

## Chapter 5

### NARA BUDDHISM

In the tenth month of 552 C.E., the king of Paekche sent to Japan an envoy with presents of an image of Buddha and sacred writings, apparently hoping thereby to ingratiate himself with the Japanese court so as to win their military support. He also sent a memorial lauding Buddhism:

This doctrine is among all doctrines the most excellent, but it is hard to explain and hard to comprehend. Even the Duke of Zhou and Confucius could not attain a knowledge of it. This doctrine can create religious merit and retribution without measure and without bounds, and so lead on to a full appreciation of the highest wisdom. Imagine a man in possession of treasures to his heart's content, so that he might satisfy all his wishes in proportion as he used them. Thus it is with the treasure of this wonderful doctrine. Every prayer is fulfilled and naught is wanting. Moreover, from distant India it has extended hither to Korea, where there are none who do not receive it with reverence as it is preached to them.<sup>1</sup>

We are told that Emperor Kinmei was so delighted with these tidings that he leaped for joy. The head of the Soga clan, no less affected, urged that Japan

---

1. Aston, *Nihongi*, II, p. 66.

follow the lead of all other civilized nations in adopting the new religion. More conservative elements at the court objected, however, saying that the worship of foreign deities could not help but incense the national gods. Soga was presented with the image and allowed to worship it, but shortly afterward, when a pestilence broke out, Shinto adherents persuaded the emperor that it was a manifestation of the gods' wrath. The image of Buddha was thrown into a moat, and the temple built by the Soga family was razed.

Nothing much more was heard of Buddhism until 584, when another member of the Soga clan was given two Buddhist images that had come from Korea. He erected a temple to enshrine them and had three girls ordained as nuns by a Korean monk living in Japan. This, we are informed by the *Chronicles of Japan*, marked the real beginning of Buddhism in the country. It was not long, however, before another plague caused the Shinto factions to throw the holy images into the moat and to defrock the nuns. When these rigorous measures failed to halt the spread of the disease, the emperor finally agreed to allow the Soga family to worship Buddhism as it chose, and the nuns were given back their robes.

Within a few years of the second start of Buddhism in Japan, a number of learned Korean monks began to arrive. Among their most eager disciples was Prince Shōtoku. Most of the emperors and empresses in the next century became Buddhists; and the subsequent Nara period (709–784) in some ways marks a high point of early Buddhism in Japan.

It is not difficult to understand the success of the new religion. At the time of its introduction to Japan, Buddhism was nearly a thousand years old and, as the first world religion, had marched triumphantly to the east and west, raising temples and monasteries and filling grottoes and caves with an amazing profusion of art. It had become a well-organized and tested faith constituted under its Three Treasures—Buddha, the Law (dharma), and the monastic orders (sangha). It possessed a highly developed and decorated pantheon as its objects of worship, a tremendous accumulation of literature called the Tripitaka, and religious orders dedicated to the propagation of its teachings by oaths of celibacy, sobriety, and poverty.

In this connection, we should stress that the importance of Buddhist missionary activity in Japan went far beyond propagation of the faith alone. Chinese and Korean monks, carried across stormy seas by religious zeal, at the same time served as the carriers of superior Chinese culture. They were no doubt well aware that identification or association with this high culture lent them great prestige in the eyes of admiring Japanese, but whether or not they chose to capitalize on this, it would in any case have been impossible to disengage this new religion from its cultural embodiment in China and Korea, the lands of its adoption. To establish the new faith in Japan thus required the transplanting of essential articles—images, vestments, books, ritual devices—as well as ideas. The Japanese apprenticeship in the study of Chinese writing was un-

doubtedly served in the copying by hand of large numbers of Buddhist sūtras, distributed by imperial order to the various temples and monasteries. Furthermore, to erect temples and monasteries, carpenters and artisans had to be brought over along with missionary monks, as illustrated by an entry in the *Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihongi*) for the reign of Sujun (ca. 588):

This year the land of Paekche sent envoys, and along with them the Buddhist monk Hyejong [and others] with a present of Buddhist relics. The land of Paekche sent the Buddhist ecclesiastics Susin [and others] with tribute and also with a present of Buddhist relics, the Buddhist monk Nyōng-chyo, the ascetics Yongwi [and others], the temple carpenters Taeryangmidae and Mungagoja, a man learned in the art of making braziers and chargers . . . men learned in pottery . . . and a painter named Poega.<sup>2</sup>

It is apparent, too, that Buddhist monks were vessels for the transmission of branches of learning that had no direct connection with religious doctrine or institutions yet that they evidently regarded as being in no way incompatible with the former. Thus during the tenth year of Suiko (602), it is recorded:

A Paekche monk named Kwallük arrived and presented by way of tribute books of calendar-making, of astronomy and of geomancy, and also books on the art of invisibility and magic. At this time three or four pupils were selected and made to study under Kwallük. Ōchin, the ancestor of the scribes of Yako, studied the art of calendar-making. Kōsō, Otomo no Suguri, studied astronomy and the art of invisibility. Hinamitatsu, the Imperial Chieftain of Yamashiro, studied magic. They all studied so far as to perfect themselves in these arts.<sup>3</sup>

In the forms it took, Nara Buddhism was an extension of that of Tang China and Silla. For example, it is in the Nara period that we first hear of Buddhist sects in Japan, and it is customary to speak of the “six schools” then introduced from China. Some of them, particularly the two Hīnayāna sects, appear never to have been independent, having served primarily as forms of religious discipline for monks. The three main philosophical features of Nara Buddhism were the dialectics of negation (the Sanron or “Three-Treatises” sect, associated with the great Indian scholar Nāgārjuna and transmitted by Kumārajīva), the doctrine of the attainment of enlightenment through the powers of the mind (the Hossō or “Dharma-Character” sect, associated with Vasubandhu and Xuan-

---

2. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

zang), and the metaphysics of the harmonious whole (taught by the Kegon or “Flower Garland” sect). The metaphysics of Kegon had been worked out and elaborated by gifted philosophers in China and Korea and was known by the time of its introduction to Japan as a philosophy so intricate and complex that it could never be realized in actual practice. It was not until the revival of Nara Buddhism during the early Kamakura period that practitioners like Myōe Shōnin (1173–1232) successfully took up the challenge of transforming the Kegon metaphysics of the interrelatedness of all things into a religion that could be practiced by lay persons as well as monks.

