

The Reception of Buddhism in the Suiko Period

WATSUJI TETSURŌ

TRANSLATED BY HIRANO UMEYO

How was Buddhism understood and believed at the time of its first introduction into Japan? The general view concerning this question is as follows: The understanding of Buddhist philosophy by the Japanese was very superficial. The Buddha was simply worshipped for the sake of happiness in this life. In short, Buddhism had no meaning other than as a petitionary religion. This view is demonstrably wrong if we take the position that the Three Sutra Commentaries¹ of Prince Shōtoku were indeed written in the Suiko period.² These Commentaries display an exceedingly lucid understanding of the profound philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism. It cannot be said a period that pro-

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¹ The Three Sutra Commentaries of Prince Shōtoku include the *Sbōmangyō Gisbo*, *Tuimagyō Gisbo*, and the *Hokekyō Gisbo*, which are commentaries on the sutras, *Srīmālādevī*, *Vimalakīrti*, and *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, respectively. The authenticity of the *Tuimagyō Gisbo* has recently been questioned in academic circles.

² The Suiko period (593–628) is the reign of the thirty-third sovereign, Suiko, daughter of Emperor Kimmei. She established her capital at Asuka, Nara, and effectuated political renovation and promoted Buddhism under the regency of Prince Shōtoku. The period is also known by the name Asuka.

duced such writings lacked an understanding of Buddhism. However, if we are dealing only with the general public of the time, disregarding outstanding figures or specialists, it would perhaps be possible to agree with the above-mentioned view. It is clear, needless to say, that the majority of the Japanese of the time were not able to whole-heartedly sympathize with the fundamental motive of early Buddhism. The Japanese who authored the narratives of the *Kojiki*³ were too simple and gay to possess a desire to be liberated from transmigration by sublimating their earthly lives. Again, it is a fact which needs no proof that the great majority of the people were unable to understand the huge, structure-like philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism. How could they, who could not even narrate simple love stories with a logical unity, approach the concept of 'Buddha,' which would necessitate an especially penetrating logic? Indeed, they must have simply worshipped their Buddhist images as sources of mystical power, and prayed for the fulfillment of their simple-hearted desire—happiness in this world.

If we accept this view, however, the above-mentioned question will not be resolved. To be sure, most Japanese were not able to understand Buddhism in its essential form. They merely prayed for happiness in this life. Nevertheless, they experienced a new mental excitement, and were given a new power and a new life substance by this newly-arrived religion. Moreover, these things were imparted to them *by Buddhism*, regardless of whether they were able to understand it or not. Therefore, while they were *unable to understand* Buddhism in its original sense, they were *able to understand* it in their own way. This peculiar way of understanding is something that cannot simply be dismissed by statements about it being "for the sake of happiness in this life," or being "a petitionary religion." Trees and stones, mountains and rivers, or dogs and foxes can become objects of prayer if it is of aid to happiness in this life. Was it only because Buddhist images were foreign or because Buddhism had special power that they chose Buddhist images, instead of trees and stones? If it was because of the power of Buddhism, how different was it in content from

³ The *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters), the oldest extant Japanese literary work, including the mythology and earliest history of the nation, was compiled by Imperial order and completed in 712 A.D.

the worship of trees and stones? Not only that, how did it signify people's spiritual development? All these questions have yet to be answered. Only through such answers can we also solve the question, "How did the people understand Buddhism and believe in it?"

In order to investigate these questions, what must be carefully established first of all is what 'misfortune and disaster in this life' meant to the Japanese of the earliest periods who were men of nature. Judging from the *Kojiki*, they naively enjoyed this earthly life. To them love was the culmination of life. But conversely this also means they naively lamented this life. The heart that sees love as the culmination of life will inevitably seek the completion of life in the *lovers' double suicide* (*jōshi*). That this is by no means an exaggeration is established when we observe that the most beautiful scenes in the *Kojiki* are all connected with the lovers' suicide. Indeed, having fresh sensibility for enjoyment, they also had a keen sense for the sadness of losing their enjoyment. Again, as the legends of epidemics in the *Kojiki* show, disease was the cause of much sorrow in their lives, which could be enjoyed only under the condition of good bodily health. Since they could not help attributing a phenomenon such as disease to some outside power, they keenly felt the powerlessness of man. Similarly, as many narratives concerning death indicate, to those whose happiness was entirely earthly, 'death,' from which man could not escape, was something so bitterly lamented they would creep about a dead person's bedside, wailing so loudly that the sound would seem to resound in heaven. There was no knowing when this thing called 'death' would draw near and destroy all their happiness at a single stroke. Man's destiny was full of anxiety and unreliable. They must have felt this feeling of uneasiness, helplessness, and powerlessness far more strongly than modern people. And they must have discovered the causes of worldly unhappiness in the 'imperfection of the realities of life' far more clearly than people today. (The majority of people today attribute it to the imperfection of system or the fault of the privileged classes. This is partly true. But it is an exaggeration to think that this is the *source* of their misfortune. During the French Revolution the people removed the causes of their misfortune, from the king down to the various systems and social ranks, but after all the true causes were not found in any of them.) The ancient Japanese ultimately perceived the *sources* of their unhappiness, in spite of their simple ideas.

