

FOR LIVING BUDDHISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

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The Significance of Music in Buddhist Practice



First World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, 1970



Second World Assembly in Leuven, Belgium, 1974



Third World Assembly in Princeton, the United States, 1979



Fourth World Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya, 1984



Fifth World Assembly in Melbourne, Australia, 1989



Religions for Peace Japan

Religions for Peace Japan

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3. Working with peace organizations in all sectors and countries to address global issues.
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Seventh World Assembly in Amman, Jordan, 1999



Eighth World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, 2006



Ninth World Assembly in Vienna, Austria, 2013



Tenth World Assembly in Lindau, Germany, 2019

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FEATURES: The Significance of Music in Buddhist Practice

Dharma World presents Buddhism as a practical living religion and promotes interreligious dialogue for world peace. It espouses views that emphasize the dignity of life, seeks to rediscover our inner nature and bring our lives more in accord with it, and investigates causes of human suffering. It tries to show how religious principles help solve problems in daily life and how the least application of such principles has wholesome effects on the world around us. It seeks to demonstrate truths that are fundamental to all religions, truths on which all people can act.

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With this issue, we will cease publication of the print edition of *Dharma World*. We will continue publishing the magazine through a new website launching in spring 2026. We sincerely appreciate your continued readership. For details, please see the link below.

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Singing Praises to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas: Music in Japanese Buddhist Rituals

by Michaela Mross

Music is not only a means of expressing religious devotion; it also helps create a community of fellow practitioners who support each other in their religious pursuits.

Introduction

In all religions, music plays a vital role in communicating with the sacred. Priests sing hymns asking deities for protection; shamans play drums to communicate with spirits; devotees intone sacred words praying for a favorable rebirth of the deceased. Accordingly, music and sounds are central aspects of Japanese Buddhism, and temples are characterized by a rich soundscape, ranging from the singing of highly melismatic pieces in free rhythm, to the more syllabic recitation of sutras on a single pitch in a fixed rhythm, to the sound of musical instruments that reverberate through the temple compound and guide monastics through their daily schedule.

Buddhist music is mostly vocal music, and both clerics and lay devotees intone sacred texts. Clerics usually sing more complex chants during elaborate ceremonies, such as the Buddha's memorial service, the Lotus Repentance Ceremony, or the rolling reading of the *Great Sutra on the Perfection of Wisdom*.¹ The most elaborate form of Japanese Buddhist chant sung by clerics is *shōmyō*, literally meaning "bright voice." Within the category of *shōmyō*, we find various styles that can be distinguished by their level of melodic movement. For some texts, it is necessary that listeners understand the content,

and therefore reciters use few melodic embellishments. For other texts, the sound is more important, and practitioners employ many melisma; in these cases, music is often seen as an offering to the buddhas and bodhisattvas or as a means to sonically express cosmic truth. Only occasionally musical instruments, such as small bells, sounding bowls, gongs, and cymbals, are used to signal the beginning or end of ritual sequences. All schools developed their distinctive repertoire of *shōmyō* with a unique style and repertoire that has

been handed down over the centuries and is still performed today.

Brief History of Japanese Buddhist Music

Buddhist chant was introduced to Japan together with Buddhist doctrine and practices, first from Korea and later from China. Already in the eighth century, the major Buddhist temples in Nara had their own music departments. One of the earliest extant references to Buddhist music describes the eye-opening ceremony of the Mahāvairocana Buddha at Tōdaiji in Nara in 752 and states that more than one thousand monks sang the standard liturgical pieces *Praise of the Buddha* (*Nyorai bai*), *Scattering Flowers*



Photo: Michaela Mross

Ōyama Bunryū intones a transfer of merit during the 650th grand death anniversary commemoration of the Sōtō Zen master Gasan Jōseki at the head temple Sōjiji in Tsurumi, Yokohama, in 2015. Photo by the author.



Michaela Mross is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Stanford University, specializing in Japanese Buddhism. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in Japan, she has published numerous articles on rituals and sacred music. Her recent book, *Memory, Music, Manuscripts*, examines the history of *kōshiki* in Sōtō Zen from the 13th century until today. She is currently working on a monograph on *goeika*, which will showcase the vital role music has played in the modernization of Japanese Buddhism over the past seventy years.

(*Sange*), *Sanskrit Sound* (*Bonnon*), and *Priest Staff* (*Shakujō*)—four pieces that are still vocalized today during major ceremonies. Around that time instrumental *gagaku* music, including pieces for dance, was also introduced to Japan and integrated into elaborate rituals. The combination of *gagaku* with *shōmyō* created impressive ceremonies with a beautiful soundscape, which served as an offering to the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

With the founding of the Shingon and Tendai schools in the Heian period (794–1185), many new liturgical pieces were introduced from China to Japan: Kūkai (774–835), the founder of the Shingon school, introduced the core repertoire of Shingon *shōmyō*, while Ennin (794–864), a disciple of the Tendai school founder Saichō (767–822), transmitted many important *shōmyō* pieces from China and laid the foundation of Tendai *shōmyō*. Monks in these two traditions emphasized the importance of the vocalization of sacred texts as a means of achieving soteriological aims and realizing buddhahood in this very body. Consequently, learning to sing sacred texts became a vital aspect of the monastic curriculum in these two schools.

In order to transmit and preserve the melodies of liturgical pieces, monks developed various musical notation systems. The oldest extant examples of Buddhist music notation in Japan date from the tenth century. But most remarkably, the oldest printed music notation in the world is a *shōmyō* notation produced at Kōyasan in 1472, one year before the first European printed

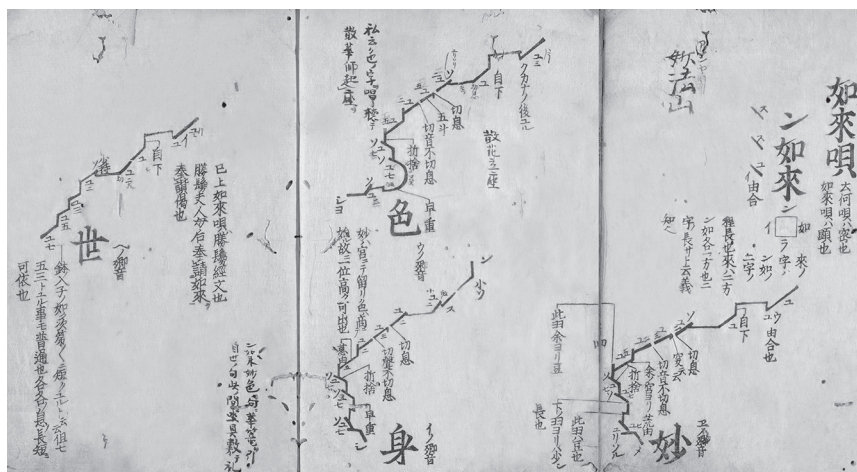


Photo: Michaela Mross

Musical notation of the “Praise of the Thus Come One,” in *Gyoson shishō* (1646), a *shōmyō* manual compiled by the Shingon monk Chōe (1458–1524). From the National Diet Library Digital Collections: <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/2543275/1/1>.

music notation, attesting to the importance of music in Japanese Buddhism.

The tenth century saw important innovations in the development of the Japanization of Buddhist liturgy. During the first centuries after the introduction of Buddhism to Japan, clerics vocalized texts in Chinese or Sanskrit, and thus Japanese devotees were not able to understand the content of the chants. In the tenth century, Japanese clerics therefore invented new liturgical forms that were vocalized in Japanese, such as offertory declarations (*saimon*), Japanese hymns (*wasan*), and Buddhist ceremonies (*kōshiki*).

The new Kamakura schools that emerged in the thirteenth century developed their unique musical traditions, but most of them were influenced by Tendai *shōmyō* because the founders of these new schools had originally been Tendai monks. In the seventeenth

century, new styles of Buddhist chant were again introduced from China when Yinyuan Longqi (Jpn., Ingen Ryūki, 1592–1673) came to Japan and founded the Ōbaku school of Zen.

