Buddhism in the Asuka-Nara Period

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THE Yamato Court, which from its base in the Yamato area had gradually been expanding its sphere of authority among the ancient people of Japan, made rapid development during the Asuka-Nara period and established its sovereignty as the undeniable leader of the Japanese nation. It began to turn its attention to the outer world, to Asia, especially China, and introduced the continental Chinese civilization, both material and spiritual, into this isolated, sea-encompassed land. There was an earnest attempt to raise the low standards of the nation and to make it achieve the long strides necessary for it to reach the level of the neighboring world, and rank with Sui and T'ang dynasty China. This produced a steady flow of excellent results.

With the court as a nucleus, a great number of "courageous men" (*Yamato-no-takeru*) appeared to conquer the Kumaso of Kyūshū, the natives of Yezo (Hokkaidō), and other recalcitrant peoples one after another, and firmly establish the foundation of Yamato rule. Under the Empress Jingū (神功皇后), Yamato proceeded even to bring parts of Korea under its control. The Asuka-Nara period was a time when the successors to these men and their achievements turned their attention to the continental culture, and fostered in themselves a high humanistic refinement. They even pressed themselves forward onto the international stage of China, the center of world culture at that time.

The records of the relationship between the Yamato Court, the leader of ancient Japan, and China can be found today only in the historical documents of China, for before the introduction of Chinese characters the Japanese simply had no way of recording them.

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* For the purposes of this paper, the Asuka-Nara period may be said to extend from 592 when Empress Suiko ascended the throne, until 794 when the capital was moved to Kyoto. Ed.

For example, the Liu Sung dynastic history—the *Sung-shu* (宋書) compiled by Sh'en-yüeh (沈約 died A. D. 513) of Liang—enumerated the arrival at the Sung Court of envoys from successive Yamato emperors beginning from the year 421 A. D., when the envoys of "Emperor Tsan of Wa" (倭王贊, Emperor Nintoku, reigned 313–399) came to Sung. The "Wa King Wu's" (武, Emperor Yūryaku, reigned 456–479) military achievements are especially mentioned and it records that in 478 he was by imperial edict made: "Sovereign of Wa (Japan), Generalissimo for the Security of the East, Commander with Imperial Emblem, and Governor Commanding the Military Affairs of the Six Countries of Wa, Silla, Imna, Kala, Chin-han, and Mok-han."[1] During the period from Emperor Nintoku to Emperor Yūryaku, the Yamato Court had diplomatic relations with the Sung, which had its capital in Chien-k'ang (present Nanking), and established its influence even over the peninsula of Korea—a fact acknowledged by the Sung *History*. From this as well as from the grandeur of Emperor Nintoku's mausoleum, we can infer that during the time the Yamato Court held sway over the country Japan was a very powerful state.

This period during the Northern and Southern Dynasties in China, Buddhism attained one of its highest stages of prosperity. Therefore, the transmission of Buddhism at this time to Japan must be seen as a natural development. I shall not now enter into details concerning this transmission. I will simply state that it was the representatives of the Yamato Court, of their own accord, that became believers in Buddhism; and that it was Prince Shōtoku that encouraged the people to follow Buddhism. In this way Japanese Buddhism consolidated the basis for its future growth.

The Buddhism imported into Japan was markedly different from Chinese Buddhism in that in the first stages of its introduction it was a foreign religion that the *de facto* ruler, the Prince Regent Shōtoku, decided to adopt. Here also may be seen the characteristics of the Buddhism that flourished in Asuka and Nara. In the case of Chinese Buddhism, a succession of foreign missionaries from various countries and schools arrived in China after passing through the countries of Central Asia, and spent many years preaching and proselytizing. The teaching gradually spread and developed in complexity.

[1] The 5 countries listed after Wa were all located in southern Korea. Ed.

In Japan, on the other hand, there had been some Buddhist followers before Prince Shōtoku, there had been Buddhists among the naturalized Koreans and Chinese in Japan, and there might have been some Buddhist ceremonies conducted in private. But, before this had sufficiently taken root, Prince Shōtoku positively and earnestly promoted its reception on a national scale. His Seventeen-Article Constitution urges Japanese to "Sincerely revere the Three Treasures," and gives the reasons: "The Three Treasures, the Buddha, the Dharma (Law) and the Sangha (the Buddhist order), are the final refuge of all generated beings, and the very nucleus of all countries. What age or man can fail to revere this Law? Very few men are utterly wicked; if taught well, they can follow it. If they do not revere the Three Treasures, how can they straighten their crookedness?" Although they are of course Three Treasures, they must be essentially the "final refuge of all generated beings and the very nucleus of all countries." They are not necessarily the images of Buddha, sūtras, and the priesthood. Prince Shōtoku's view of the Three Treasures was that they are one, and that they should not be taken separately. This can be seen in his *Commentary on the Śrīmālā Sūtra (Shōmangyō Gisho)*:

> The Three Treasures separately conceived and the Five Vehicles distinctively established were formerly taught, but both of them are expedient teachings, not the true teaching. Now, the Five Vehicles have been united into the One Vehicle, either of them being the cause of eternal Buddhahood. . . . (In a like manner, the Three Treasures are united into One, and) this One eternal Treasure constitutes the ultimate refuge.

