

## KOBO DAISHI, THE SAINT OF SHINGON\*

**K**ŌBŌ Daishi, the great teacher and the saint of Shingon, in fact the founder of it in Japan, was born on June 15, 774, in Sanuki on the island of Shikoku. Although his real name was Mao (眞魚), his parents called him Tōtomono (貴物), meaning Treasure; for, according to the legend, as a boy he was once seen surrounded by four deities, the *shitenno*, holding a canopy over him. His father Saeki Takimi (佐伯田公) noticed that the child seemed to like to play with things connected with Buddhism, and this gave him the idea of making him a priest; but his uncle who was a teacher of the Chinese classics thought it was better for him to learn reading and writing through the medium of the Chinese classics, and so when Mao was fifteen years old, he went to Kyoto to stay with his uncle and diligently studied Confucianism. He became however dissatisfied, his mind was absorbed with Buddhism, and despite his uncle's influence he became a disciple of the head-priest of the temple Ishibuchi, and here he studied the scriptures under the priest Gonzo (勤操) and chirography, of which he later became a master under Uokai. About this time, when only eighteen years old he wrote a book in which he discussed the merits of the doctrines of Confucius, Laotze, and Shakamuni. Soon after this, he gave himself up to spiritual training, and this included severe bodily austerities, for he believed that he must stand firm in his Buddhist faith without being weakened by any outside worldly influences. He wandered about the country as a homeless monk, and later when he returned to

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\* It is proposed to have a series of articles on the Shingon sect of Japanese Buddhism and as an introduction to these a brief account of the life of Kobo Daishi, the founder of Shingon in Japan, is given. Future articles will deal with the teaching of Shingon, sometimes called Mikkyo (secret teaching) and sometimes Mantra (true word).

Gonzo at Nara he was given the name of Kūkai (空海), meaning "Ocean of Emptiness."

While studying at Nara, Kūkai thought there must be some fundamental sutra from which all other sutras were derived; so he concentrated and prayed for one hundred days that he might be spiritually led to find the holy book. As a result it was revealed to him that the book which he so earnestly sought was the *Daibirushana sutra* (大毘盧遮那經 *Vairochana*), and he at once went to search for it. Temple after temple he visited, seeking patiently for ten years, but at length his perseverance was rewarded; for at Kumadera temple in Yamato he found the coveted book. This sutra was composed of seven rolls translated into Chinese by a Hindu priest, Zemmui Sanzo (善無畏三藏). When Kūkai found the sutra, he realised that it required great study and that there was no teacher in Japan wise enough to instruct him, and so he felt that it was necessary for him to go to China and there learn of this mysterious teaching embodied in the sutra. Accordingly, in 805, when he was thirty-one years old, he joined the suite of the Japanese ambassadors to the court of T'ang of China. China at this time represented the highest civilisation in the Eastern world, and Kūkai was delighted to have the opportunity to further his studies not only of Buddhism but of the Chinese language. In this ambassadorial delegation of which Fujiwara Kadonmaro was the head, was also the priest Saicho (最澄), afterwards known as Dengyo Daishi. Saicho carried an interpreter with him, but Kūkai knew the Chinese language so well that he needed no interpreter and so had a wonderful opportunity for getting his information at first hand. He became the student of Keikwa (惠果) at the temple of Seiriuji (青龍寺) at Chōan (長安). Keikwa taught him from the sacred sutras and revealed to him all the Shingon teaching and mysteries. During his sojourn he also studied Chinese chirography in which he was so accomplished that he was admired by all the Chinese scholars. In fact his skill was so remarkable and his

technique so perfect that he was asked by the emperor to renew the characters written on the wall of the palace, originally written by Ogishi (王羲之), the most famous calligrapher of the seventh century. Kūkai also studied Sanskrit during his stay in China. He had intended remaining in China for many years, but at the end of three years he decided to return to Japan. From Keikwa he had received not only personal instruction but also many books and religious implements for use in the rituals. When Keikwa died he erected a monument to him at Ryugen, and it was said that he moistened his inkslab with his tears. Only those who have studied under an Oriental spiritual teacher can understand the peculiarly close and devoted relationship which exists between teacher and disciple, and this undoubtedly Kūkai had for Keikwa.

When Kūkai returned to Japan, he first preached his doctrine at the very temple in Yamato where he had first found the sacred sutra. A noted congregation of priests assembled to hear him expound the teachings. In February, 811, he inaugurated his teaching of Ryobu Shinto (兩部神道), that is, the union between Shinto and Buddhism; for Kūkai maintained that the deities of Shinto and Buddhism are really the same, the Shinto deities being personifications of the Bodhisattvas. For this he has been greatly condemned by one class of thinkers on the one hand, and admired and praised by the other. Most Western writers of Buddhism condemn him and think that he encouraged superstition and caused Buddhism to degenerate. But most Japanese writers and scholars feel that it was a natural outcome, already started by Prince Shōtoku (聖德太子) in the seventh century and encouraged by Gyōgi Bosatsu (行基菩薩) in the eighth, of the social needs of the Chinese and Japanese types of civilisation, and that Kūkai was not only a great religious teacher but through him Japanese art reached its greatest development. Not only was he a great religious teacher, scholar, painter, and poet, but the inventor of the *hiragana* syllabary. There is no question but he conferred a

great benefit to Japanese literature. It was he who originated grade schools in which he taught *hiragana* as a medium for teaching the Chinese classics and eventually Buddhism. Every person who uses the Japanese *kana* syllabary is, knowingly or not, a disciple of the great teacher. This syllabary which is based on the Sanskrit alphabet reads :