Japanese Buddhist music underwent another innovative wave during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Western musical styles were brought to Japan. Some Buddhist reformers enthusiastically embraced the newly introduced Western musical styles and composed Buddhist songs using those styles. Inspired by the renewed interest in composing novel Buddhist music, some clerics turned to traditional Japanese genres and adopted them to the new times. They, for example, turned to Buddhist pilgrim songs to create new lineages of hymn chanting in groups, which could serve to instruct the laity in Buddhist concepts and practices.

In this way, Japanese Buddhist chant has evolved over the centuries. While traditional chants created centuries ago continue to be handed down and form the central part of Buddhist liturgy, new styles have been added to the repertoire. Still today, young monks and nuns dedicatedly learn the traditional chants of their schools. Some of them also engage in innovative projects, such as Buddhist pop music, rap, and voice meditation. Thus, traditional and contemporary forms coexist in an ever-evolving practice.

Kōshiki and the Commemoration of the Buddha's Death

One vital ritual genre that features *shōmyō* is *kōshiki* (Buddhist ceremonies). This ritual genre was developed in the late tenth century in the context of Tendai Pure Land belief and spread throughout all Buddhist schools in the following centuries. Works in this genre have been composed and performed for various objects of veneration, such as buddhas, bodhisattvas, eminent monks, sutras, and kami. The central text recited during these rituals explains the virtues of the object of worship and Buddhist concepts in an easily understandable manner. Therefore, *kōshiki* became very popular and strongly contributed to the spread of Buddhism to all social strata.

Over the centuries around 400 works in this genre were composed, but the highpoint of composition was in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. One of the most prolific authors was the Kegon-Shingon monk Myōe (1173–1232), who is today well known for his dream diary, in which he recorded the visions that guided his practice. Myōe's *Shiza kōshiki* (*Kōshiki* in four sessions), composed for the Buddha's memorial day in 1215, is considered a masterpiece in the genre. Myōe's *Shiza kōshiki* is actually not one *kōshiki* but a set of four *kōshiki* to be performed in sequence: a *kōshiki* on the

Buddha's passing, one on the Sixteen Arhats, one on the remaining traces of the Buddha's activities, and one on the Buddha's relics. The central texts of these four works describe in an emotionally evocative and dramatic manner the passing of the Buddha and his heritage. Myōe himself was strongly devoted to Śākyamuni Buddha and lamented having been born well after the Buddha's death. He had long planned to visit India, the land of the Buddha, but was never able to fulfill this aspiration. His *Shiza kōshiki*, as well as other rituals and dreams, seems to have served as a means of visualizing this journey without actually undertaking it.

When Myōe performed his *Shiza kōshiki* during the Buddha's memorial service, the ritual took over twenty hours. It started around 11 am on the fourteenth day of the second lunar month and ended around 8 am on the next day. The ritual was performed throughout the night and there was no time for sleep. People from all social strata gathered in communion to commemorate the Buddha.

The main part of the ritual was the recitation of the central text of the *kōshiki*. Usually, the recitation of this liturgical text takes at least one hour. In order to keep the attention of the audience, reciters need to add variation to their musical performance. This led to the development of a special recitation method that utilizes melodic formulas on three different pitch levels: a low (first) pitch level; a middle (second) pitch level whose central pitch is either a fourth or fifth above the central pitch of the low pitch level; and high (third) pitch level, which is one octave above the low pitch level. A change of pitch level highlights important passages; the highest pitch level marks a high point and is sparingly used.

We do not know how Myōe recited his *kōshiki*. In the early stages of *kōshiki*, the officiant had a lot of freedom for improvisation and was able to determine



Wikimedia Commons File: Semuji Myoue.jpg

Kenpon chakushoku Myōe Shōnin zu
(Color on silk painting of Priest Myōe).
Hanging scroll. National Treasure.

the distribution of the pitch levels himself. In the Kamakura period, clerics started to add musical notation to the texts, and the musical realization of a *kōshiki* became fixed. Manuals from the Tokugawa period show how later reciters used the three pitch levels to convey the emotions of the text. For example, in the following excerpt from the *kōshiki*

on the Buddha's death, the reciter uses the highest pitch level to express the deep sorrow over this loss:

[First pitch level]

The Tathāgata further addressed the great assembly and said:

“Now, my body is racked with pain. The time of [final] nirvana has come.”

After speaking thus,

he entered various states of *samādhi* in an order of his choosing.

After he arose from *samādhi*,

he expounded the marvelous dharma for the assembly and said:

[Second pitch level]

“The fundamental nature of ignorance

has always been that of liberation.

I now abide in peace,

eternally in the radiance of quiescence.

This is called the *mahā-parinirvāṇa*.”

After he spoke to the assembly,

he leaned his whole body over and lay on his right side;

his head to the north, his feet to the south,

facing the west with his back to the east.

[Intermediate pattern]

Then he entered the fourth stage of *samādhi*

and achieved the *mahā-parinirvāṇa*.

[Third pitch level]

He closed his lotus blue eyes

and his smile of compassion disappeared forever.

His lips, red as the fruit of the *bimbā* tree, were sealed

and finally his pure, compassionate voice went silent.

In this way, the highest pitch level enhances the emotive effect of the narration about the Buddha's passing, adding an emotional component to the text. The deep lament about the death



Arrangement of the bells and the hymnbook in the Baikaryū before singing. On the right is the shō bell, and next to it, the mallet with which it is played. On the left is the rei bell. Photo by the author.

Photo: Michaela Mross

of Śākyamuni Buddha, described in other passages of the *kōshiki*, is amplified by the high pitch of the male voice.

A distinctive feature of Myōe's performance of the *Shiza kōshiki* was the participation of the laity. At the beginning of the ritual, lay devotees and clerics vocalized together the phrase “We take refuge in the purple-golden wondrous body that finally entered nirvana in the Śāla Grove of Kuśinagara,” and so the ritual started with communal obeisance. After the recitation of each of the central texts of the four *kōshiki*, laypeople and clerics continuously chanted “We take refuge in Śākyamuni Buddha” (*namu shakamuni butsu*) until the beginning of the next *kōshiki*. This collective chanting lasted for at least one hour. The vocalization of the Buddha's name made the Buddha present. At the same time, the communal chanting transformed the individual participants into a group whose members formed karmic bonds with each other and the Buddha.

During Myōe's lifetime, the *Shiza kōshiki* was relatively simple, and only a few other liturgical texts—including the aforementioned *Praise of the Buddha*, *Scattering Flowers*, *Sanskrit Sound*, and *Priest Staff*—were performed in addition to the central *kōshiki* text. For this reason, it was easy for Myōe and his fellow monks to integrate lay devotees. But after

Myōe's death and the adoption of this ritual by the Shingon clerics, the ritual form became increasingly complex and many difficult-to-sing *shōmyō* pieces were added. Because laypeople did not have the necessary training in *shōmyō*, lay participation gradually diminished. When clerics on Kōyasan perform the *Shiza kōshiki* during the Buddha's memorial service today, laypeople do not join the vocalization. But the rich soundscape with its diverse *shōmyō* pieces takes the attendees on a musical journey to remember the Buddha and his life.²

Goeika and the Modernization of Buddhist Liturgy in the Twentieth Century

In medieval Japan, Buddhists also created songs that were sung outside of ritual contexts by the laity and clergy. One such genre was *goeika* (devotional songs in the form of *waka* poems), which pilgrims intoned when visiting sacred sites. Singing *goeika* was an individual practice, and practitioners had a lot of freedom in how to intone the songs.