According to this, it is clear that the notion of "Three Treasures" does not signify three separate things—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—as is generally conceived, but the eternal and noumenal One Treasure as the basis of the three. In other words, the Three Treasures are the ultimate truth of the universe, or the ultimate path a human being should follow naturally. A truly good society or nation can be established only when all the people aim at such an ultimate life-objective—this is Prince Shōtoku's Buddhism, and the meaning of "Sincerely revere the Three Treasures." Therefore, this Buddhism was not something breathing of the supernatural nor was it much affected by the odour of incense burned to mystical incantations.

Prince Shōtoku selected, studied, and lectured on three sūtras, the *Śrīmālā-*

siṃhanāda-sūtra, *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*, and *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*. Of these, the *Śrīmālā-siṃhanāda* (Śrīmālā's Lion Roar) depicts Lady Śrīmālā as one who truly realized the Buddhist teaching while leading a lay life as queen. The *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, too, praises Vimalakīrti as a man who authentically experienced and practiced Buddhism. He was a householder; he carried on his business, had a wife and children, and led a free and active life in the ordinary world, dealing in politics as well as in business. There is an interesting plot in which Śāriputra, usually venerated as the foremost among all Śākyamuni's disciples, is shown as having a mistaken idea of true Buddhism and relegated to a clown-like role in which he is made fun of and reproved by goddesses and by the bedridden Vimalakīrti himself. This clearly goes to indicate that Buddhism is to be found in worldly life. As for the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* (Lotus Sutra), because there were various religious sects at the time of its compilation, it strongly advocates that all is one, all is One Vehicle, ignoring the discrimination of sects. It speaks of "persons that one should respect and serve." Without exception, all the commentators on this sūtra in China interpreted this to mean that noble persons, such as "monks who silently sit in meditation in the mountains," should be respected and served. Prince Shōtoku strongly objected to this interpretation. He labelled those who enjoyed and were attached to sitting in meditation amid mountains and forests in escape from the world false disciplinants, and said they were completely contrary to the Mahāyāna ideal of the Lotus Sutra. How could those who entered the mountains with such a perverted mentality be able to propagate to mankind the true teaching of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*? Prince Shōtoku maintains that Buddhism will really be found within social life and daily industry, as is surmised also from the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* itself, and that recluses who practice Buddhism by entering the mountains are not good Buddhists. They are merely egoistic and self-righteous men.

Looking at his comments on these three particular sūtras, which he selected out of several thousand volumes of other sūtras, his urging people to follow the Buddha did not necessarily mean they should escape from life and engage in lives of religious discipline as monks or nuns. He believed that it was possible for one to practice Buddhism within one's worldly life, and thereby to purify and improve society—as it is put in the Lotus Sutra: "to purify the Buddha Land and accomplish the deliverance of the people"—and that this, indeed,

was the true Buddhism, the so-called Mahāyāna.

The basic policy of Prince Shōtoku as a statesman was to raise as quickly as possible the low standard of living in Japan to the Chinese level, which was at that time the highest in the world. For this purpose he sent an embassy to China which included student monks and laymen, bearing the now famous message, "The Son of Heaven of the Land of the Rising Sun sends a message to the Son of Heaven of the Land of the Setting Sun." The *History of the Sui Dynasty* records that the Emperor of Sui (Emperor Yang) was angered when he read this implication of equality, calling it "an impolite message from an eastern barbarian." But it is said that this message also contained the statement: "Being informed that the Bodhisattva Emperor (Yang) of the Western Sea wants to revive Buddhism, scores of monks have been sent to study it, along with the official envoys of the Imperial Court."

The message makes special reference to the Sui Emperor as "the Bodhisattva Emperor who wants to revive Buddhism," because the Sui had revolted against the North Chou, a dynasty whose chosen policy was the thorough annihilation of all religious bodies. Immediately after the Sui established itself as a nation it had proclaimed a religious revival. The emperor himself eagerly took the lead in this by reestablishing the Buddhist temples, and filling them with Buddhist scriptures and priests. He fostered a state policy, which was without parallel in Chinese history, to rule the country by means of Buddhism. It was to the Sui capital, where Buddhism was gaining a stronghold as a state religion, that selected Japanese student monks came to study the religion for the sake of the nation by order of their government.