I-ro-ha-ni-ho-he-to,  
 Chi-ri-nu-ru-wo,  
 Wa-ka-yo-ta-re-so  
 Tsu-ne-na-ra-mu :  
 U-i-no-o-ku-ya-ma  
 Ke-fu-ko-e-te,  
 A-sa-ki-yu-me-mi-shi,  
 Ye-hi-mo-se-su.

“The flowers however fragrantly blooming are doomed to wither, and who in this world can hope to be permanently living? The remotest mountain-pass of existence (or birth and death, *samsrīta*) is crossed today! Awakening from a dream so evanescent, I am no more subject to intoxication.”\*

Kōbō also brought books on the arts and medicine from China, and the Japanese justly consider him one of the greatest benefactors that Japan has ever had. Many legends and wonderful stories are told of him. Allowing for all inaccuracies of imaginary accounts, the fact remains that Kūkai was a man of the highest endowments and wonderful penetration, versatile and yet having depth of spiritual discernment.

He is considered by the Japanese as a national hero not only as an exponent of religion but as a benefactor to man. His record of achievement they regard as superlatively high. Kōbo was also a great painter and sculptor. Wherever one travels in Japan, one finds traces of the great teacher in this

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\* This is a poetic rendering of the Buddhist gāthā known as the stanza of “*Sabbe sankārā aniccā*” which is freely translated as follows :

All composite things are impermanent,  
 For they are subject to birth and death :  
 When this birth and death is transcended,  
 How calm is the true happiness ?

temple a statue, in that temple a picture, in this grotto a spot where he meditated, in that field a spring which he is said to have discovered: the land is dotted with memories of him. He seems to have travelled the length and breadth of the land propagating not only the Buddhist religion but Chinese civilisation as well. Japan owes a great debt to Kūkai as Confucianists still call him.

There are some writers and scholars who feel that Shingon is directly derived from contact with Christianity through Nestorianism rather than the offspring of pure Indian teaching and that Kōbō himself during his stay in China came into contact with Nestorian teachers. This is an interesting and fascinating field of study, and while much has been suggested, nothing has as yet been proved in regard to this connection. There are certainly many resemblances between Kōbō's secret teaching and Christianity as taught by the Gnostics and Nestorians: on the other hand there is a strong resemblance to the teachings of the Indian Yoga school, and the fact that Shingon bears much resemblance to Tibetan Buddhism though never having had direct contact would seem to show a common origin in India. More will be said about this in later papers.

Shingon has died out in China whence it was brought from India, but it still living in Japan. The most widely attended temples in Japan are the so-called Daishi temples at Kōya, Tōji in Kyoto, Kawasaki, and Nishi Arai near Tokyo. His picture (*ofuda*) on thin pieces of paper are among the most popular charms.

The rest of his life was spent spreading his doctrine throughout Japan. Dengyo Daishi, the headpriest of the Tendai sect who had faith in his doctrines was admitted into his church. The Emperor Saga was friendly to him and received baptism from him. He opened up Mount Kōya, later to become the Shingon holy of holies, and he caused many other splendid temples throughout the country to be built. He also established a kind of Buddhist university, Sōgei-shuchūin (綜

藝種智院). At Kōya, he wrote many treatises on the Shingon doctrine. Here he died in 835 at the age of sixty-two. In the year 921, eighty-six years after his death, the title of Kōbō Daishi, 弘法大師, great teacher of law-propagation, was conferred upon him by the Emperor Daigo.

Kōyasan is the Mecca for Shingon believers. It is beautifully situated on a mountain, 2,800 feet high in Kii province south of Nara. Here the admirers of Kōbō Daishi come, filled as it is with memories of the great teacher and find their way to his grave. Here he is supposed to lie uncorrupted awaiting the coming of Maitreya, the Buddha of the future. It is said each year one hundred thousand persons visit this tomb to pay reverence to the spirit of the founder. His spirit may be said to have a beautiful place to wait in, for the cemetery of Kōyasan is an impressive and charming place.

Shingon followers think that Kōbō Daishi himself was a great Bodhisattva. To the popular mind, he is better known as a wonderful miracle-worker, and one writer has stated that the religious historian cannot afford to leave the miracles which adorn or disfigure his life, as they are part and parcel of the religious history of the country; but I have chosen rather to depict Kōbō as a great man, priest, and scholar quite apart from the wonder-working legends, which have clustered about his personality.

BEATRICE LANE SUZUKI