In the early twentieth century, reformers turned to *goeika* and created lineages in which a standardized performance practice of *goeika* was taught to lay devotees. The first lineage, the

Yamatoryū, was founded in 1921 by the layman Yamasaki Chikumatsu (1885–1926) after he had found relief from a severe skin disease through his Buddhist faith. Reformers of the Japanese Buddhist schools soon followed his example and created sectarian lineages of *goeika* chanting. As the devotional songs sounded similar to popular music played on the radio at that time, *goeika* quickly gained popularity among lay devotees. The leaders of the newly founded *goeika* lineages promoted the singing of hymns as a vital Buddhist practice. For example, Sogabe Shunnō (1873–1959), who is considered the founder of Kōyasan's *goeika* lineage, interpreted *goeika* as *shōmyō* for lay people.³

During World War II, the *goeika* lineages stopped their activities. After the end of the war, all schools restarted their outreach, and some schools that had not founded *goeika* lineages before the war started one for the first time. This included the Sōtō Zen school, which established the Baikaryū (Plum Blossom Style) as their *goeika* lineage in the early 1950s. Niwa Butsuan (1880–1955), who inspired its founding, saw this as an opportunity to revive the school and heal the hearts of people after the long and devastating war.⁴

The lineages created groups in which the particular style of that lineage is taught. While intoning the pentatonic melodies, the singers indicate the rhythm with two bells: with the right hand they play a *shō* bell, and with the left they sound a *rei* bell, which is basically a vajra bell. Vajra bells are usually played by clerics in esoteric rituals. Using this kind of bell in *goeika* practice provided laypeople the opportunity to handle precious ritual implements that originated in esoteric Buddhism. The teachers of the groups not only instruct practitioners on how to sing the melodies but also



Photo: Michaela Mross

A group of the Sōtō school's Baikaryū sings Dōgyō gowasan (Japanese Hymn of Practicing Together) at the lineage's national meeting in 2015. The text of the hymn is displayed on the screen. The lines next to the hiragana script provide the musical notation. Photo by the author.

teach devotees Buddhist values and ideas when they explain the lyrics. Thus, the *goeika* groups are a vital means for outreach and religious edification.

In some schools, the invention of a sectarian *goeika* lineage also led to changes in the liturgy. The Sōtō school headquarters, for example, created suggestions for temples on how they could integrate the newly created Baikaryū groups into rituals. As a consequence, temples that have a Baikaryū group started to ask the members to sing during various services, such as the feeding of hungry ghosts during *o-bon*. On these occasions, the groups usually sing the *Japanese Hymn for the Three Treasures* when the clerics enter the hall, and when the priests leave the hall, they sing a solemn song in minor mode expressing veneration of the object of worship. Often the groups sing another hymn when the officiant provides offerings on the altar. *Goeika* sounds significantly different from traditional *shōmyō* and sutra chanting. By integrating *goeika* into rituals, clerics created ceremonies with a fresh soundscape and thus modernized traditional liturgical forms.

The participation of laypeople singing *goeika* in traditional rituals reminds one of Myōe's *Shiza kōshiki*, during which laypeople sang the Buddha's name. Music is not only a means of expressing religious devotion; it also helps create a community of fellow practitioners who support each other in their religious pursuits. During the ritual, they harmonize with each other while chanting in unison, and they can feel the reverberation of multiple voices in their bodies. This experience helps forge deeper connections among participants and, most importantly, creates karmic bonds to the buddhas and bodhisattvas to whom they pay homage. □

Notes

1. For a performance of the rolling reading of the *Great Sutra on the Perfection of Wisdom*, see, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k03yqLhsGg4>. For a performance of Sōtō Zen *shōmyō*, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ato8vvNjK3I>.

2. This section is based on my research published in the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*. (Mross, Michaela [2016]. "Vocalizing the Lament over the Buddha's Passing: A Study of Myōe's *Shiza kōshiki*." In *Kōshiki in Japanese Buddhism*. Special Issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 43/1: 89–130.) I would like to express my gratitude to the editors for allowing me to republish this material.

3. Sogabe, Shunnō (1930). "Kyōdō no kokoroe." In *Kōyasan daishi kyōkai Kongōkō Goeika wasan shōkai*, 5th edition (Kōyasan: Kōyasan Daishi Kyōkai Kongōkō Sōhonbu).

4. Niwa Rempō (1980). *Baika kai: Waga hanshō* (Shizuoka: Tōkeiin), p.156. Various audio recordings of Baikaryū hymns are available online; see, for example, Ono Takuya's blog (<https://tgiw.info/weblog/otonae>) or the YouTube channel of Baikaryū teachers in Akita Prefecture (<https://www.youtube.com/@梅友チャンネル>).

A Brief History of *Shōmyō*, Japanese Buddhist Chant

by Steven G. Nelson

Music researchers and contemporary composers began to take an interest in *shōmyō* as one of the main genres and sources of Japanese vocal music.

The term *shōmyō* is a translation of the Sanskrit term *śabda-vidyā*, one of the five branches of learning mastered by the Brahmins of ancient India—namely the linguistic study of Sanskrit. It only began to be used to refer to Japanese Buddhist chant from the twelfth century, largely replacing the term *bonbai* ('Sanskrit chant,' the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese term *fanbei*), which had been used until then.

Buddhism originated in India in the fifth century BCE. Its founder Śākyamuni permitted the recitation of sutras but prohibited monks from listening to secular music. The innovative Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle) Buddhism, which developed in India from about the first century CE, began to use secular music as an offering to the Buddhas. The most positive evaluators of music and dance were the followers of Mantrayāna (Esoteric) Buddhism, which emerged in the seventh century. According to their teachings, song is seen as a type of *mantra* (textual formula), and dance a type of *mudrā* (hand gesture).

Soon after it developed, Mahāyāna Buddhism was introduced to China, where chant was sung in transliterated versions of the original Sanskrit, and in Chinese, using both Chinese translations of the Sanskrit texts and newly composed Chinese texts. From the third century, Yushan (Jp. Gyosan) in Shandong Province became the center of Chinese Buddhist chant.

Buddhism was transmitted to Japan from the Korean kingdom of Baekje by the middle of the sixth century CE, and later became one of the guiding principles of national politics. In 710, Nara was established as Japan's capital, and Nara Buddhism flourished as a form of Buddhism for the protection of the nation. Sūtras were recited in Chinese,

Steven G. Nelson was born in Sydney, Australia, in 1956. After studying at the University of Sydney, he travelled to Japan in 1980 to study the early music notations of gagaku at Tokyo University of the Arts. His main research interests include gagaku, Buddhist chant, Heike-gatari (narration of The Tale of the Heike to the accompaniment of the lute, or biwa), and other accompanied song forms in traditional Japanese music. Presently he serves as professor in the Japanese Department, Faculty of Letters, Hōsei University, Tokyo.

and lectures in Japanese were given to help people understand their contents. In addition, repentance ceremonies in prayer for national peace and abundant harvests were widely held. Among these, the *Shuni-e* (or *Omizutori*), a ceremony of repentance dedicated to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, was initiated in 752 by Jitchū of the temple Tōdai-ji, and has been performed annually without interruption for over a thousand years.

In the same year, 752, the consecration ceremony for the Great Buddha at Tōdai-ji was held. Under the head priest, the Indian monk Bodhisena, over a thousand monks sang what became the four standard *shōmyō* pieces: *Bai*, *Sange*, *Bonnon*, and *Shakujō*. By the ninth century, a ritual form known as *bugaku-shika-hōyō*, which combines these chants with the performance of *gagaku* dance and instrumental music in a complex ritual

Wikimedia Commons File: ONJYO BOSATSU Todaiji.JPG



A relief of Onjō-Bosatsu (Musician Bodhisattva) playing a flute on the bronze octagonal lantern located in front of the Great Buddha Hall of Tōdai-ji, Nara. Eighth century.

structure, became established. It became the most important ritual form used in large-scale ceremonies of most of the Japanese Buddhist sects until the nineteenth century.