In China's case, Buddhism was introduced when foreign Buddhists from various countries and sects came to China on their own to proclaim their faith. They propagated Buddhism among the people they came into contact with. The state or ruling class had not sought Buddhism for any political end. But at the initial stage of Japanese Buddhism, it was the administrators of the Yamato Court that took the positive step of selecting and sending students abroad to the Sui and T'ang capitals for study. The Buddhism they brought back became the Buddhism of the Kinai district (the district centering around Yamato), supported, at least, by the imperial court and the ruling class. This became the main stream of Japanese Buddhism, which thus formed inseparable links with the political world, and which later developed into Nara Buddhism.

The Sui-T'ang capital was a famous cultural center boasting the highest level in Asia and perhaps in the world. Here outstanding Japanese students and monks studied civilization and Buddhism. The Yamato Court looked forward eagerly to their return, and made efforts for the transplantation and development of the culture they brought back. The cosmopolitan culture of Sui and T'ang thus entered Japan rapidly. Her cultural standards were raised considerably, and the international outlook of the ruling class was at once broadened. There were great merits in this, of course, but there were not a few cases in which the undigested or the too speedily imitated foreign culture did not really adapt to Japanese life, and also cases in which the imported culture turned its back upon the life of the masses. Buddhism, especially, a religion which should be essentially personal and supranational, could not help falling into the evil of assuming a national coloring and being subordinated to the state.

In order to know how the regent Prince Shōtoku understood Buddhism, it is best to view the shape taken by the Hōryūji and the Shitennōji temples that he founded. The Hōryūji's full name, Hōryū-Gakumon-ji (the College Monastery Hōryū), indicates that it was not a site at which to perform funeral ceremonies or memorial services for the repose of the dead, but a place to study or lecture on Buddhism, which besides being the supreme religion transmitted from China encompassed even metaphysics, psychology, logic, and other sciences of the time. In a sense, it was a national research institute with religion at the core, having been established by bringing together the best of world culture.

The Shitennōji temple was constructed at a place where the Japanese Court, eager to introduce foreign culture, had opened its doors to foreign countries. In those days the sea came closer to the Shitennōji temple than it does now, and the Yamato River, which flowed down from Yamato where the capital was, flowed closer to the temple than at present. The Shitennōji temple of Naniwa (present Osaka) with its gorgeous architecture was constructed at Japan's front door, which Asuka and Nara (to the inland) had opened to foreign visitors. Although it was a Buddhist temple, there was also a stage for *bugaku* or court dances and music. The *bugaku* performances shown here were not native to Japan, but new and exotic foreign dances, music and costumes; in present day terms, the latest dances with the latest orchestra. Any who left for foreign lands or returned back to the capital must have spent at least some

time here, not far from the port, enjoying this splendid *bugaku* in a solemn religious atmosphere. The temple, also possessing such facilities for social welfare as a charity dispensary, a home for old people, and an orphanage, extended help to all unfortunate people, signifying that Buddhism was something for all people equally.

Prince Shōtoku's Buddhism somewhat resembled the combined underlying ideas of the Hōryūji and the Shitennōji temples. He intended that the state should enable all the people to adopt it as quickly as possible. We can say, I think, that he had grasped the authentic spirit and ideals of Mahāyāna Buddhism. However, it was natural that the state and politics should soon take preference over a religion that the ruler had introduced as a matter of national policy. The true role of religion apart from politics is liable to be forgotten, and religion is unavoidably led astray, when placed under the control of the state and politicians. The Taika Reformation (A. D. 645), which united minor lords under one sovereign, made use of the new knowledge gained by students who had studied political statecraft in China and brought about the centralization of political and economic power for the whole country. Thus strengthened, the centralized government operated with ever growing effectiveness from the new capital at Nara. But at the same time Buddhism, which Prince Shōtoku had originally welcomed with the aim of achieving a nation of people who "sincerely revere the Three Treasures," now gradually became influenced by the centralized power of the state. In the Nara-Tempyō period (729–749) under Emperor Shōmu, this tendency developed into the establishment of state provincial branch temples (*kokubun-ji*) and nunneries (*kokubun-ni-ji*). With this, Buddhism as a religion came to an impasse.

