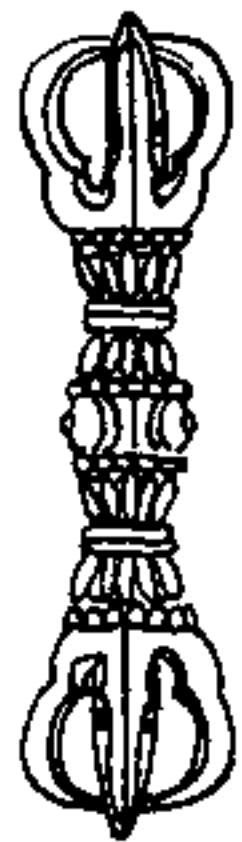


186. Mandala of Vajrasattva as supreme Buddha.

esoteric Buddhism; as also in the Shingon 'Taizo-kai' mandala. Used in meditation it represents the path to deliverance; outer circles stand for purification and initiation as preludes to spiritual rebirth; the gates of the inner square mandala admit the seeker to the ascending presence of the Buddhas culminating in the attainment of nirvana with the Absolute Buddha at the centre (fig. 172, p. 187).

The most common function of the mandala is to provide a ground-plan of the cosmos for invoking the 'deities' in ritual practice. A mandala of coloured sand on the ground represents the dwelling-place from which the sacred figure confers his powers on the officiating lama. The iconography is primarily related to liturgy and the temple where this occurs is itself modelled on the mandala, containing the major symbols of the Buddhas in the form of the three 'supports'. These are, first, the body supports in the visual form of images and paintings (which in the temple setting may be much larger than the examples usually seen in museums); speech supports are books derived from the words of the Buddha; mind supports are stupas (*chorten*) symbolizing his enlightened mind.⁷⁸ These are supports for meditation and rituals and serve not only the devotions of monks but also the popular Tibetan practice of religion which can be summed up in five universals: faith, 'speech work', offering, salutation by gestures and prostrations, and circumambulation.⁷⁹ The latter two categories represent 'body work' which is often focused on images. Of particular interest is the performance of circumambulation, an ancient Indian ritual (*pradakshina*) brought by Buddhism and developed into a pivotal rite of Tibetan society. It may be performed around the focus of images of all sizes, scriptures and persons of spiritual renown (who themselves are the object of much iconography); more frequently *chortens* and monasteries and trees or sacred places supply the focus. In his act of 'going' the Tibetan can bring his animals also, thus expressing the Buddhist attitude to the unity of living beings as he participates in the microcosmic ritual.⁸⁰

Of the many symbols and ritual objects used in Tibet the most important is the *vajra* which gives the Sanskrit name to the major school of Tantric Buddhism.⁸¹ Originating in India it meant the thunder-bolt or lightning sceptre of the god Indra. In Mahayana Buddhism it came to mean the indestructible supernatural substance, hard as a diamond. The idea of emptiness was developed by the Vajrayana school, applying to enlightenment and its goal of the Absolute Emptiness of the indestructible Buddha-nature. In the form of the ritual sceptre it thus is the possession of the Buddhas who wield it as the sign of supreme wisdom which overcomes all obstacles. Called *dorje* in Tibetan, the vajra is used ritually by monks. The



187. Vajra, thunderbolt symbol of the Absolute in Vajrayana Buddhism.

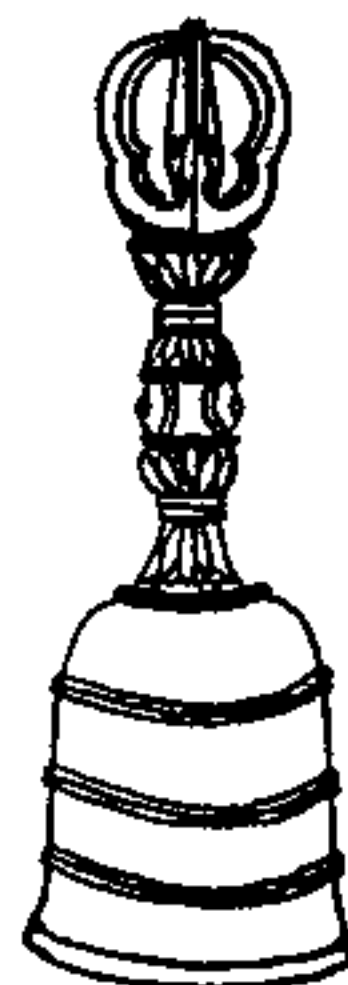
central part of the holder is interpreted as emptiness, while the four outer prongs and axis at each end symbolize the five Buddhas who join at the tip in a mandala pattern. The vajra is also used to surmount a priest's bell, in which case the sexual polarities are understood - the diamond world above and the female womb world of earthly phenomena below, fulfilled in unity.