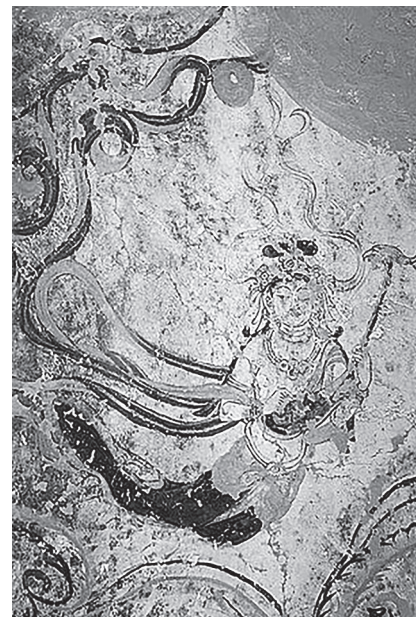
What became the two major Buddhist sects of the Heian period (794–1192) were introduced by priests who studied in China: Saichō (767–822) of the Tendai sect, and Kūkai (774–835) of the Shingon sect. Kūkai was central in transmission of the Mantrayāna teachings and its ritual forms, as well as the two types of vocal pieces indispensable for esoteric ritual: the repertoires of Sanskrit hymns (*bongo no san*) and Chinese hymns (*kango no san*). These were used in elaborate ceremonies, including those held annually at the imperial court that played a central role in legitimizing the emperor's authority. Buddhist chant of the Shingon sect was brought to its full form by Kanchō (or Kanjō, 916–98), and thereafter passed down in master-to-student lineages. In the late 1140s, Prince-Priest Kakushō (1129–69, son of Emperor Toba) held a long conference at the Kyōto temple Ninna-ji, where four lineages of Shingon *shōmyō* were formally recognized. The lineage that eventually passed down to Kōya-san in Wakayama prefecture, the Nanzan-shin branch, is the only one that has survived to modern times, splitting up into various sub-branches as it did so.

Tendai *shōmyō* began with Ennin (794–864), a disciple of Saichō. After spending nine years in Tang China, he brought back the chanting traditions of the Chinese Tiantai (Tendai) and Pure Land teachings, as well as those of esoteric Buddhism, and integrated them with pre-existing practices. His student Enchin (841–91) also studied in China. After his return, the Tendai *shōmyō* tradition split into two main branches: Ennin's Sanmon ('mountain gate') branch based at the temple Enryaku-ji on Mt. Hiei, and Enchin's Jimon ('temple gate') branch based at the temple Onjō-ji (Mii-dera) in Ōtsu,

on the western shore of Lake Biwa. In the early twelfth century, Ryōnin (1073–1132) synthesized the Tendai chanting traditions that had been transmitted separately since Enchin's time. In 1109, he built the temple Raigō-in in Ōhara, north of Kyōto, and established it as the main temple of the Ōhara school of Tendai *shōmyō*. Ōhara came to be called Gyosan, after the Chinese center Yushan, and the term *gyosan* became synonymous with *shōmyō*. Ryōnin's disciples included Kekan and Raichō, and many outstanding *shōmyō* masters emerged from the late twelfth to thirteenth centuries.

After the ninth-century abolition of missions to Tang China, which had been the main vehicle for the introduction of Chinese culture, Japan began to develop unique traditions in various fields. For Buddhist chant, this meant the development of *shōmyō* in the Japanese language. One way this was accomplished was by reading Chinese texts in Japanese, rearranging the words of a text and adding grammatical elements to transform it into a type of highly literary Japanese. This was used for explanatory texts that needed to be understood readily by those present at a ritual, usually chanted solo, with little melodic inflection. The other way was through the creation of new texts in vernacular Japanese, often in the seven- and five-syllable lines of Japanese poetry, which were usually performed in a more song-like manner.

Belief in Amida of the Western Pure Land inspired the popularity of nen-butsu, the repeated invocation of Amida's name. Genshin (942–1017) wrote *Ōjō yōshū* ('Essential Teachings on Rebirth in the Pure Land'), which informed people of the horrors of hell and instructed them about ways to attain rebirth in Amida's pure land. A text he wrote for an assembly of twenty-five priests who met monthly to support each other in their worship was later recast into the *Rokudō kōshiki* ('Lecture-Sermon on the Six Realms'). Lecture-sermons (*kōshiki*)



Wikimedia Commons File: Apsara playing a Phoenix-headed konghou.jpg

An apsara, one of the heavenly beings playing a Phoenix-headed konghou, a traditional Chinese musical instrument. Yulin Grottoes, cave 15, in Guazhou County, Gansu Province, China. Sixth century.

in this format became popular, on the model of the *Ōjō kōshiki* ('Lecture-Sermon on Rebirth in the Pure Land') of Yōkan (or Eikan, 1033–1111).

The noble Fujiwara no Yorimichi (990–1074) built the famous Phoenix Hall (Hōō-dō) at the Uji temple Byōdō-in in 1053, on the site of what had been his summer retreat. The hall houses a famous Amida image by the foremost sculptor of the period, Jōchō (d. 1057). With the paintings that once covered the inner surfaces of its doors, and the multitude of small sculptures of celestial deities playing music and making other wondrous offerings suspended from the walls, the whole building expresses the idea of *raigō*, the joyous welcome of a newly departed spirit into the Pure Land.

In the twelfth century, popular song and music flourished, under the lead of Emperor Go-Shirakawa (1127–92) and many other prominent musicians, and the concept of achieving enlightenment through music and literature (*sanbutsu-jō*) was preached. Fujiwara no Moronaga (1138–92), Grand Minister of State from 1177 to 1179, was the foremost



Konpon-chūdō, Enryaku-ji's main hall. Enryaku-ji is a Tendai monastery first founded in 788 by Saicho, who introduced the Tendai sect of Māhāyana Buddhism to Japan from China.

musician of the time. After ordination, he styled himself Lord Myōon-in ('Wondrous Sound') and studied Tendai *shōmyō* under Genchō and Kekan. He established his own theory of musical scales and founded the Myōon-in school of *shōmyō*. His disciple Fujiwara no Takamichi (1166–1239) was also an outstanding musician who inherited the Myōon-in school. The school was also transmitted by Shōsen of the Nara temple Kōfuku-ji, and Kenna (1261–1338) of the temple Shōmyō-ji, close to Kamakura, and continued until the fifteenth century.

Two priests of the Nara schools, Jōkei (1155–1213) and Kōben (Myōe Shōnin, 1173–1232), greatly expanded the thematic content of *kōshiki* lecture-sermons to include the historical Buddha as well as a multitude of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and other deities. The latter's set of four *kōshiki* (*Shiza kōshiki*)—on the death of the historical Buddha, historical sites associated with him, his disciples, and his relics—is still part of the modern Shingon *shōmyō* repertoire.

During the Kamakura and Nanbokuchō periods (1192–1392), new Buddhist sects emerged, including the Pure Land sects of Jōdo and Jōdo Shin, the Zen sects of Rinzaï and Sōtō, and the Nichiren sect centered on belief in the Lotus Sutra. Many of these new

Buddhist sects grew from the Tendai sect, so their chant was based on Tendai practice. Although referred to as the 'old' Buddhist sects, the Tendai, Shingon, and Nara sects were still influential. Both Tendai and Shingon *shōmyō* were influenced by the Myōon-in school, leading to reactionary movements within each lineage to rework music theory and notational systems, and compile collections of musical notation.

Tanchi (1163–1237?), of Kekan's school, worked to establish the musical theory of Tendai *shōmyō*. In his *Shōmyō mokuroku* ('Catalog of Buddhist Chant'), he classified the modes and initial tones of *shōmyō* chants, and in his *Shōmyō yōjin-shū* ('Essentials of Buddhist Chant'), he specified five-tone and seven-tone scales, the twelve pitches of the octave, three basic modal types, the concept of modulation, and various notational styles. In 1238, Tanchi's disciple Shūkai compiled another catalog (*Gyosan mokuroku*) that indicates the notational style of each piece, and clarifies the initial pitch of each character of the text by adding a *shutton-zu*, or graph of initial tones.

The various schools of Shingon *shōmyō* also saw similar efforts to develop coherent music theories, styles of notation, and collections of notation. The most significant was the development

in around 1270 of the *goin-bakase* ('five-tone neumes') style of notation by Kakui (1212–93?), of the Nanzan-shin branch. In this notation, the initial position, angle, and direction of the notational line make it possible to read the pitch of the notation even in long melismatic phrases, i.e., phrases in which a single syllable of the text is set to many notes. This became the fundamental notational style of Shingon *shōmyō*.

The priest Gyōnen (1240–1321) of the Nara temple Tōdai-ji left a significant mark on the study of music theory and the history of Buddhist chant in India, China, and Japan. His *Shōmyō genru-ki* ('Account of the Origins and Spread of Buddhist Chant') may be the first music history written in the field.