The sixth sect (the Ritsu or Precepts school) was based on the rules of discipline governing the lives of monks and nuns. A person could be initiated into this discipline (called “receiving the precepts”) only by a qualified master of the precepts, and in 754 the intrepid Chinese priest Jianzhen (Ganjin) finally arrived in Nara after five earlier attempts that had ended in shipwrecks. With his legitimate transmission of the precepts to Japan and the establishment of the ordination platform at Tōdaiji, Buddhists could finally be ordained as authentic clergy. As it is with most rules, however, the precepts became a legalistic matter of formal obedience rather than the principles by which a Buddhist lived and sought enlightenment. Like the metaphysics of Kegon, the precepts in time became watered down and had to be infused with new life and philosophical meaning in the Kamakura period by monks like Myōe and Gedatsu Shōnin (1155–1213).

Common to these seemingly disparate views was the basic Buddhist doctrine of impermanence, of non-ego (the absence of any enduring, substantial self), and of the need for liberation from illusion and suffering by the attainment of Nirvana or Buddhahood. Buddhism insisted on the need to free oneself from relying on externals so changeable that they can only deceive. Therefore, these must be negated exhaustively until all the usual distinctions of becoming, which arise from incomplete knowledge, are denied and perfect knowledge can be attained. Such was the teaching of Nāgārjuna. For the followers of the Hossō sect, the school of the great Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, the outer world did not exist at all but was a creation of the mind. How could someone turn to the motions of the stars for guidance when they were illusory and without permanent reality? Even in the Kegon school, which preached a cosmological harmony governed by Lochana Buddha—who sits on a lotus throne of a thousand petals, each of which is a universe containing millions of worlds like ours—it is the mutable nature of this system and not its permanence (like the Confucian Heaven) that is emphasized. Within the great harmony of the Kegon (or Flower Garland), all beings are related and capable of mutual interaction until they attain a fundamental communion with Buddha and, through him, with all other beings.

We do not know how much of these abstruse doctrines was understood by Japanese Buddhists of the Nara period, but expressions of religious fervor gen-

erally assumed a tangible form. The court's patronage of Buddhism led to the building of Nara's magnificent temples and monasteries, some of which still survive. Certain court ceremonies such as the open confession of sins (*keka*) show how the strong desire to lead a religious life permeated ruling circles. Buddhist influence led also to the making of highways and bridges, to the use of irrigation, and to the exploration of distant parts of the country by itinerant monks (who drew the earliest Japanese maps). Even such features of Japanese life as the public bath and cremation also date from the Buddhist inspiration of this time.

For the small number of monks and scholars of the Nara period who were well versed in Buddhist literature, four sūtras were of special importance: the Sūtra of Past and Present, Cause and Effect; the Sūtra of the Golden Light; the Sūtra of the Humane Kings; and the Kegon, or Flower Garland Sūtra. The first of these sūtras is a biography of Buddha that declares his extraordinary attainments to have been the cumulative merit of his meritorious deeds from the infinitely distant past to the present. This concept contrasts with the Han Confucian doctrine of kingly rule based on moral virtue in conformity with the Way of Heaven, or the theory of the *Record of Ancient Matters (Kojiki)*, where we find genealogy to be essential to the legitimation of rulership.

The ruler's responsibilities—and indeed the entire question of the relationship between the state and Buddhism—were discussed most completely in the Sūtra of the Golden Light. This major work of Buddhist literature played a more important role than any other text in establishing Buddhism as the state religion of Japan, and its influence continued undiminished for centuries. It opens with an eloquent proclamation of the eternity of Buddha's life and declares that he exists not only as a historical figure with a human form but also in the cosmos as the ultimate law or Truth, and in the life hereafter as the savior possessed of an all-embracing love. Since Buddha is omnipresent, everything that exists is subject to his eternal vigilance of boundless compassion. The sūtra declares further that the gates of the paradise of the Lotus where Buddha dwells are always open to all of humanity, for anyone can become a Buddha. The methods the sūtra especially recommends for bringing about this change for the better are expiation and self-sacrifice, and accordingly, the climax of the entire narration is the parable of Buddha giving himself up to feed a hungry tiger.

The central theme of the sūtra is the life of wisdom—*prajñā*, which distinguishes good from evil and right from wrong. Everyone, from the king to his lowliest subject, must obey the dictates of the inner light of reason. The religious life starts with an awareness of one's sins and the need to atone for them. It is wisdom that enables people to surmount their failings, and the highest expression of the triumph of wisdom is an act of self-sacrifice. Wisdom is also associated with healing; Buddha is supremely possessed of wisdom and is the great

healer as well. It was this aspect of Buddha that appealed most to Japanese of the Nara period, as witnessed by the predominant role of Yakushi, the Healing Bodhisattva, in both temples specifically dedicated to him and in most centers of worship. The Sūtra of the Golden Light contains a chapter entirely devoted to medicine and healing, illustrating the close connection between religious belief and medicine. (Buddhist monks introduced many medicines from China during the Nara period.)

The political aspects of the sūtra are most clearly stated in the chapter on kingly law (*Ōbōshō-ron*), which declares that government and religion are united by the Buddhist Law (or dharma). The law of men must be universal but not final, always subject to change, with peace as its ultimate end. Any king who violates the Law will be punished, but as long as he is faithful to it, Buddha will see to it that he enjoys immeasurable blessings. Japanese monarchs during the Nara period held this sūtra in such reverence that they attempted to make it an instrument of state ideology. Copies of the sūtra were distributed in all the provinces in 741 C.E. by order of Emperor Shōmu, one of Japan's most devout rulers. At about the same time, Shōmu ordered each province to build a seven-story pagoda and to establish a Guardian Temple of the Province and an Atonement Nunnery of the Province.