The *kokubunji* and *kokubun-ni-ji* were built under state supervision in each of the centers of provincial government throughout the country. As an overall organization designed to bring at one stroke the large towns and provinces within Buddhism's edifying influence, the *kokubunji* may be called the very fruition of Prince Shōtoku's ideal. It can be said that Japanese culture, which had rapidly developed since Asuka times thanks to the national policy of introducing the continental culture, reached a near crest during the reign of Emperor Shōmu in the Nara period. And the same can be said of the Buddhist culture that began in the time of Prince Shōtoku. Emperor Shōmu was the person responsible for erecting the *kokubunji* temples and the Daibutsu (the Great Bud-

dha), which represent to the world the Buddhist culture of the Nara period. While comparing these two great enterprises and noting the conspicuous differences in their natures, I would like to address myself to the impasse Buddhism confronted at this juncture, and to the subsequent arrival of a period of reform.

Since the *kokubunji* and the Daibutsu were both Buddhist-inspired enterprises undertaken one after another by the same emperor, people are apt simply to think of the two as being of a similar nature. In fact, they came into being under completely different religious circumstances. I believe that the emperor decided to build the Daibutsu in order to deny the *kokubunji* he had previously built; the Daibutsu was thus the manifestation of a new religious conviction in Shōmu as a human being (not as the emperor) who repented of his impure service to the Buddha in the past.

The *kokubunji* were temples built by provincial governors under orders from Emperor Shōmu. They were built at government expense, by levying taxes and impressing people for physical labor. No matter what splendid Buddhist teaching the conception of the *kokubunji* and *kokubun-ni-ji* might have been based on, how grand their structures might have finally been, it seems difficult to call these structures built from taxes and manual toil requisitioned by government order from the common people true religious sanctuaries. The functions of the priests of the *kokubunji* were, moreover, always subject to the supervision of the governors. They were, more exactly, little more than an extension of government offices, bedecked with splendid Buddhist trappings. Still more, the central government applied continual pressure on the governors to ensure that construction work proceeded on schedule. The erection of these temples inflicted increasing suffering on the common people, completely oblivious and even running counter to the spirit of Buddhism. They can hardly have been seminaries capable of enhancing the way "to remove suffering and give comfort" to the people. It is needless to say that Buddhist temples should be built from a spirit that arises spontaneously among the believers themselves.

The number of grand Buddhist temples erected from the Asuka period in various places in the Kinai district were of two kinds. To the first belong the national and government temples. To the second belong the family temples erected by such powerful noble families as the Soga and Fujiwara. Since both kinds of temples had economic resources, they were, no doubt, great temples

representative of the fine culture of Asuka and Nara. But it cannot be said that these temples, which were excluded to other families and to the common people, and the private family temples, which could hardly avoid being symbols of secular power, possessed the true spirit of Buddhist temples. And yet alongside these government and family temples, there did exist Buddhist temples in the true sense in various places, although they were very small.

These were the *chishiki* temples (知識寺, temples of fellow believers). "*Chishiki*" refers here to "friends," "fellow believers and practicers"—those with the same beliefs who encouraged and helped each other in their religious practice.[2] These temples arose out of the spontaneous demand of such people, each person playing a part in keeping with his means. Some brought stones, some donated lumber, some rendered physical labor, and some gave sums of money. Through cooperation and free services, and with religious belief as a bond, they built temples belonging to all and open to all seekers after truth. The *chishiki* temples were truly based on the Buddhist spirit, and deserve to be known as sanctuaries where Buddhism was actually put into practice.

The key to the construction of the Daibutsu lay in a visit the Emperor Shōmu happened to make to a *chishiki* temple in the province of Kawachi that made him awaken to the true manner in which a Buddhist enterprise should be undertaken. The following passage occurs in an imperial proclamation read by Tachibana Moroe:

> Last year, in the Year of the Dragon (Tempyō 12, 740), I worshipped a seated image of the Buddha Vairocana in a *chishiki* temple at Ōagata in the province of Kawachi. I decided that I would build such a temple too. (*Shoku Nihongi, 17*)

Deeply moved by this encounter in Kawachi, the emperor three years later at the age of forty-nine proclaimed the casting of the Daibutsu. The imperial edict states:

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[2] *Chishiki* 知識 (*Zen-chishiki* 善知識 in full) is a Buddhist term equivalent to the Sanskrit *kalyāṇamitra*, which means "a well-wishing friend," "a virtuous friend." It has been traditionally understood to connote "a (good) religious teacher" who, as a friend, helps others in their religious progress. In the present context, however, *chishiki* seems rather to be used with an emphasis on its Chinese meaning of "knowledge," "acquaintance," and thus denoting "acquainted with each other," and then, "friends," "fellow devotees." Ed.