In addition to the performance of Buddhist chant in the ritual context, there was also a tradition of freely expounding the Buddhist teachings through narrative chanting, which came to be known as *shōdō* ('chanted guidance'). Early masters include Chōken (1126–1203) and his son Shōkaku (1167–1235). This, along with the narrative style of *kōshiki* lecture-sermons, exerted a significant influence on narrative performing arts of the time, such as *Heike-biwa* (narration of *The Tale of the Heike* to the accompaniment of the lute, or *biwa*) and *sōga* (ceremonial vocal music cultivated by the medieval priest and warrior classes). Influence from these forms is also apparent in the music structure of Japan's medieval dance-drama *nō*, which blossomed in the late fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries.

From about the time of the Ōnin civil war (1467–77), Japanese Buddhist chant entered a period of transmission rather than creation, during which music notation was printed for the first time, and new instruction manuals were compiled. Religious texts had been published at the Shingon center of Kōya-san from the thirteenth century. The *Bunmei yonenban Shōmyō-shū* ('*Shōmyō* Collection Printed in 1472') is the oldest printed

music notation of Japan, and predates the oldest printed music notation of Europe, the *Constance Gradual* (1473), by one year. The three existing copies of this edition may be the world's oldest surviving printed music notation. Subsequent reprinting in the following decades indicate that demand for this printed notation was strong. Despite its humble title, the instruction manual *Gyosan taigai-shū* ('Collection of Trivia of Buddhist Chant'), compiled by Chōe (1458–1524) in 1496, is rich in a wealth of detail that may surprise us even today.

With the stabilization of politics and the economy in the Edo period (1600–1868), it became possible for Buddhist ceremonies to be celebrated regularly, and both Buddhist scriptures and collections of notation of Buddhist chant were published at Kōya-san and the head temples of most other sects, as well as by secular printers in the large urban centers of Kyōto, Ōsaka, and Edo (modern Tōkyō).

By this time, the Nanzan-shin school of the Shingon sect had split into two doctrinal schools—the Old-Doctrine (Kogi) and New-Doctrine (Shingi) branches—with the latter having split again in the late sixteenth century into two factions: the Chisan branch based at the Kyōto temple Chishaku-in and the Buzan branch based at the temple Hase-dera in the mountainous southern part of Nara. Both research on *shōmyō* and publication of collections of notation were undertaken almost exclusively by the Chisan branch, with the Buzan branch making use of its efforts second-hand.

Music notation was not published by the Tendai sect until the mid-seventeenth century, when Kenshin (d. 1683) of Ōhara published a collection, *Shōmyō-shū*, in five volumes. It was later republished in six volumes, and hence came to be known as *Gyosan shōmyō rokkanjō*. In the early nineteenth century, Shūen (1786–1859) began compiling an



The burning of sutras during the nationwide campaign of Abolish Buddha and Destroy Shakyamuni at the time of the Meiji Restoration. A woodblock print.

extensive collection of *shōmyō* materials, the *Gyosan sōsho* ('Gyosan Anthology'), and additional materials were added by Kakushū (1817–83).

Following the promulgation of laws to separate Buddhist and 'native' Shintō belief at the time of the Meiji Restoration (1868), many Buddhist temples and their holdings were systematically destroyed, dealing a severe blow to the Buddhist community. Some sects reacted by sending students to Europe in preparation for the establishment of modern Buddhist studies, while others created new Buddhist hymns in the style of Christian hymns, following the example of Christian missionary activities. With the loss of occasions for performance, *shōmyō* came to be heard less and less by the general public. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, a reevaluation of traditional culture began in response to Japan's rapid Westernization, and the Buddhist community gradually adapted to the times. Although new notation systems influenced by Western staff notation were

developed and used to document the state of the chant tradition, most sects continue to use the traditional notation or slightly 'improved' versions.

After World War II, the state of traditional Buddhist ceremonies declined even further, and the number of *shōmyō* practitioners decreased. At the same time, however, music researchers and contemporary composers began to take an interest in *shōmyō* as one of the main genres and sources of Japanese vocal music, leading to the publication of academic books and recordings, and the performance of Buddhist chant at concert halls and other venues outside of temples. ▢

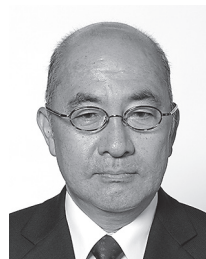
Further reading

Nelson, Steven G. 2008. "Court and religious music (1): history of *gagaku* and *shōmyō*" / "Court and religious music (2): music of *gagaku* and *shōmyō*." In Alison McQueen Tokita and David W. Hughes, ed. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Japanese Music*. SOAS Musicology Series.

Wikimedia Commons File: Burning-of-sutras-and-religious-objects.jpg

Changes in the Significance of Music in Buddhism

by Masashi Hashimoto



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With the emergence of Mahayana, the arts of music and dance and such came to be regarded as practices to attain our own enlightenment—a substantial development.

Though it is not easy to talk in any uniform way about how the use of music in Buddhism changed, I would like here to offer a few introductory remarks. As Buddhism developed from Early Buddhism to Mahayana, by way of Sectarian Buddhism, music came to be assessed very differently, in what might seem to be a contradictory way. I will concentrate here on looking at Buddhist sutras to see how the way music was understood in Indian Buddhism changed, until by the time of the Lotus Sutra, it was considered a meritorious practice that enabled people to attain their own enlightenment.

In the *Sakkapañha-sutta* (DN. 21), Sakka, the ruler of the devas, seeking an audience with the Buddha, sent the heavenly musician Pañcasikha, a renowned lutist, to go ahead to announce him. Standing at the head of the devas of the thirty-three heavens, Pañcasikha appeared on the Vedyaka hill and approached the Indasāla Cave where the Buddha was staying. Then, plucking his lute, he sang about the Three Treasures of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, about the arahats, and about love.

At the end of his song, the Buddha praised him saying, “The music from your strings harmonizes with your voice, and your voice harmonizes with the music from your strings. The music

from your strings is balanced with your voice, and your voice is balanced with the music from your strings.” Later commentators said that of course the Buddha holds himself aloof from any attachment to music, but by praising it he granted Sakka and the devas the opportunity to ask him questions.

Sakka, in the *Cūḷataṇhāsāṅkhaya-sutta* (MN. 37), possessed five hundred heavenly musical instruments for his enjoyment. The commentators understood this to imply that Sakka savored the glory of heaven and that all his senses were activated by music. The fivefold (and five hundred) heavenly musical instruments (*pañcaṅgika-turiya*) refer to a drum with one surface covered in skin (*atata*), a double-headed drum (*vitata*), an instrument with a head and strings, like a lute (*atata-vitata*), wind instruments (*susira*), and cymbals, gongs (*ghana*) and so forth. When Sakka saw the venerable Mahāmoggallāna approaching, he dismissed the music, and welcomed the visitor. According to the commentators, Sakka was following the example of devout kings, who, on seeing a bhikkhu, dismissed performers on the grounds of the precept of “no singing, no playing musical instruments, no dancing.” This mirrors a passage in the *Cūḷa-sīla* (Ten Precepts) of the *Brahmajāla* (DN. 1)

in the section “When an ordinary, ignorant being praises the Tathāgata”: “The monk Gotama holds himself aloof from being a spectator of shows with dancing, singing and music.” This was the exemplary image of religious mendicants held by people in India at the time. Even before it was put into writing in the *Vinaya*, which laid out the norms of behavior to be followed by monks and nuns, a kind of customary law existed for the religious, not just within Buddhism. This may explain why there was unexpectedly no specific injunction against music, and so forth. In the *Pāṭimokka*, the 251 monastic precepts in the *Vinaya*.

Lay followers would observe the eight uposatha precepts for a whole day and night on ritual cleansing (*uposatha*) days. The first mention of these precepts seems to have been in the *Dhammika-sutta* (*Suttanipāta* 14). No. 7 forbids wearing garlands (*mālā*) and using perfumes (*gandha*). Generally this is incorporated into a set to “refrain from dancing, singing, playing musical instruments and watching entertainments;” but this addition was yet to appear. It was added to garlands and perfumes in the *Uposatha-Vagga* (AN. Vol. IV, p. 250), which sets out in detail what people should refrain from on *uposatha* days: “Refrain from singing (*gītā*) and



A wall painting of a Buddhist musical performance. Mogao Caves (cave 112), c. mid-Tang dynasty (618–907).

dancing (*nacca*), the playing of musical instruments (*vādita*), and the watching of entertainments (*visūka-dassana*)."