Shōmu also was responsible for building the Great Image of Lochana Buddha, the most famous monument of the Nara period. Just as Lochana Buddha is the central figure of the cosmogony of the Kegon Sūtra, the Great Image and its temple were intended as the center of the provincial temples and nunneries. The Kegon Sūtra is said to have been the teaching delivered by Buddha immediately after attaining enlightenment, when he made no attempt to simplify the complexities of his doctrines for the benefit of the less capable. Its difficulty kept it from attaining the popularity of the Sūtra of the Golden Light, but its importance is evident from the efforts devoted to completing the Great Image (more than fifty feet high). In 749, when gold was discovered in Japan for the first time, it was regarded as an auspicious sign for completion of the monument. Emperor Shōmu declared:

This is the Word of the Sovereign who is the Servant of the Three Treasures, that he humbly speaks before the Image of Lochana.

In this land of Yamato since the beginning of Heaven and Earth, Gold, though it has been brought as an offering from other countries, was thought not to exist. But in the East of the land which We rule . . . Gold has been found.

Hearing this We were astonished and rejoiced, and feeling that this is a Gift bestowed upon Us by the love and blessing of Lochana Buddha, We have received it with reverence and humbly accepted it, and have brought with Us all Our officials to worship and give thanks.

This We say reverently, reverently, in the Great Presence of the Three Treasures whose name is to be spoken with awe.<sup>4</sup>

We cannot help but be struck by the humility of the terms that Shōmu uses. For him to claim to be a “servant” of the Three Treasures marks an astonishing departure from the previously held ideas of kingship in Japan. There seemingly remained only one more step to be taken to make Japan into a true Buddha land: to have a sovereign who was ordained as a minister to Buddha’s Law so that the country could be governed in perfect consonance with these teachings. And during the reign of Shōmu’s daughter, rule was nearly transferred to a Buddhist monk.

In 764 C.E., Empress Kōtoku, who had previously abdicated to enter the religious life, suddenly decided to resume her rule despite the Buddhist vows she had taken. Adopting a new reign title, Shōtoku, she appointed Dōkyō, a master of the Hossō sect, to be her chief minister. Dōkyō steadily rose in power. In 766 he was appointed “king of the law” (*hōō*), and several years later the empress, acting on a false oracle, was on the point of abdicating the throne in his favor. However, powerful conservative forces at the court blocked this move, and Japan never again came so close to becoming a Buddha land. Empress Shōtoku died in 770; Dōkyō was disgraced; and later new rulers turned from Nara to Kyoto, where new forms of Buddhism were to dominate the scene.

## THE SŪTRA OF THE GOLDEN LIGHT

The full title of this work, *Sūtra of the Sovereign Kings of the Golden Light Ray* (*Konkō myō saishō ōgyō*), refers to the Deva Kings who came to pay homage to the Buddha. The *sūtra* is credited with inspiring the first temple built by the court, the Shitennōji (or Temple of the Four Deva Kings). When Tenmu seized the throne in 672, this *sūtra* appears to have influenced his decision to promote Buddhism in the interest of the new regime. His predecessor, Tenchi (Tenji), had been clearly associated with the Confucian political order, and as we have seen, Tenchi’s assumption of power was justified by numerous portents indicating that he had received the Mandate of Heaven. Tenmu found a similar justification in the Golden Light *Sūtra*, which set forth a doctrine of kingship based on merit—merit achieved in former existences and through the wholehearted support of Buddhism. It thus strongly implied that kings rule by a kind of “divine right” not based on any hereditary claim but, rather, on the ruler’s religious merit. In Tenmu’s case, his realm would enjoy peace and harmony from the beneficial influence of Buddhist teachings on public morality, and even the cosmic order would respond to his virtue and bestow blessings on him and his people. Here, then, is a Buddhist claim to religious legitimacy overriding any customary right

---

4. Sansom, “The Imperial Edicts in the Shoku-Nihongi,” p. 26.

of dynastic inheritance. It is no wonder that Tenmu held this sūtra in particular honor and fostered the growth of Buddhism by ordering every family to have a Buddhist shrine in its house.

THE PROTECTION OF THE COUNTRY BY THE FOUR DEVA KINGS

Then the Four Deva Kings, their right shoulders bared from their robes in respect, arose from their seats and, with their right knees touching the ground and their palms joined in humility, thus addressed Buddha:

“Most Revered One! When, in some future time, this Sūtra of the Golden Light is transmitted to every part of a kingdom—to its cities, towns, and villages, its mountains, forests, and fields—if the king of the land listens with his whole heart to these writings, praises them, and makes offerings on their behalf, and if moreover he supplies this sūtra to the four classes of believers, protects them, and keeps them from all harm, we Deva Kings, in recognition of his deeds, will protect the king and his people, give them peace and freedom from suffering, prolong their lives, and fill them with glory. Most Revered One! If when the king sees that the four classes of believers receive the sūtra, he respects and protects them as he would his own parents, we Four Kings will so protect him always that whatever he wishes will come about, and all sentient beings will respect him.” . . .

Then Buddha declared to the Four Deva Kings:

“Fitting is it indeed that you Four Kings should thus defend the holy writings. In the past I practiced bitter austerities of every kind for 100,000 kalpas [eons]. Then, when I attained supreme enlightenment and realized in myself universal wisdom, I taught this law. If a king upholds this sūtra and makes offerings in its behalf, I will purify him of suffering and illness and bring him peace of mind. I will protect his cities, towns, and villages and scatter his enemies. I will make all strife among the rulers of men to cease forever.

“Know ye, Deva Kings, that the 84,000 rulers of the 84,000 cities, towns, and villages of the world shall each enjoy happiness of every sort in his own land; that they shall all possess freedom of action and obtain all manner of precious things in abundance; that they shall never again invade each other’s territories; that they shall receive recompense in accordance with their deeds of previous existences; that they shall no longer yield to the evil desire of taking the lands of others; that they shall learn that the smaller their desires the greater the blessing; and that they shall emancipate themselves from the suffering of warfare and bondage. The people of their lands shall be joyous, and upper and lower classes will blend as smoothly as milk and water. They shall appreciate each other’s feelings, join happily in diversions together, and, with all compassion and modesty, increase the sources of goodness.