> With the great vow of a Bodhisattva, I solemnly pledge to erect a gilt bronze statue of the Buddha Vairocana. I will melt down all the bronze in the country for it, and cut down all the trees in the mountains to build a temple. I will announce this widely throughout the country to my fellow "friends" and practicers. In the end, we shall benefit and attain enlightenment together. (*ibid, 15*)

It is clear from this that the Daibutsu was built in order that all people might make their quest toward enlightenment together, fellow believers throughout the country being the emperor's "fellow friends," the emperor himself not an emperor but one of "friends," a devotee and practicer on the same footing as the others. The edict states further:

> I, the emperor, am the one who possesses the wealth of the land; the one who possesses the power. With this wealth and power, the matter of building this sacred figure is easy. But to do it with one's whole heart is difficult. If it is only a cause of the vain spending of the people's labor, we cannot meet the Buddha's wish; rather, we commit a sin by abusing the Dharma. This I fear. (*ibid.*)

The emperor realized that he should not exercise his authority and use compulsion. To those who cooperated in the enterprise and also to the government authorities, he declared in the same edict:

> One who joins the "friends" should worship the Buddha Vairocana three times a day, in all sincerity. . . . If someone should desire to help build the figure by donating even a branch from a plant or a handful of earth, accept it unhesitatingly. The chiefs of provinces and counties should not, because of this project, harm the peasants or exact taxes or labor from them. Proclaim this widely and let my intention be known. (*ibid.*)

The emperor, in this way, made an effort to have people fully understand that the Daibutsu was a thoroughly voluntary enterprise deriving from the common faith of the believers, and that no government authority or compulsion should be exercised. Thus its motive was entirely different from that of the *kokubunji*, which the same emperor had ordered bureaucrats all over the country to erect by exacting taxes and labor from the people.

To set this joint activity into operation and cast the Daibutsu, an entirely unprecedented method was used, if viewed from the commonsense standpoint of the court bureaucrats of the time. The *Shoku Nihongi* tells us that "Gyōgi Hōshi, leading his disciples, solicited the common people to help in the enterprise." Gyōgi Hōshi (Priest Gyōgi)—better known by the more familiar name Gyōgi Bosatsu—had a great number of "friends" as followers, of both sexes, including priests and laymen, who deeply respected him. At his request they donated their labor. But to the court bureaucrats, he was simply a mendicant priest of unknown lineage and birth, without position of authority or the standing to approach the court. It even seems he was hated as a dangerous agitator and an obstacle to administration. Gyōgi practiced Buddhism in the streets and in the rural rice fields. He preached the Buddha's teaching while performing social services covered with dirt and wet with perspiration; digging ponds, repairing roads, building bridges, and so forth. He led great numbers of "friends" from the common people, irrespective of their rank or education or sex, or whether they were priests or nuns. He was, in short, the greatest leader of the group of "friends" of the time. Yet only about ten years before, in the third year of Tempyō, the same Emperor Shōmu felt impelled to take the following measures in an edict directed against Gyōgi.

> The recent lay followers of Gyōgi Hōshi will be allowed to stay in the order only if they are pious practicers, over 61 years of age if they are men and 55 if they are women. Others will be strictly controlled by the authorities and subject to arrest. (*ibid, 11*)

The Tempyō government branded such people as undesirables, disturbers of the national order, and kept them under surveillance and prohibited their assemblies. That later, the leader of such a "dangerous group" was solicited along with his followers to cooperate in the Daibutsu undertaking was, indeed, an almost sensational incident on the part of the highly ceremonious Nara Court. At any rate, it is clear the emperor who ordered the *kokubunji* to be built, and the emperor who vowed he would erect the Daibutsu, were completely different religious personalities.

What, then, was it that made the emperor awaken to himself as a naked human being, and led him even to descend from the level of his imperial standing to that of a "friend" (知識) of the common people? There is no religion,

in Buddhism at least, if one is not awakened to the real nature of human existence. The statue in the *chishiki* temple in Kawachi, a common object of worship for common people, was the direct cause that led the emperor to this self-examination. Still, we should not disregard the human suffering he underwent prior to the day he visited that temple.

His father was Emperor Mommu, and his mother Miyako, the daughter of Fujiwara Fubito, then at the height of power in the political world. Miyako's sister was his consort, the Empress Kōmyō, a devout Buddhist. Their family included a son and daughters. Into this royal family tragedy struck, against which even "all the wealth and power of the country" was useless.