Novices received the ten *sāmaṇera* precepts, and No. 7 repeats the above: "Abstain from dancing, singing, playing musical instruments and watching entertainments." In the *Pācittiya* 10 of the precepts for nuns (*bhikkhuni*), violating the precept against singing and dancing, and so forth is regarded as a misdemeanor that calls for confession and repentance. The systems around novices and nuns were only gradually put into place within early Buddhist monasticism and so it is not clear how seriously the precept against singing and dancing was regarded within it. It is more than likely that its importance

grew with the development of monastic Buddhism. The *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya* speaks of the "seven treasures that cannot be touched by monks," and, defining them, adds "musical instruments, drums and fifes" (T 23, 846c). Thus performance was indirectly banned.

In early Buddhist sutras, which preserve the monastic stance, music may possibly have been played in the course of missionary work, where the lay (human beings and devas) and the ordained (the emancipated) interacted. In the Pali *Maha-parinibbanna-sutta*, the Buddha told Ananda, "Do not worry yourselves about the funeral arrangements . . . There are wise Khattiyas, Brahmins and householders who are devoted to the Tathagata: they will take

care of the funeral." And so, "the deities and the Mallas of Kusinara paid homage to the body of the World-Honored One with dance, song, music, flower-garlands, and perfume, showing respect, honor and veneration" (DN. Vol. II, pp. 159–161). The Buddha's relics received the same homage (p.164).

However, as far as we can tell from the various Vinayas, veneration of stupas employing song and dance and music did not begin at the time of the Buddha's *parinibbana*. In the *Mahīśāsaka-vinaya* it is stated that stupas should be erected for "the Tathagata, arahants, pratyekabuddhas and universal monarchs" (T 22, 173a). Since bhikkhus would be censured by laypeople if they themselves venerated the stupas with song

and dance, the Buddha forbade them to do so. However it was alright to let the people do so. On the other hand, bhikkhus themselves could “praise the Buddha and venerate stupas with flowers, perfumes, banners and flags” (173a). The *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya*, referring to the depositing of relics in a stupa, says that the Buddha forbade bhikkhus “to pay homage by playing music or sounding conch shells themselves” (T 22, 956c–957a).

In the *Mahāsāṅghika-vinaya* (Vol 33) the Buddha permitted a layman, King Pasenadi of Kosala, to perform veneration employing music. He gave the precedent of King Kiki of Kāsi, who did so at the *parinibbana* of Kassapa, the sixth Buddha of the past, saying, “During the life of that Buddha and after his *parinibbana*, veneration could be performed in all cases offering flowers, perfumes, music, various kinds of robes, and food and drink.” He explained, “This enables living beings to produce wholesome deeds and gain peace in the long night of spiritual darkness” (T 22, 498c).

In the environment of early Buddhist monasticism where attachment to “play” simply led to continuing transmigration, it would have been difficult to develop song and dance as artistic forms. However, when the lay-centered Mahayana took hold, sutras spoke of the merit of venerating stupas with song and dance, and this allowed their development as art. In the “Skillful Means” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, it is said that all those who pay homage to the stupas of Tathagatas with the mystic sounds of music and song have attained the path of the buddhas.

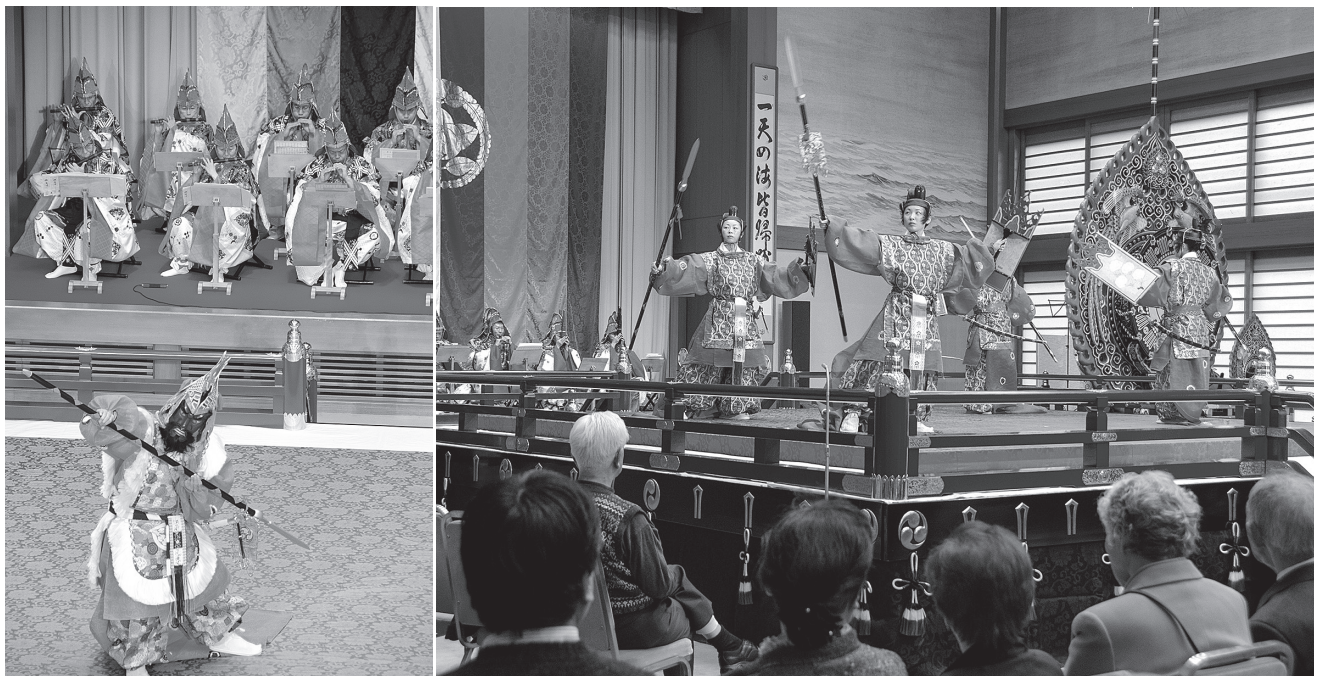
All kinds of instruments are listed here: kettle drums (*bherī*), conches (*śaṅkha*), small drums (*paṭaḥa*), large drums (*duṇḍubhi*), lutes (*viṇā*), cymbals (*tāḍā*), tabor drums (*paṇava*), elongated barrel-shaped drums (*mṛdaṅga*), flutes (*vaṃśa*), a kind of drum/cymbal (*jhallarī*), and the unidentified *ekotsava*. Relics could also be venerated by pouring water, clapping hands, and melodious singing. Those who did so have also all attained the path of the buddhas. By

offering veneration by however small an action (such as plucking just one string of an instrument), those with even a distracted mind will gradually see innumerable buddhas. Such is the merit of venerating stupas and relics through music, as a practice leading to the perfection of self.

And so, with the emergence of Mahayana, the arts of music and dance and such came to be regarded as practices to attain our own enlightenment, a substantial development. □

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Kosei Gagaku-kai of Rissho Kosei-kai, a Japanese classical music and dance group inaugurated in 1950, serves the role of transmitting Gagaku to the people today. The group performs music on occasions such as Rissho Kosei-kai ceremonies and also offers its performances to the gods and the buddhas at shrines and temples.

Buddhism, Music, and Salvation

by Fabio Rambelli

Music is a skillful means to please laypeople and patrons of the Sangha, or an offering to the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

In this essay, we will trace the doctrinal possibilities of music practice as a form of Buddhist practice, from early Buddhist scriptures and Vinaya codes to the long Japanese tradition of performing Gagaku ceremonial music and Bugaku dance at Buddhist rituals.