“In this way the nations of the world shall live in peace and prosperity, the



peoples shall flourish, the earth shall be fertile, the climate temperate, and the seasons shall follow in the proper order. The sun, moon, and the constellations of stars shall continue their regular progress unhindered. The wind and rain shall come in good season. All treasures shall be abundant. No meanness shall be found in human hearts, but all shall practice almsgiving and cultivate the ten good works. When the end of life comes, many shall be born in Heaven and increase the celestial multitudes.”

[Tsuji, *Nihon bukkyō shi*, jōsei-hen, pp. 194–195]

## THE FLOWER GARLAND SCHOOL

In seventh-century China and the Korean state of Silla, the teachings of the Flower Garland (J: Kegon) school of Mahāyāna Buddhism was a religious accompaniment to the state-building process, and in eighth-century Nara-period Japan, it served the same function. It preached a universal spiritual communion in accordance with the doctrine of interdependent existence and interdependent salvation as the basis for a universal state that would also be a Buddha land or state.

### *THE FLOWER GARLAND SŪTRA*

The basic scripture of the Flower Garland school is the Flower Garland Sūtra (Kegon-kyō), a lengthy work describing an enormously grand vision of the universe. The language of the sūtra is so mythic and extravagant that it has acquired a reputation for being abstruse and almost impossible to comprehend. Widely regarded in the Mahāyāna tradition as being the first sermon preached by the Buddha, revealing the full content of his enlightenment, this sūtra was said to be too profound and lofty for most humans to understand. Therefore, after making concessions to human limitations, the Buddha preached other sūtras that were easier to grasp.

The Flower Garland Sūtra teaches tenets similar to those developed in other schools and contributes to a doctrinal common ground for Mahāyāna Buddhism in general. The terms “interdependence,” “interpenetration,” “simultaneous co-arising,” and “nonduality” express this basic notion that the diverse elements of the universe are interdependent and interrelated. This is not to say that everything is identical, however; rather, the Kegon vision affirms diversity and attempts to explain the inherent and simultaneous interrelatedness of each thing with all things and all things with each thing, without the loss of individual identities.

The patriarchs of the school in China often enjoyed their rulers’ patronage. Dushun (557–640), the school’s founder, was held in high esteem by Emperor Wen (r. 589–605) of the Sui dynasty, and Fazang (643–712), the third patriarch

and great systematizer of Kegon (Ch: Huayan) teachings, was honored several times by Empress Wu (r. 684–704) of the Tang,<sup>5</sup> who supported a new Chinese translation of the Flower Garland Sūtra by Śikṣānanda and was acclaimed by Huayan monks as an incarnation of the bodhisattva Maitreya.

#### THE FLOWER GARLAND SŪTRA: THE TOWER OF VAIROCHANA

The last section of the sūtra tells of the pilgrimage of Sudhana, a youth who visits various people, each of whom teaches him something about the Flower Garland universe. Maitreya welcomed Sudhana by showing him the great tower of Vairochana, the central Buddha of the sūtra. The tower was a place in which the interrelatedness of the universe could be seen and is described in the following excerpt taken from Śikṣānanda's translation.

In the Kegon view, a Buddhist state (*bukkoku*) would be one that supported this universal spiritual communion. However, as a universal principle underlying a universal state—the mutual fusion and permeability of all things—even while acting as a solvent of all local loyalties and cultural particularism, it also left questions as to the solid ground on which one might erect any social or political structure or ethic. In effect, this left room for the persistence of strong indigenous customs, thus enabling egalitarian spirituality to coexist with political and social hierarchy.

This is the place where all the buddhas live peacefully. This is the dwelling place where a single eon permeates all eons and all eons permeate one eon without loss of any of their own characteristics. This is the dwelling place where one land permeates all lands and all lands permeate one land without loss of any of their own characteristics. This is the dwelling place where one sentient being permeates all sentient beings and all sentient beings permeate one sentient being without loss of any of their own characteristics. This is the dwelling place where one buddha permeates all buddhas and all buddhas permeate one buddha without loss of their own characteristics. This is the dwelling place where in a single moment of thought everything about the past, present, and future can be known. This is the dwelling place where in a single moment of thought one can travel to all countries. This is the dwelling place where all sentient beings manifest all of their prior lives. This is the dwelling place of concern for the benefit of everyone in the world. This is the dwelling place of those who can go everywhere. This is the dwelling place of those who are detached from the world and yet constantly remain there to teach other people.

[*Kegonkyō*, TD 10, no. 279:423; GT]

---

5. Actually, Empress Wu assumed the title of emperor, the only woman in Chinese history to have done so, and adopted the dynastic name of Zhou, rather than Tang, during her period of personal ascendancy.

## THE BUDDHA KINGDOM OF THE FLOWER GARLAND

A common refrain in Kegon Buddhism is the claim that the perfect realm of the Buddha (*ni*) is interfused with the ordinary world (*ji*) without obstruction (*muge*) and that earthly rulers should manifest this universal harmony and order by “turning the wheel of the dharma” throughout the land. With its vivid descriptions of this unity of all parts within a whole, the Flower Garland Sūtra articulated a spiritual ideal that easily resonated with political objectives for unification and stability. In other East Asian countries as well, the Kegon ideal of harmony inspired the building of the Bulguk-sa (Temple of the Kingdom of the Buddha), which commemorated the unified rule of the Korean kingdom of Silla, and the establishment of the Great Temple of the East (Tōdaiji) in Nara, which exemplified Emperor Shōmu’s (r. 724–49) vision of centralized rule in Japan.

## Chapter on the Exquisite Adornments of the Rulers of the World

All of the kingdoms in the ten directions  
 Will become purified and beautiful in a single moment  
 When rulers turn the wheel of the dharma  
 With the wondrous sounds of their voices  
 Reaching everywhere throughout their lands  
 With no place untouched.

The world of the Buddha is without bounds,  
 And his dharma realm inundates everything in an instant.  
 In every speck of dust the Buddha establishes a place of practice,  
 Where he enlightens every being and displays spiritual wonders.  
 The World Honored One practiced all spiritual disciplines  
 While coursing through a past of a hundred thousand eons,  
 Adorning all of the lands of the buddhas,  
 And manifesting himself without obstruction, as if in empty space.