However that might be, there was no tendency in them to regard this world as evil. Although this life was imperfect, what was there except this life? Only the nether world of darkness and ghastliness. Therefore, what they yearned for was perfection of the land of eternity (*tokoyo no kuni*), a place devoid of *this* earthly imperfection. It was a land *without death*. They imagined it to exist "somewhere on earth but not here." That is, their aspirations were for some *strange land* on earth; not for heaven or the "other shore." Thus, the idealism of the men of nature of ancient times lay in "the possession of a longing for a world of higher perfection without rejecting this life." However worldly they might have been, they did not approve of the realities of life as they were. Youth grows old, ardent love cools, bringing changes to both body and mind, and all who are born must pass away—this actual state of affairs to them was not something inevitable just because it was real. No realities are permanent, but they *desired permanence*. They did not know what permanence was like, but they *evaluated passing things on the basis of permanence*.

From the first this idealism of theirs did not take any form of thought. We must find it in the legends of the dim land of eternity and in the narratives of love suicides which tell of sorrowful love. That they were not able to express their idealism in clear form does not mean that they were not strongly inspired by it. We know that they expressed a bitter lamentation. And we are able to surmise that their above-mentioned aspirations were reassuringly at work in this "sorrow of the man of nature." Try and recall the feeling of sadness we feel as native "natural" children in our infancy—even if it were not such a serious moment as a death of a close relative—that lucid sorrow which seems to penetrate into our heart of hearts at a time, say, in the evening when we tread on our way home, sated of amusement. In spite of the fact there was no conception here of a super-earthly world, yet there were aspirations for the infinite, the eternal, the perfect. This strong premonition of sorrow in itself was a great possibility that was open in the heart of a man of nature.

To the hearts of these men of nature religion was truly indispensable. They needed a support for their forlornness. It was like an infant relying on his mother for everything, gaining comfort for his grief and distress and forlornness by crying and appealing with all his heart. The men of nature discovered this dependable power in the trees and stones; to be more precise, they discovered it in their rites which they performed for the objects of their worship.

In this way, it was believed, for example, that rites such as purification (*harai*⁴) had a magical power which would protect them. But this power decreased with the development of their intellect. Contact with Chinese culture gradually strengthened this tendency. For example, the spell of *kugatachi*,⁵ the 'god's judgment,' was broken in Korea.

Buddhism, or rather, 'Buddhist images,' came to Japan, riding the waves of the time. Despite meeting with various objections, the images finally seized the hearts of the Japanese. The erection of the large temple Hōkōji⁶ began as a national enterprise. Shitennōji Temple,⁷ famous for its benevolent acts of social welfare, was constructed on the property of the Mononobe family, who had previously opposed Buddhism. What was it, then, that took place in the hearts of the Japanese?

Instead of trees or stones, *beautiful*, awe-inspiring and significant 'Buddhas' in human form were introduced. Instead of magical rites, human devotion to these 'Buddhas' was now required. To the majority of the people what the 'Buddhas' signified philosophically was not the question. They only knew that these 'Buddhas' were being worshipped by the Chinese, who, from their viewpoint, were a people of a far superior culture to themselves. The images surely were worth their worship; they would listen to the 'aspirations' of their helpless hearts. Viewed in this light, what a wonderful and strong impression these Buddhas must have produced on the people. All aesthetic charms were transformed into religious power. They now experienced in these

⁴ *Harai*, or purification, is a rite in which one prays to a Shintō deity to have oneself purified of all defilement and protected from misfortune.

⁵ *Kugatachi* was a method of judgment in ancient times, in which one put his hand in boiling water. If the hand festered he was believed guilty; if not, he was judged innocent.

⁶ Hōkōji in Asuka, Nara, erected by Soga Umako, was one of the earliest temples in Japan. Construction began in 588 and was completed in 609. It was the center of Buddhism in the Suiko period. Angoin Temple now stands on the same site, but excavations during 1956-7 revealed the enormous scale and arrangement of the original buildings, including the pagoda, main hall, corridors, and the south and west gates.

⁷ Shitennōji in present Osaka was built by Prince Shōtoku in 593. It was reconstructed several times after destruction by fire, but it still retains its original form, which is famous for its arrangement of buildings, known as the Shitennōji style as against the Hōryūji style.

'Buddhas,' or through them, a presentiment of the perfect world which they aspired after. They discovered in the Buddhas their mothers by whom they wished to be embraced.

It is clear they experienced *their own* man-of-nature-like aspirations by projecting them on the Buddhist images. It is not that they acquired from Buddhism something new which they had not possessed. This experience strongly developed what they had already possessed. Their aspirations for a perfect world, which had existed as a vague presentiment, acquired a more lofty substance *because of this experience*. For example, so long as they felt a reliable power in the purification rite, the eternal suggested by this power would be something non-human. But when they felt a reliable power in the images of the faintly smiling Maitreya (Miroku), or Avalokiteśvara (Kannon), they felt in them an expression of human love as of one who possessed the eternal. The loving look of the mother with a baby, or the naive smile of an innocent girl—these to them must have been beautiful and admirable. But they were merely realities of life and not objects of their aspirations. Now they learned to contact the objects of their aspirations through these figures of reality *as symbols*. In other words, they learned that this human beauty was an image of the perfect world. This was a great progress. With this as a turning point they were to take a first step forward into the conceptual realm of the 'Dharma.'