Buddhist Ambivalence toward Music

Many early Buddhist sources present negative views of music, to the point of prohibiting it. In the *Zōitsu Agonkyō* (T 2, 1.756c) the Buddha lists the abstinences that lay followers must adopt on fasting days—those include “making music and smearing one’s body with perfumes.” The same sutra also prohibits monks and nuns from discussing music, singing, and dance, because these subjects, along with drinking alcohol and performing comedy, are not appropriate for them (T 2, 1.781bc). Some Vinaya codes also prohibit monks, nuns, and laypeople not only from performing music and dance themselves but also from watching or listening. These texts are primarily addressed to the early communities of Buddhist renunciants who were endeavoring to separate themselves from the lifestyle of ordinary world: they forbid music because it relates to sensual pleasure and to inappropriate deportment.

At the same time, early scriptures also show a positive attitude toward music, singing, and dancing, as long as they are performed in praise of, or as offerings to, the Buddha. They likely acknowledged that music, songs, and dance were important for religious purposes and in communal events in communities where Buddhism was spreading. Melodious sutra chanting is attested since the earliest period in the development of Buddhism, when chanting the scriptures with a beautiful singing voice was praised. For instance, the *Zōitsu Agonkyō* extols “a clear and penetrating voice that reaches Brahma’s heaven” (T 2, 1.558a23–24), as long as it is to praise the Buddha and his teachings. The *Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya* (Jpn., *Makasōgi ritsu*) allows the members of the Sangha to attend music performances organized by lay patrons to commemorate the birth of the Buddha, his enlightenment, or his first sermon (p. 494a). The *Buddhacārīta* (T 192, 4.54a) mentions music performed to celebrate the building of stupas to enshrine the relics of Śākyamuni after his cremation. An even more explicit praise of music offerings is presented in *Hōen shurin*, when the Buddha attended a music performance in the city of Śrāvastī: “All these people played music as an offering to the Buddha and the Sangha; because of the merit of that, they will not fall into an

evil destination but receive the highest pleasure possible for gods and humans for a hundred *kalpas*, after which they will become *pratyekabuddhas*” (T 53, n. 2122: 576c).

In general, Mahayana scriptures tend to show a more positive attitude toward music. The Lotus Sutra says that in a distant past, the Bodhisattva Myōon played music of all kinds for thousands of years to a buddha, and because of that he was reborn in a Buddha-land (T 9, n. 262: 56). The *Konkōmyō saishōō kyō* describes the voice of Benzaiten as endowed with the power to lead beings



Eight-armed Benzaiten surrounded by the goddesses Hariti and Prithvi, and two divine generals. C. 1212. Property of University Art Museum, Tokyo University of the Arts.

Wikimedia Commons File: Goddess Saravati (Japan).jpg



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to salvation (T 16, n. 665). In Japan, Myōonten and Benzaiten came to be considered the same being, who presided upon a number of rituals involving the transmission of the musical arts.

A distinct thread in Buddhist ideas about music concerns the presence of music in the heavenly realms and the pure lands. A visualization in the *Kanbutsu sanmaikai kyō* presents “countless songs with musical accompaniment sing the infinite virtues of the Tathāgata” played by Brahma, Indra and a large retinue of heavenly beings (T 643, 15.677b26–c2). The *Muryōju kyō* (T 360, 12.266a) describes Amida’s Pure Land, with the unsurpassable beauty of the sound produced by the trees made of the seven precious stones, and the myriad kinds of spontaneously produced music in which each sound is the sound of Dharma (*hōon*); moreover, heavenly beings come to play music for the Buddha and the bodhisattvas. Heavenly music is not a mere adornment of the Pure Land, but a veritable manifestation of the Buddha Amida endowed with the power to lead beings to salvation.

Later on, Esoteric Buddhist (*mikkyō*) scriptures continue to present music as an offering to buddhas and bodhisattvas; a novelty they introduce is the fact that a musical instrument, the *biwa*, is described as the *sanmayagyō* (the symbolic, substitute body) of Benzaiten, thus opening up the possibility for the sacralization of music instruments.

We should point out, however, that most scriptures draw a distinction between human music and heavenly

music; the music Śākyamuni was exposed to before leaving his father’s palace was human music, but after his awakening, he only listened to heavenly music. This leaves some doubts on whether human music can have a direct role in Buddhist practice.

Salvific Music

In all these sources music is a skillful means to please laypeople and patrons of the Sangha, or an offering to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, or part of the pure lands—in other words, music is never considered a value in and of itself. There are, however, a few exceptions in the Buddhist canon that address music as deeply related to the very core of the Buddhist teachings and practices. These scriptures are not very well known today, as they are not part of the canon of any Buddhist denominations, but they had a significant impact in premodern Japan because they gesture toward the possibility of musical activity in itself as a form of Buddhist practice.

The first of these scriptures is entitled *Sutra of the Questions by Indra* (*Shakudaikan’in mongyō*, T 1, n. 1: 62c–66a). In it, the Buddha praises the *gandharva* Pañcasikha, a virtuoso musician, for the “pure sound” of his beryl *koto* (the Sanskrit original has *vinā*, a string instrument):

The sound of your *koto* and your own voice . . . move the human mind. The music you play on your *koto* has many meanings: it talks about



A detail of Musicians in Paradise. Yulin Grottoes, cave 25, in Guazhou County, Gansu Province, China. Sixth century. The musical instruments shown from the left pipa (Jpn., biwa), sheng (a Chinese mouth-blown polyphonic free reed), flute, and conchshell.

desire and attachment, Buddhist practice, the *śramanera*, and nirvana. (T 1, 1.63a18–20)

Here, Pañcasikha’s music is most definitely not a hindrance for renunciants (as in the monastic regulations), nor a mere offering. Instead, it conveys the fundamental *teachings* of Buddhism (i.e., the nature of desire and attachment, and how to go beyond them), as well as the principles of correct practice, and as such has the power to lead a Buddhist practitioner (*śramanera*) to nirvana.

Wikimedia Commons File: Traditional Chinese instrument players - Yulin Cave 25.jpg

In another early source, the Buddha takes the shape of a *gandharva* after being challenged by *gandharva* king Zen'ai on who among them is the best virtuoso player of the *koto* (i.e., the *vinā*). (*Gandharvas*, and more rarely *kiṃnaras*, metahuman angelic beings, were considered music virtuosi.) At the sublime sound of the Buddha (in his manifestation as a *gandharva*), Zen'ai becomes his disciple and attains arhathood (*Senshū hyakuengyō*, T 4, 200: 211a–212a). In this scripture, the Buddha is not just a spectator of a music performance; he himself becomes a musician and his music has the power to convert the king of the *gandharva* and cause him to attain arhathood. Here the power of music, far from being detrimental to Buddhist practice, enables one to attain liberation; the Buddha does not shun music, but appears as a virtuoso musician himself.

The Sutra of Druma, King of the *Kiṃnara*

But the most stunning scriptural endorsement of music can be found in another early scripture, the *Sutra of the Questions by Druma, King of the Kiṃnaras*, with its extended interaction between the Buddha Śākyamuni and the king of the *kiṃnaras*, Druma. And while a large portion of the sutra consists of standard teachings about *prajñā-pāramitā* doctrines, visualizations, and instructions on the characteristics of the bodhisattvas and their practices, it also presents an original view on music: At one point, the Buddha announces that king Druma is on his way to pay his respects to him, accompanied by multitudes of *kiṃnaras*, *gandharvas*, and other celestial beings. Immediately, King Druma begins to play his precious and beautifully decorated beryl *koto* (i.e., the *vinā*), joined by all the heavenly musicians in his cortege. The sound pervades the universe and everything, from the cosmic Mount Sumeru to plants and trees, begins to sway as if

inebriated. Almost all the members of the Buddha's assembly, rise from their seats and, unable to control themselves, begin to dance. When asked, Mahākāśyapa and the other disciples can only say: "We can't control ourselves! Because of the music of this *koto*, we cannot sit quietly and keep our bodies from dancing, and our minds can't focus. . . . It's something independent of our mind's desire, we just can't resist this rhythm. The music of the king of the *Kiṃnaras* . . . shakes my mind like trees in a storm and it can't stand still" (pp. 370c–371a). This is in line with other scriptures, in which music is an obstacle to Buddhist practice. Here, however, the Buddha goes beyond that perspective and makes clear that because of his deep knowledge of skillful means, King Druma can use the intrinsic power of music for salvific purposes. The *kiṃnaras*—continues the Buddha—like the *gandharvas* and *mahorāgas*, love music; with their music, they arouse love for, belief in, and respect for the Dharma, which in turns generates the sounds of the three jewels, the sounds of the six *pāramitās*, and the sounds of all teachings. Because of his merit, in the future King Druma will become a Buddha ruling over his own Buddha-land.