The Buddha’s divine powers are unbounded,  
 Filling endless eons;  
 No one would tire of constantly watching him  
 Even for countless ages.

You should observe the realms of the Buddha’s power  
 Purifying and adorning all of the countries in the ten directions.  
 In all these places he manifests himself in myriad forms,  
 Never the same from moment to moment.

Observe the Buddha for a hundred thousand countless eons,  
 But you will not discern a single hair on his body,  
 For through the unhindered use of skillful means  
 It is his radiance that shines on inconceivably numerous worlds.

In past ages the Buddha was in the world  
 Serving in a boundless ocean of all the buddhas.  
 All beings therefore came to make offerings to the World-Honored One,  
 Just as rivers flow to the sea.

The Buddha appears everywhere in the ten directions,  
 And in the countless lands of every speck of dust  
 Wherein are infinite realities  
 The Buddha abides in all, infinitely unbounded.

The Buddha in the past cultivated an ocean  
 Of unbounded compassion for sentient beings,  
 Whom he instructed and purified  
 As they entered life and death.

The Buddha lives in the dharma realm complex of truth  
 Free of forms, signs, and all defilements.  
 When people contemplate and see his many different bodies.  
 All their troubles and sufferings disappear.

[*Kegonkyō*, TD 10, no. 279:22; GT]

### *STATE SPONSORSHIP AND CONTROL OF BUDDHISM*

Buddhism's early claim to exist beyond the authority of the state, as asserted by Huiyuan in fifth-century China, was radically transformed in the Tang period when it became an institutional arm of the state. The office of the "superintendent of the Buddhist clergy (*sangha*)," which first appeared under the Northern Wei in the mid-fifth century, marked the inception of this transformation. The superintendent headed a bureaucracy staffed by lay officials or nominal "monks" charged with overseeing monastic affairs. He was not the head of an autonomous religious organization but, rather, an appointee of the emperor and given tonsure by the emperor's hand.

The religious rationale for this government-run Buddhism in China was supplied by the first superintendent, Faguo, who justified the monks' service to the government by directly identifying the emperor as the Buddha. In contrast to Huiyuan's rigorous defense of clerical independence, Faguo said that "Taizu

is enlightened and loves the Way. He is in his very person the Thus-Come One. Monks (*shramanas*) must and should pay him all homage. . . . He who propagates the teaching of the Buddha is the lord of men. I am not doing obeisance to the Emperor, I am merely worshiping the Buddha.”<sup>6</sup> A somewhat less accommodating view is put forward in the following commentary on the Perfect Wisdom Sūtra for Humane Kings Who Wish to Protect Their States (known in Japan as the Ninnōkyō).

#### THE HUMANE KING AS PROTECTOR OF BUDDHISM

As an alternative to Buddhism’s serving the state, the Sūtra of the Humane King proposes that the state and Buddhism serve each other. Using the vocabulary of Chinese monarchy, the scripture asserts that “humane” or “benevolent” kings (*renwang*) practice “outer protection” (*waihu*) and that this protection involves the patronage of an independent clergy who practice the “inner protection” (*neihu*) of the bodhisattva virtue of “forbearance” (*ren*). The pun on the term *ren*<sup>7</sup> is the basis of the scripture and the starting point of all its commentaries. Thus, according to the early-seventh-century *Commentary on the Sūtra of the Humane King*, the ruler who protects Buddhism thereby protects the state.

Because the humane king (*renwang*) explicates the Teaching and disseminates virtue here below, he is called “humane.” Because he has transformed himself, he is called “king.” The humane king’s ability is to protect (*hu*). What is protected is the state. This is possible because the humane king uses the Teaching to order the state. Now if we consider the Highest Perfect Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*), its ability is to protect. The humane king is he who is protected. Because he uses the Highest Perfect Wisdom, the humane king is tranquil and hidden. Thus, if he uses his ability to propagate the Teaching, the king is able to protect [the state], and it is the Highest Perfect Wisdom which is the [method of] protection. Moreover, one who is humane is forbearing [*renzhe ren ye*].<sup>8</sup> Hearing of good he is not overjoyed; hearing of bad he is not angry. Because he is

---

6. Hurvitz, *Wei Shou*, p. 53.

7. *Ren*, meaning “humaneness,” and *ren*, meaning “forbearance,” are homophones, but the words are written with different Chinese characters.

8. A punning inversion of *Mencius* 7B:16, “To be humane (*ren*) is what it means to be human (*ren*),” recalling also Confucius’ pun on “humaneness” (*ren*) and “forbearance” (*ren*) in *Analects* 12:3.

able to hold to forbearance in good and bad, therefore he is called forbearing (*ren*).

[TD 33, no. 1705:253; CO]

*Here the scripture's adroit use of language to reorder the relationship between religion and the state is coupled with Mahāyāna teachings of Perfect Wisdom. This eighth-century recension of the text by Amoghavajra, a leading monk at the Tang court, further accentuates these teachings through the addition of such passages as the following based on the dialectics of negation.*

At that time the World-honored One said to King Prasenajit, “By what signs do you contemplate the Thus-Come One?” King Prasenajit answered, “I contemplate his body’s real signs; [I] contemplate the Buddha thus: without boundaries in front, behind, and in the middle; not residing in the three times and not transcending the three times; not residing in the five aggregates, not transcending the five aggregates; not abiding in the four great elements and not transcending the four great elements; not abiding in the six abodes of sensation and not transcending the six abodes of sensation; not residing in the three realms and not transcending the three realms; residing in no direction, transcending no direction; [neither] illumination [nor] ignorance, and so on. Not one, not different; not this, not that; not pure, not foul; not existent nor non-existent; without signs of self or signs of another; without name, without signs; without strength, without weakness; without demonstration, without exposition; not magnanimous, not stingy; not prohibited, not transgressed; not forbearing, not hateful; not forward, not remiss; not fixed, not in disarray; not wise, not stupid; not coming, not going; not entering, not leaving; not a field of blessings, not a field of misfortune; without sign, without the lack of sign; not gathering, not dispersing; not great, not small; not seen, not heard; not perceived, not known. The mind, activities, and senses are extinguished, and the path of speech is cut off. It is identical with the edge of reality and equal to the [real] nature of things. I use these signs to contemplate the Thus-Come One.”