When we turn to the distinctive sacred figures of Tibetan Buddhism the Taras occupy an important place. Again originating in India, probably as a Hindu goddess, Tara embodied the Shakti female principle as it was taken up into Tantric Buddhism. As the White Tara she became the Shakti of Avalokiteshvara who was believed to be more receptive to prayers when thus accompanied; then she became a bodhisattva in her own right and a much revered saviour-goddess and mother-goddess figure. (She is said to have originated from tears of compassion shed by Avalokiteshvara.) Just as Shiva and his consorts take terrible as well as benevolent forms, so the twenty-one Taras include the menacing (red, yellow, blue) and the gentle (white, green). The latter two are symbolized by the open lotus and the closed water-lily, signifying that by day or night one or the other soothes human suffering and guides people to wisdom and salvation. In this role the white and green Taras are popular in Tibet and the Himalayan area.⁸²

On the other hand we confront a host of fierce and terrifying figures in Tibetan Buddhism, evidently derived from both the ancient heritage of demons and the angry forms of Indian deities. Instead of the calm medita-



189. Green Tara, saviouress representing wisdom and compassion in Tibetan Buddhism.



188. Vajra bell, Tantric symbol of union of Diamond and Womb worlds.

tion of the Buddha these figures, even if regarded as benevolent, express sex and aggression in an ambivalent way.⁸³ Thus the fierce *dakinis* are female spirits who are said to give wisdom in initiation but they are also seductive and destructive denizens of the cemetery world over which the initiate must triumph by meditation. The many-armed Hevajra with his consort is a version of Shiva in Tantric Buddhism. The terrifying Heruka figures have four faces, six pairs of arms and a Shakti, thrusting out a leg in demoniac rage. These are frequently featured in Tibetan *ankas* (thangkas), large paintings on hanging scrolls of cotton which may have the central circles full of wrathful Herukas and hordes of demons.⁸⁴ The bronze of Yamantaka depicts a fearsome figure with sixteen legs, thirty-four arms and several skull-bedecked heads of which the front is the head of a raging bull. Yet his name means literally 'conqueror of death' and salvation comes through his union with his Shakti. He is therefore regarded as a *yi-dam*, a guardian spirit of the Tibetan church.

The cult of the macabre, the violent and the horrifying does not have the last word. That is reserved for the indestructible supreme Buddha who surveys all from above in the comprehensive iconography of some tankas. Nor is the earthly Buddha forgotten. Gautama is usually shown at his enlightenment, in the earth-touching mudra; and the centre of a large scroll full of figures and scenes from his own life shows him thus with his two leading disciples, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana. The serene calm of the Buddha does triumph after all, as in the history of Tibet it was able to pacify the wildness of the inhabitants.



191. (left) Gautama Buddha with disciples.



190. (right) Yamantaka (conqueror of Yama, god of death) with bull's head.



192 Wheel of Treasures of the World
L. 10.5 cm. (4.1 in.)

A similar tension is felt in the 'Wheel of Life' painting which is usually displayed in the vestibule of Tibetan temples. It expresses visually the Buddhist conception of the cycle of transmigration (*bhava-chakra*) in which life inevitably leads to death and rebirth. The wheel is in the grip of a monster demon with fangs and long nails and a fearsome third eye; this is the demon of time (*Kala*), the impermanence which pervades all. In the hub of the wheel the cock, snake and pig symbolize the cardinal sins of greed, hatred and ignorance. The outer rim shows the twelve scenes from the chain of causation in one's life leading to continued rebirth, according to the doctrine of *karma*. The six interior segments show the six worlds where rebirth may occur - the superior worlds of gods, titans (*asuras*) and man, and the inferior regions of animals, hell and hungry ghosts. Each of these has its Buddha, indicating again that an answer is ultimately available in Buddhist teaching and wisdom leading to enlightenment and liberation. All this is standard Buddhist doctrine which, like the basic Buddhist iconography, reasserts itself in the midst of the strange and apparently alien forms.

Summary

In the religious traditions of China, Japan and Tibet the advent of Buddhist scriptures and art brought a rich iconography into being, but in each case the heritage of indigenous religion coloured the reception of Buddhism, giving a distinctive flavour to the Buddhist art of each civilization. The native traditions did not die in this process of syncretism and growth. The Buddha-image also retained its basic marks from its origins in India, notably its calm spirituality; and the expression of Buddhism in variant national and sectarian forms (as in Tibet and in Zen) could bring sharpened insights into the teachings and meanings found in Buddhist art and symbols.