It was fortunate for the Japanese that when Buddhism first came to Japan it was neither a philosophy nor a practice, but was rather something that should be called Śākyamuni worship, Bhaiṣajya-guru (Yakushi) worship, or Avalokiteśvara worship. Had it been something like Dōgen's Buddhism,⁸ which considered temple and pagoda construction as of secondary importance, it is doubtful Buddhism would have been well received. Or, we might say that out of Mahayana Buddhism, which embraces everything, only the worship of Buddhist images had been absorbed. In whatever case, it must be recognized

⁸ Dōgen (1200–1253), the founder of the Sōtō sect of Zen, criticized all existing forms of Japanese Buddhism as unauthentic and emphasized seated meditation exclusively. He first studied Tendai at Mount Hiei, and in 1223 went to Sung China, where he became a pupil of Ju-ching at T'ien-t'ung shan. Returning from China, he established Eihei-ji Temple, the headquarters of Sōtō Zen.

that the first reception of Buddhism was not just a blind reception of something foreign; it was a natural step of spiritual development on the part of the Japanese.

It was natural and also inevitable, therefore, that the Buddhism thus received was chiefly one of prayers for divine favor in this world. The people did not have any longing to reach the other world *by denying this world*. Although this life was sad to them, it was not evil. Worldly welfare and spiritual welfare were the same thing. Therefore, whenever they were ill they prayed wholeheartedly for their recovery, as a child in pain crying for his mother. The inscriptions on the nimbus (*kōbai*⁹) of the images of Bhaiṣajya-guru and Śākyamuni of the Hōryūji temple, which are the oldest authenticated records in Japan, both tell of prayers for recovery from illness. However, to call this utilitarian, as some do, would not be proper. As for their religious motive, they did not use religion for material welfare; they earnestly relied on the Buddha as on a mother only because of the sorrows of life. If we do not see this genuine motive, I think we cannot understand their belief.

However, no matter how worldly they might have been, they could not escape from the great reality which limited this life—the reality of death. Here their grief reached its climax. The ‘Buddha’ on whom they could lean in such grief, manifested a most profound meaning to them as something that responded to their highest aspirations. Their understanding of “the other shore” (*higan*) began at this point. To them “the other shore” was the world after death, not the world of emancipation. It was after death that a true life could exist. And the Buddha in human form guaranteed it. It was by this belief they were able to be consoled against their grief of death. It was a consolation the men of nature of the earlier period earnestly sought but could not acquire. Now they were able to acquire it, thanks to “something human that had been *elevated* in the Buddhist images.” Things such as the inscription, “The world is false, Buddha alone is true (世間虛假唯佛是真),” on the

⁹ *Kōbai*, or nimbus, is an indication of radiant light about a painted or sculptured Buddha, Bodhisattva, etc. It is of three kinds: *zūkō*, the round indication at the back of the head; *shinkō*, the oval indication at the back of the body; and *kyosbinkō*, the larger indication at the back of the whole figure.

Tenjukoku-shuchō draperies,¹⁰ and the imaginations of the circumstances of Prince Shōtoku's rebirth in Tenjukoku (the Land of Bliss) are clearly projections of this kind of consolation.

The people of the Suiko period thus understood and believed in Buddhism. As an understanding of Buddhism it was superficial. But it had an extremely deep meaning, viewed from the side of their spiritual development. When we deliberate, taking this fact into account, the structure of the Hōryūji Temple and Buddhist images such as the Kannon (Avalokiteśvara) of the Yumedono (the Hall of Dreams), the Kudara Kannon, and the Kannon of the Chūgūji Temple become most appropriate as works of their creation. Are not these works of art truly the fruits of the sorrows and aspirations of these people?

To those who recognize the unmistakable vitality that differentiates original works from imitations, the originality of these works is beyond question. It is necessary, however, that this should be supported by views such as those outlined above. This is because those who hold that these works of art are imitative blindly believe that the Japanese at that time did not possess any inner life capable of being represented by such works of art. I believe the above observations have proved such views to be groundless and arbitrary. Should not we pay more respect to those who created such great works of art?

It is not only in matters related to art that there is necessity to change our viewpoint. If the understanding of Buddhism was thus begun in conformity with the inner life of the Japanese themselves, the general spiritual as well as political development of the Japanese people after this period should necessarily be viewed in a different light. Those who would dismiss everything as being mere "imitations" of China should recall, taking our own recent involvement with Western culture as example, how use of that word has dulled many possible shades of meaning.

¹⁰ Tenjukoku-shuchō, or Tenjukoku Mandara, are embroidered draperies depicting the Buddha's paradise made by the wife of Prince Shōtoku after his death for the repose of his soul. Its fragments are now preserved as a national treasure at Chūgūji Temple in Ikaruga, Nara.