[TD 8, no. 246:836; CO]

*In the preceding passage, the “unboundedness” of the Buddha’s body and the principle of universal emptiness in the Prajñāpāramitā (expressed in the negation of all determinate views) can also be understood in the more affirmative terms of the Kegon philosophy, that is, the universal tolerance and mutual nonobstruction of all things (expressed as “nothing precludes or bars anything else,” jiji muge, or, politically, “any expedient means may be made to serve the purposes of Buddhism.” Both formulations underlay the practice of Amogavajra’s Esoteric Buddhism or Mystical Teaching, which was predicated on a view similar to Huayan’s “True Emptiness [allows for] Mysterious or Wondrous Man-*

*ifestations (shinkū myōyū).” Thus mystic rites and incantations could play a part in Buddhism’s consecrating and legitimizing of imperial rule.*

## BUDDHISM AND THE STATE IN NARA JAPAN

### PROCLAMATION OF THE EMPEROR SHŌMU ON THE ERECTION OF THE GREAT BUDDHA IMAGE

Having respectfully succeeded to the throne through no virtue of our own, out of a constant solicitude for all men, We have been ever intent on aiding them to reach the shore of the Buddha land. Already even the distant seacoasts of this land have been made to feel the influence of our benevolence and regard for others, and yet not everywhere in this land do men enjoy the grace of Buddha’s law. Our fervent desire is that under the aegis of the Three Treasures, the benefits of peace may be brought to all in heaven and earth, even animals and plants sharing in its fruits, for all time to come.

Therefore on the fifteenth day of the tenth month of the fifteenth year of the Tempyō reign [743], which is the year of the goat and water junior,<sup>9</sup> We take this occasion to proclaim our great vow of erecting an image of Lochana Buddha in gold and copper. We wish to make the utmost use of the nation’s resources of metal in the casting of this image, and also to level off the high hill on which the great edifice is to be raised, so that the entire land may be joined with us in the fellowship of Buddhism and enjoy in common the advantages which this undertaking affords to the attainment of Buddhahood.

It is we who possess the wealth of the land; it is we who possess all power in the land. With this wealth and power at our command, we have resolved to create this venerable object of worship. The task would appear to be an easy one, and yet a lack of sufficient forethought on our part might result in the people’s being put to great trouble in vain, for the Buddha’s heart would never be touched if, in the process, calumny and bitterness were provoked which led unwittingly to crime and sin.

Therefore all who join in the fellowship of this undertaking must be sincerely pious in order to obtain its great blessings, and they must daily pay homage to Lochana Buddha, so that with constant devotion each may proceed to the creation of Lochana Buddha.<sup>10</sup> If there are some desirous of helping in the

---

9. Year designation according to the Chinese sexagenary cycle (see chapter 4).

10. Although it might seem impious to think that the Cosmic Buddha himself could be so created, in the Kegon philosophy the particular and the universal are one and inseparable, so that an image properly conceived with a devout realization of the Buddha’s true nature might stand for the Buddha himself.

construction of this image, though they have no more to offer than a twig or handful of dirt, they should be permitted to do so. The provincial and county authorities are not to disturb and harass the people by making arbitrary demands on them in the name of this project. This is to be proclaimed far and wide so that all may understand our intentions in this matter.

[From *Shoku Nihongi*, in *Rikkokushi*, III, pp. 320–321]

### THE BODHISATTVA GYŌGI

Gyōgi [670?–749], a major figure in the Buddhism of the Nara period, gained great renown as a popular teacher and practitioner of good works—establishing hospitals, orphanages, old people’s homes, rest houses, and the like and performing public works such as the construction of bridges, harbors, and canals for navigation and irrigation. At these sites, he established practice halls (*dōjō*) that also served as seminaries for those serving on these projects. Although early on, the court looked askance at Gyōgi’s unconventional and unauthorized activities, in time, as he became popularly revered as a bodhisattva incarnate, the court sought to appropriate his popularity and prestige for itself, at which point Emperor Shōmu conferred on him high ecclesiastical rank (*daisōjō*) in recognition of his standing among the people.

The following is taken from a collection of hagiographical writings compiled by the Tendai monk Chingen around 1040, containing miracle stories ostensibly connected with the Lotus Sūtra. It shows how a charismatic figure like Gyōgi quickly became the stuff of legend and how the popularization of Buddhism attended the state-building process in the Nara period.

Bodhisattva Gyōgi was a man from the Ōtori District of Izumi Province. Koshi was his secular clan name.

When born, he was wrapped in a caul. His parents placed him on a tree branch as a method of decontaminating him. After one night, the parents found that their baby was out of the skin and already spoke well. They took him home and reared him.

When still a boy, Gyōgi used to praise the Law together with the neighborhood children. As time passed, Gyōgi had several followers, including young cowherds who attended Gyōgi and ignored their cows and horses. When the masters of these cowherds needed them, they sent people to fetch the boys. But those who were sent for the boys, including men and women, the young and the old, listened to Gyōgi preach and stayed with him, forgetting to ask the cowherds about the cattle. So finally Gyōgi would climb to a high place and call out to gather the cattle. The scattered cows and horses gathered near Gyōgi and each master took his cattle home by himself.

Later Gyōgi took the tonsure and became a monk of Yakushiji Temple. He



read the commentaries including the *Yugayuishikiron*<sup>11</sup> and perceived the deep significance in these writings.

Gyōgi traveled widely in cities and in rural areas, cultivating the people. Nearly one thousand people followed him, wishing to be taught. . . .

Gyōgi visited various dangerous and yet important places. He constructed bridges and roads. He investigated the irrigation and cultivation of rice fields and he dug ponds for reservoirs and built dikes. Those who heard of his projects all gathered and helped him. So the construction was finished in a short time. Since then, farmers and peasants have greatly benefited.