His only son, born in the 4th year of Shinki, died the following year (728), in the 9th month, after having been joyfully invested shortly before as heir apparent to the throne. The emperor expressed his grief in the following edict:

> The Crown Prince is ill in bed. Days pass but he does not recover. Without the power of the Three Treasures, how could this agony be borne? (*ibid*, *10*)

With the offering of a prayer, he had 177 statues of Kannon made. He proclaimed an amnesty, admonished people against the destruction of life, and so forth. This reveals his deep distress as a human being. "The Crown Prince passed away. He was two years old. The emperor's lamentation was great." These short sentences in the *Shoku Nihongi* enable us to vividly visualize the emperor's deep grief.

Losing his beloved son, he began to crave even more the maternal affection his own mother had so long deprived him of. He was an unfortunate, lonely person. Since giving birth to him Shōmu's mother had kept herself shut up in her room and never saw anyone, a victim, perhaps, of melancholia after the childbirth. At the age of twenty-four, without ever having been embraced by his mother, the emperor ascended the throne. Even after that, though his mother actually existed, he could not see her. However, after an audience she had granted in the 12th month of 737 to the priest Genbō, who had recently returned from study in T'ang China, she at last said that she would see the emperor. The event is recorded in the *Shoku Nihongi*:

> The Empress Dowager, being in low spirits, had cast aside personal affairs for a long time and had not once seen the emperor since she

> gave birth to him. Then the priest Genbō visited her, and suddenly wisdom arose in her. Thereupon she met the emperor face to face. There was none in the whole land that did not rejoice. (*ibid.*, *12*)

The country's rejoicing aside, the deep emotion of the emperor, who had long craved his mother's love, must have been beyond description.

The Empress Kōmyō was a practical believer in Buddhism, and personally extended her mercy to the sick among the common people. Emperor Shōmu pushed forward the construction of *kokubunji* temples throughout the country, but there were districts in which the temples were not completed in spite of this. There were also complaints being heard from the people. It was just at this time that the emperor happened to worship the image of Vairocana Buddha in Kawachi and learned the true religious role of an emperor. It was an opportunity to reflect on his own Buddhist acts, those which he had hitherto made others undertake in the belief that they were good and noble. He vowed to build a true religious figure which he himself could worship. The casting of the Daibutsu represented the rebirth of Shōmu the man and his departure on a new religious life. It can perhaps be said that with its casting the deep suffering of Shōmu the human being was fused into the figure of the Buddha.

In the records concerning the construction of the Daibutsu, we find the items: "lumber–'friends,' 51,590 people"; "metal–'friends,' 372,075 people," probably referring to fellow believers who donated lumber or metal. These accounts seem to show that the completion of the Daibutsu owed a great deal to the cooperation of the "friends." Another account states that Emperor Shōmu himself carried earth which he put in his sleeve pocket. This would be natural for one who had been awakened to his role as a "friend." He also might have wanted to make it clear to the "friends" that the emperor himself was one of them. When it became fairly certain that the Daibutsu would be completed in the 21st year of Tempyō, he underwent the Buddhist initiation ceremony under the Priest Gyōgi, together with the Empress Kōmyō. He became Shami Shōman, and thereupon abdicated the throne. *Shami* (Skt. *śrāmaṇera*) means one who is undergoing Buddhist discipline, who is on the way to becoming a regular priest or *bhikṣu*. The emperor was forty-nine at that time. It is clear that, as far as the construction of the Daibutsu was concerned, he was one of the fellow believers who worshipped the Daibutsu, having completely

divested himself of his imperial title; and also that he was now fully conscious that as Shami Shōman, a disciple of Gyōgi, he was a mere instrument of the Three Treasures, prostrate in total humility before the Daibutsu. Thus, when Shami Shōman died, a funeral service was performed with full Buddhist rites. This was unprecedented. The edict proclaimed on that day states: "The ex-emperor has left home and taken refuge in Buddhism. A posthumous title will not be conferred anew." This was probably in obedience to the will of the former monarch. But circumstances at the Nara Court could not allow an emperor to remain merely as Shami Shōman. As a matter of precedent and courtesy, therefore, the posthumous title "Shōhō-kanshin-shōmu-kōtei" (勝宝感神聖武皇帝)[3] was selected and bestowed upon him.

The clear shift of Emperor Shōmu to a new religious life enables us to discern the existence of two opposing aspects in the reality of Nara Buddhism: on the one hand Buddhism, having had direct links with the state bureaucrats ever since the time of Prince Shōtoku, became highly prosperous; on the other hand, however, it had reached an impasse and lost the true religious character which it ought to have possessed. Buddhism subordinated to and dependent upon the state had reached a stage necessitating renovation.