Gyōgi built as many as forty-nine halls<sup>12</sup> in the area near the capital including Yamato, Kawachi, Yamashiro, Izumi and Settsu and built more in other provinces.

Once while on his way home after traveling in various provinces practicing the Way, Gyōgi saw some villagers including adults and children gathered around a pond, catching fish and eating them. As Gyōgi passed by, one of the youngsters playfully urged Gyōgi to eat some of the cut-up raw fish. As Gyōgi put the morsels into his mouth and spat them out, the fish meat became small fish. Those who watched marveled greatly.

Emperor Shōmu respected Gyōgi and granted him the rank of Grand Abbot.<sup>13</sup> Chikō,<sup>14</sup> another eminent monk of that time, felt jealous of Gyōgi, and thought, “I am a learned Grand Abbot while Gyōgi is a mere monk without much learning. Why does the emperor appreciate him so much more and ignore me?” Holding a strong grudge against the emperor and Gyōgi, Chikō retired into a mountain and soon died there. According to his wishes, Chikō’s body was not immediately buried but was left as it was.

Ten days later, Chikō revived and said to his disciples, “Messengers from King Yama’s palace pursued me. As we ran, we saw a beautiful golden edifice glittering with radiance. I asked the messengers whose palace it was. The messengers replied that it was the place where Bodhisattva Gyōgi was born. As we proceeded further, we saw fire and smoke ahead. When I asked the messengers, they said that the fire and smoke were from the hell where I was going. Soon we arrived there.

King Yama told me in a roaring voice that I was brought down to hell to be punished for my evil and jealous feelings toward Gyōgi in the country of Japan. Soon I was made to hold a hot copper pole and my flesh and bones burned and festered. After I atoned for my sins, I was released.”

---

11. A major text of the Dharma Character (Hossō) school translated by Xuanzang.

12. Temple construction was restricted in the Nara period, so village temples, which did not conform to government restrictions, were called *dōjō*, “practice halls.”

13. Grand abbot or superintendent.

14. An eminent scholarly monk of the Nara period who studied the Three Treatise (Sanron) Teachings, belonged to the Gangōji Temple, and left numerous commentaries on the sūtras.

Now that Chikō had revived, he wished to apologize to Gyōgi. At that time, Gyōgi was engaged in constructing a bridge spanning Naniwa Bay in Tsu Province. When Gyōgi saw Chikō at a distance, he smiled at him. Chikō prostrated himself before Gyōgi and tearfully begged his pardon.

When the emperor built the Tōdaiji Temple,<sup>15</sup> he ordered Gyōgi to offer a dedication service for the temple as lecturer. Gyōgi replied that he would not be able to serve as a lecturer at such a great meeting, but that a holy man from a foreign country would come to offer the service.

When the day arrived, Gyōgi said that they should welcome the holy man. With an imperial order, Gyōgi led ninety-nine priests and the officials from three offices including those for aristocrats, for priests and nuns, and for music. He went to the port of Naniwa and waited there with music.

Holding a set of *argha*<sup>16</sup> (Buddhist utensils for offerings), with arranged flowers and burning incense, Gyōgi took the hundredth place among the priests and boarded a boat. . . .

After a while . . . they saw a small boat approaching. As it arrived at the shore, an Indian stepped on the beach. Seeing this, Gyōgi raised a hand, smiled at the Indian priest, and recited a poem,

The truth of the words  
Vowed before Shākyamuni  
At Vulture Peak  
Did not die and  
We have met again.

The holy man from the foreign country responded by reciting his poem,

As promised to each other  
At Kapilavastu,  
I can now see  
The face of Mañjushrī.

Gyōgi said to the monks and laymen in his presence that the holy man was Bodhisena, a monk from South India. The people gathered at the place now knew that Gyōgi was an incarnation of Mañjushrī. There is no more space to itemize other miraculous happenings.

Gyōgi, at the age of eighty, passed away on the fourth day of the second month of the first year of Tenpyōshōhō (749).

[Trans. adapted from Dykstra, *Miraculous Tales*, pp. 27–29]

15. The Indian Bodhisena (704–760) came to Japan in 736 and, on Gyōgi's recommendation, presided at the Eye-Opening Ceremony of the Great Buddha of the Tōdaiji Temple in 752.

16. A set of special containers are used for the *aka* or the water offered to the Buddha.

*REGULATION OF THE BUDDHIST ORDERS  
BY THE COURT*

Not all those who embraced Buddhism, "left the world," and joined monastic orders did so with a full realization of what would be required of them in the religious life. Consequently, it was not long after the first establishment of monasteries and nunneries in Japan that charges were made of flagrant violations of Buddhist vows in regard to the taking of life, sexual incontinence, and drunkenness. Since the throne had taken a prominent part in establishing Buddhist institutions, it was expected that the court would likewise assert its control over them, as indicated by the measures taken by Suiko as early as 623 C.E. Such external controls proved largely ineffective, however, for serious violations were common throughout the seventh and eighth centuries, and it remained for reformers such as Ganjin and Saichō (see chapter 6) to attempt to tighten discipline from within.

31st year [623], Spring, 4th month, 3rd day. There was a Buddhist monk who took an axe and smote therewith his paternal grandfather. Now the empress, hearing of this, sent for the Great Imperial Chieftain Soga, and gave command, saying: "The man who has entered religion should be devoted to the Three Treasures and should cherish devoutly the prohibitions of the Buddhist Law. How can he without compunction be readily guilty of crime? We now hear that there is a monk who has struck his grandfather. Therefore, let all the monks and nuns of the various temples be assembled, and investigation made. Let severe punishment be inflicted on any who are convicted of offenses." Hereupon the monks and nuns were all assembled, and an examination held. The wicked monks and nuns were all about to be punished, when Kwallük, a Buddhist monk of Paekche, presented a memorial, as follows: "The Law of Buddha came from the Western country to Han.<sup>17</sup> Three hundred years later it was handed on to Paekche, since which time barely one hundred years had elapsed, when our king, hearing that the emperor of Nippon was a wise man, sent him tribute of an image of Buddha and of Buddhist sūtras. Since that time, less than one hundred years have passed, and consequently the monks and nuns have not yet learned the Buddhist laws and readily commit wickedness. On this account all the monks and nuns are afraid and do not know what to do. I humbly pray that with the exception of the wicked [monk who struck his grandfather], all the other monks and nuns be pardoned and not punished. That would be a work of great merit."

Accordingly the empress granted [his petition].

---

<sup>17</sup>. The Chinese dynasty of that name.

13th day. A decree was made as follows: “If even the monks continue to offend against the Law, wherewithal shall the laymen be admonished? Therefore from this time forward we appoint a Sōjō and a Sōzu for the superintendence of the monks and nuns.”

Autumn, 9th month, 3rd day. There was an inspection of the temples and of the monks and nuns, and an accurate record made of the circumstances of the building of the temples, and also of the circumstances under which the monks and nuns embraced religion, with the year, month, and day of their taking orders. There were at this time 46 temples, 816 monks, and 569 nuns—in all, 1,385 persons.

32nd year [624], Spring, 1st month, 7th day. The king of Koryō sent tribute of a Buddhist monk, named Hyegwan. He was appointed Sōjō [superintendent of monks and nuns].<sup>18</sup>

[Adapted from Aston, *Nihongi*, II, pp. 1522–1554]

### *EDICTS OF THE EMPRESS SHŌTOKU CONCERNING DŌKYŌ*

These edicts, one making the priest Dōkyō the chief minister of the court and the other naming him the king of the Law, preceded Empress Shōtoku’s attempt to abdicate the imperial throne in his favor.

#### EDICT OF OCTOBER 19, 764

It has been represented to us, in view of the master’s constant attendance on us, that he has ambitions of rising to high office like his ancestors before him, and we have been petitioned to dismiss him from our court. However, We have observed his conduct and found it to be immaculate. Out of a desire to transmit and promote Buddha’s Law, he has extended to us his guidance and protection. How could we lightly dismiss such a teacher?

Although our head has been shaven and we wear Buddhist robes, we feel obliged to conduct the government of the nation. As Buddha declared in the [Bommō, Brahmajāla] Sūtra, “Kings, ye who take up thrones, receive the ordination of the bodhisattvas!” These words prove that there can be no objection even for one who has taken holy orders in administering the government. We deem it proper therefore, since the reigning monarch is ordained, that the chief minister should also be an ordained monk. Hearken, all ye people, to our words:

---

<sup>18</sup>. The Japanese were still such novices in Buddhism that Korean monks were generally selected as religious authorities.

We confer on the Master Dōkyō the title of chief minister and master, though the title is not of his seeking. [pp. 93–94]

EDICT OF NOVEMBER 26, 766

We do affirm in this edict our belief that when the Law of Buddha, the Supreme One, is worshiped and revered with perfect sincerity of heart, he is certain to vouchsafe some unusual sign. The sacred bone of the Tathāgata which has now been manifested, of perfect shape and unusually large, is brighter and more beautiful of color than ever we have seen; the mind cannot encompass its splendor. Thus it is that night and day alike we pay it humble reverence with our unwavering attention. Indeed, it appears to us that when the Transformation Body of the Buddha extends its guidance to salvation in accordance with circumstances, his compassionate aid is manifested with no delay. Nevertheless, the Law depends on men for the continuation and spread of its prosperity. Thus, it has been due to acts of leadership and guidance in consonance with the Law performed by our chief minister and master, who stands at the head of all priests, that this rare and holy Sign has been vouchsafed us. How could so holy and joyous a thing delight us alone? Hearken, all ye people, to your sovereign's will: We bestow on our teacher, the chief minister, the title of king of the Law.<sup>19</sup> We declare again that such worldly titles have never been of his seeking; his mind is set, with no other aspiration, on performing the acts of a bodhisattva and leading all men to salvation. Hearken, all ye people, to your sovereign's will: We confer this position on him as an act of reverence and gratitude. [pp. 140–141]

[From *Shoku Nihongi*, in *Rikkokushi*, VI, pp. 93–141]

THE MERGER OF BUDDHIST AND  
SHINTO DEITIES

It is difficult to trace the early stages of the important process by which Buddhism was made compatible with Shinto and thus became more easily acceptable to the Japanese. The first clear indication of this appears in the middle of the Nara period—more than two hundred years after the official introduction of Buddhism to Japan—in a biography of Fujiwara Muchimaro. The author was obviously a Buddhist himself, and he portrayed a Shinto deity seeking refuge in the power of Buddhism. The mutual relationship of Buddhism with Shinto later developed in complex ways and by the Kamakura period resulted in detailed explanations of the Shinto gods as the concrete manifestations of Buddhist deities. This Buddhist argument was widely accepted and contrib-

---

19. Sometimes translated as “pope.”

uted significantly to the doctrinal, ritual, and institutional blending of both religions. Muchimaro's biography marks the textual beginning of this merger and tells how a Shinto deity, still in command of its own powers, made a spiritual request that had an institutional answer.

In the year 715, Fujiwara Muchimaro had a dream in which a strange man appeared and said, "Since you revere the teachings of the Buddha, please build a temple for my sake. I beg of you to fulfill my request and save me, for my past karma has caused me to be a Shinto deity for a long time. Now I place my trust in the way of the Buddha, and I wish to perform meritorious acts for my happiness. Thus far, I have not been able to obtain the proper causes and conditions for this, and therefore I have come to speak with you."

Muchimaro was suspicious and thought that the man might be the Kibi deity. He wanted to say something in reply but found himself unable to speak. Then he woke up from his dream. He offered a prayer, saying, "The ways of the gods and men are different. What is obvious to the one is obscure for the other. Who was that strange man appearing in my dream last night? If he should prove himself to be a deity by showing me a sign, then I shall surely build a temple for him." At that point, the deity picked up a monk named Kume Katsuashi and placed him at the very top of a tall tree. That, he said, was the sign. Muchimaro then realized the truth and built a temple, which is now a part of a Buddhist-Shinto shrine complex in Echizen Province.

[Tsuji, *Bukkyō shi*, 1, p. 44c; GT]