Yet even if the emperor realized this, the religious world, in reality, could not be renovated so easily. However much the emperor declared that he was one of the "friends" of the common people and that the Daibutsu was a common object of worship built through the equal cooperation of all believers irrespective of rank, the great Tōdaiji temple with the Daibutsu as its object of worship could not avoid becoming the central head temple of all the country-wide *kokubunji* branch temples. It became the "Daiwa-konkōmyō-gokoku-no-tera" (Temple of Golden Light Guarding Great Japan), and was invested with five thousand houses and twenty thousand servants. And though the emperor became Shami Shōman, a pious and humble disciple of the Buddha, he was, after all, destined to be pedestaled as Shōhō-kanshin-shōmu-kōtei. The reformation of Nara Buddhism had to await the appearance of a great religious genius who could devote himself to the religious world. This reformation was finally accomplished by Kōbō Daishi (Kūkai) and Dengyō Daishi (Saichō)

[3] This may be roughly rendered: "Sacred and Courageous (=Shōmu) Emperor, (during whose reign) Excellent Treasures manifested themselves in response to (his) worthy spirit." Ed.

with the transfer of the capital to Kyoto. This was the reformed "mountain-ascending" Buddhism that shut itself off from the government circles and worldly honors.

What Buddhist doctrine does the great statue of Vairocana in the Tōdaiji temple represent? What is the Tempyō spirit it manifests? A magnificent doctrine has been incorporated into the enormous body of this Buddha figure. Vairocana is the primal Buddha that sent Śākyamuni Buddha into our world to guide and enlighten people, and that has also sent an equivalent of Śākyamuni to each of the other innumerable worlds of the universe to deliver the beings there. Those who gaze up at this great image should notice the large lotus seat on which it sits. Inscribed on the petals of the lotus flower are drawings in line engraving, which can be clearly seen in rubbed copies. In the upper part of the center of each petal is engraved a sitting Buddha in meditation, surrounded by Bodhisattvas. This is the Buddha Śākyamuni that Vairocana has sent out to each world. A light is emitted from the crown of the head of this Śākyamuni, and in the light there are thirty-six smaller Buddhas, showing that Śākyamuni is preaching and saving various others by producing innumerable transformed Buddhas. Below the seated Śākyamuni there are horizontal lines separated into twenty-five steps, each step with a Buddha, a Bodhisattva, and a palace. In the lowest section there is a mountain surrounded by sea. A sun and a moon appear on the summit of the mountain. This is a depiction of Mount Sumeru, a drawing of the world as conceived by the ancient people of India. The upper lines represent the heavenly realms, on each petal of the lotus flower is therefore drawn the universe, the so-called "trichiliocosm" or world system of a thousand million worlds. There are a great number of such lotus petals. The people of India believed that in addition to the universe that could be consolidated within this "trichiliocosm," there were other "trichiliocosms" beyond number—so many solar systems, so to speak. This great universe is symbolized by the petals of the lotus flower. In the center of each universe sits Śākyamuni, an offshoot that has appeared from the body of Vairocana, the principal image pervading throughout the entire world. Śākyamuni is here untiringly engaged in guiding and teaching people. Indeed, Nara, where the Daibutsu sits, is the center of the great universe.

The above ideas are described in the *Avataṃsaka* and *Brahmajāla* sūtras. The great Buddha of the Tōdaiji is neither the Buddha of Japan, nor of Nara, nor of

China, nor of India, but the fundamental Buddha of the whole universe. This conception could never have been produced from the thought of an isolated country like Japan. This is the great central Buddha that has equally taken into consideration the whole world, the whole of mankind—a Buddha produced by the magnificent Tempyō spirit, which possessed the preparedness and courage necessary to throw Japan open to the world so she could breathe in world culture deeply and fully. No, we can say that this giant figure represents the Tempyō spirit itself.

In each of the provincial *kokubunji* temples the Buddha Śākyamuni was the object of worship. This was an aspect of their instructional activities as offshoots of the fundamental Vairocana, represented in the Daibutsu as the petals of the lotus flower seat. The great Buddha Vairocana was thus the Original Buddha of all those images enshrined in *kokubunji* throughout Japan. The Tōdaiji was the chief *kokubunji*, and it can be said that the *kokubunji* project was brought to completion with the finishing of the Daibutsu.

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that Emperor Shōmu had such a systematic concept in mind at the beginning when he made his vow to construct the Daibutsu. However, it is conceivable that as the construction proceeded, overcoming failures and difficulties, the ideas of the leading priests as well as of the Buddhist scholars who had studied in China were instrumental in linking the Daibutsu enterprise closely to the magnificent Kegon (*Avataṃsaka*) philosophy and, furthermore, to the *kokubunji* temples. That such a thing should have happened in the Nara period, when the Kegon sect was introduced from T'ang China, is highly probable.

The great religious ceremony inaugurating the newly constructed image was performed with a Brahman priest from India officiating. Afterwards, the blind Chinese priest Chien-chen (鑑真, Ganjin in Japanese) came before the Daibutsu and gave the Buddhist commandments to the ex-Emperor Shōmu, Empress Dowager Kōmyō, and a hundred high officials, making them disciples of the Buddha. Here in the presence of the Buddha there was no consciousness of being a Japanese or a Chinese or an Indian. It was a religious seminary where all the countries and peoples of the world were equally welcomed. At the dedication ceremony before the Daibutsu, surrounded by a large vermilion hall, a tall pagoda and corridors, there was a stage where the music and dances of India, China, and lands to the west of China were performed. It was an exhibi-

tion hall where world culture was wonderfully on display. The development of Japanese culture from the time of Prince Shōtoku can be said to have reached its climax here. The Tempyō spirit, at least the spirit of the ruling class, had evolved a magnificent, open culture similar to the Buddha Vairocana, making the whole universe its own world. The Daibutsu was a concrete emblem of this.

As stated above, the Daibutsu was the Emperor Shōmu's pious service to Buddhism, marking his humble return to the status of an ordinary human being and introspective and repentant believer. The Daibutsu, incorporating the splendid Tempyō world view and supported by the profound philosophy of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, represents the culminating development of Nara Buddhism. It is also one of the greatest productions of Japanese culture. Being an emperor, however, Shōmu could not really thoroughly become one of the "friends." He said he would cast aside his consciousness of himself as an emperor before the Daibutsu. But, in truth, words such as "I am the one who possesses the country's wealth, and the one who possesses all its power" show he could not do this. He was not well acquainted with the actual living standards of the common people, nor familiar with the actual state of the country's economy. It can also be said that although the Daibutsu enterprise professed to be a welfare work that arose spontaneously among the "friends," in the last analysis, no clear view had been formed as to the heavy burden it would cast on the people and the extent to which it would weaken the nation's economy; for the casting of the enormous figure required a tremendous amount of copper, not to mention the gold for the final coating.

The completion of the Daibutsu and the elevation of the Tōdaiji as the head temple of the *kokubunji* signalled, simultaneously, the decline of the Nara period. In this project we can see the religious purification of the Emperor Shōmu's spiritual life, his personal suffering, and the confession and repentance of his faults. But along with this, we can also see the failure of the Nara government and an alarm calling for the reform of state Buddhism.

With the transfer of the capital from Nara, the Buddhism of the Asuka-Nara period took a complete change. The two great teachers Kōbō and Dengyō wrought a total change in Japanese Buddhism by taking it from the city, the center of politics, to the mountain tops—by means of a "mountain-ascending" reform—and transmitting Chinese Buddhism within the framework of this

reform with the aim of producing so-called "national treasures," that is, authentic religious masters. The idea was to train and discipline people for a long period within the pure precincts of the mountains without allowing them to descend; it was closed to women from the outset, and even to emperors and ministers, and free of all taint of politics or worldly fame. The two new religious sects founded by Kōbō and Dengyō, Shingon and Tendai, later, during the Fujiwara period, became instruments of the Heian nobility. Although they thereby lost their religious purity for a second time, from within these sects there appeared priests who, having once renounced the world and entered the temple, now reconsidered, renounced the world again and left the temple. They were called *hijiri* (聖), "wandering saints." The *hijiri* appeared one after another beginning with Kūya Shōnin, who came out of the temple into the streets in straw sandals, going about soliciting religious contributions from among the common people. Finally, in the period when the Heian nobility was divested of its leadership by the newly-risen samurai class, Hōnen, Shinran, Nichiren, and others executed a religious reform by descending the mountain. Japanese Buddhism thus came down into the village streets and the life of the people, a second reform and second total reversal.

After this reformed Buddhism had developed into different branches and sects, the long, stabilized period of the Tokugawa set in. It was a stable feudal society in which the various daimyos built castles in their own fiefs, and thus checked each other. Buddhism imitated this, with each sect consolidating its temples with its own priests and followers. Finally, each sect became fixed, with its organization established under a head abbot who installed himself in the castle of his head temple and checked and opposed other sects from within his own ramparts. Their religious power was again washed away by the Meiji Restoration (1867) and the inflowing current of Western culture by which Buddhism was thrown open to internationalism. This may perhaps be the third radical transformation of Japanese Buddhism. But this change has not yet been brought to completion. Some try to incorporate internationalism into the sects by tearing down the outer ramparts; others peep at the outside world from their castles but cannot seem to make up their minds. Such is the face of present Japanese Buddhism in the midst of a third transition period.

Translated by Hirano Umeyo