Significantly, in this scripture the Buddha instructs the bodhisattva Tengan, his main interlocutor, to address his questions about music and its effects directly to King Druma—a powerful endorsement of the spiritual state of the latter. This is a summary of their dialogue:

Druma: "The musical voice of sentient beings originates from the body and from the mind."

Tengan: "No, because the body, like plants and stones, is not intelligent, and the mind, being formless, has no vision or touch and doesn't make speeches."

Druma: "If it's distinct from body and mind, where does it come from?"

Tengan: "Ideation creates music and sound. If there is no voice in empty space, then sound does not emerge."

Druma: "All sounds emerge from empty space. Sound has the nature of emptiness: when you finish hearing it, it disappears; after it disappears, it abides in emptiness . . . all dharmas . . . are emptiness. All dharmas are like sound . . . Sound . . . has no origin and is not subject to extinction, therefore it is pure, immaculate, and incorruptible, like light and the mind."

This sutra, in which King Druma argues that music is the very condition of realized emptiness and hence a manifestation of awakening, is a powerful endorsement of music as a proper Buddhist salvific activity. The sutra, however, only speaks about the celestial music of the *kiṃnaras*, not about human music, thus reiterating the standard understanding of other early Buddhist texts and preserving, with this gap, a fundamentally ambivalent stance. Exegesis in medieval Japan would bridge this gap and give an important role to a certain type of human music, the ceremonial music and dances of Gagaku and Bugaku.

Final Considerations: King Druma, Japanese Gagaku, and the Possibility of Buddhist Music Today

At a time in which most Buddhist scriptures saw music essentially as entertainment (either a way to deal with possible patrons or as a pleasant offering to the buddhas), or as the soundscape of pure lands, the *Sutra of King Druma* provided the first cogent Buddhist philosophy of music as closely related to the concept of emptiness, its practices (*samādhi*), and its results (*prajñā-pāramitā*). This sutra, far from being a doctrinal anomaly, became

central for a number of developments in Japanese Buddhism and its attitudes toward the performing arts, especially the ceremonial music and dance known as Gagaku. (Japan is, together with Tibet, the only Buddhist culture that has created and sustained a long and rich tradition of Buddhist ritual music and dance.)

Now, Gagaku is mostly understood as deeply related to the imperial court and Shinto shrines, but historically, Gagaku (and its dance repertory, Bugaku), has been transmitted mostly at two Buddhist temples, Kōfukuji in Nara and Shitennōji in Osaka; a third center of transmission, the imperial court in Kyoto, had close connections with Iwashimizu Hachimangū, which prior to the Meiji era was another full-fledged Buddhist temple. Gagaku—as both instrumental music (*kangen*) and dance (Bugaku)—was widely used, along with Shōmyō chanting, in large-scale Buddhist rituals known as *Bugaku hōyō* (a rich tradition that continues today, primarily in the *Shōryō-e* ceremony for Prince Shōtoku at Shitennōji and at a few other temples). It is possible that the *Sutra of King Druma* provided a model for such ceremonies.

Japanese developments related to the Buddhist conceptions of music went beyond that and extended to at least three other areas. First, the performance of Gagaku and Bugaku came to be considered a salvific activity: since music was both a type of offering and

an instantiation of the pure lands in this world, it would generate merit for the performers and the audience; this was known as “playing instrumental music as a karmic activity for rebirth in a pure land” (*kangen mo ōjō no gō to nareri*). Second, in line with Esoteric Buddhist teachings, music came to be seen as a fundamental aspect of the enlightened cosmos, deeply related to the nature of reality, as initially suggested

by Kūkai and developed by Annen in his *Shittanzō*, a book on Sanskrit linguistics, which also contains important sections on music theory, and which became one of the bases for Shōmyō music theory. Finally, the scriptural separation between heavenly music and human music was practically abolished: since scriptures about music in the heavenly realms listed all instruments used in early Gagaku ensembles (for example, paintings of Amida coming to this world often include heavenly beings playing Gagaku instruments), human-made Gagaku was considered to be comparable in beauty and power to the heavenly music of the pure lands.

Based on scriptural sources and a long Japanese musical tradition, it may be possible today to further expand the Buddhist understanding of music and treat it (not only Gagaku, but any type of music) as something deeply related to our body-minds and our environment, very much in line with developments in contemporary music influenced by John Cage’s esthetics and the works of Pauline

Oliveros, both directly influenced by Buddhism. As such, it should be possible to make music the subject of practices in which the practitioners focus on sounds as they resonate both within themselves and with the surrounding environment, as a way to attain a higher awareness of the interrelatedness of all things and to experience, somehow, the concept of emptiness, as King Druma explained in his sutra. □

Photo: alg-images / AFLO



Amida shoju raigo zu (*Welcoming descent of Amida and bodhisattvas*). Late fourteenth century. Hanging scroll. Color and gold on silk.

Esoteric Buddhism and the Mandala

by Michihiko Komine

Even though the realm of enlightenment cannot be expressed in everyday language, Esoteric Buddhism has another way to enable this: the mandala.

Introduction

In the course of its long history, Buddhism has undergone many changes as it expanded and developed. Of these, one of the most significant was the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism around the first century BCE, followed by the rise of esoteric teachings and practices some five or six centuries later. While Esoteric Buddhism is thought of as an

extension of later period Mahayana, it is undeniable that there are considerable differences between the two in both doctrine and practice. By distinguishing between them, we can come to a better understanding of the distinctive features of each.

One such feature is that they have completely different objectives. Of course, they both share the same foundation—the tenets of compassion and dependent origination—but they differ greatly in their perspective on Buddhism. If the focus of attention is not the same, it is only natural that major differences will emerge. What is of prime importance in Buddhism is the fact that Śākyamuni achieved enlightenment, and then did not keep it to himself but transmitted it to the world at large. Whereas Mahayana focused on spreading his teachings widely throughout society, Esoteric Buddhism rather emphasized the attainment of enlightenment itself. For Mahayana, then, taking very seriously the Buddha's altruistic practice over forty-five years, the first and foremost duty of Buddhism is the spiritual liberation of all living beings. In other words, Mahayana does not place importance on religious practice aiming at one's own attainment of buddhahood, but on the core value of

action to liberate living beings within society. In concrete terms, this means that Mahayana makes the Way of the Bodhisattva, upon which both the layperson and the ordained walk together, the basis of its teaching, as well as its activities, are the dynamic force in spreading the teachings of Buddhism throughout the world.

The Mandala: Representing Enlightenment

While Mahayana focuses on our lives, as we have seen, Esoteric Buddhism has as its objective the sacred realm of enlightenment. Kūkai, the ninth century Japanese priest who formulated esoteric doctrine, clearly stated that the core of Esoteric Buddhism is the religious practice of the ordained practitioner. He said that the ultimate aim of Buddhism is “to attain enlightenment in this very body” (J. *sokushin jobutsu*). By contrast, Mahayana holds that “the realm of enlightenment is profound, far beyond human conjecture,” and that it cannot be experienced by anyone other than a buddha. It is a state described by the expression, “The path of words has been cut off,” meaning that we cannot speak of it in our everyday speech and writing, and summarized by the compound “cessation of mental activity,” saying that it is a state far exceeding human intellection. It is not surprising, therefore, that Mahayana does not prioritise practice aimed at enlightenment but rather emphasizes



A painting of Huiguo with an attendant. Fourteenth century.

Wikimedia Commons File: Huiguo, 14th century, Kamakura, National Museum, Tokyo.jpg



Michihiko Komine is elder of Kanzo'in in Tokyo, a temple belonging to the Chisan branch of the Shingon sect of Japanese Buddhism. His special fields are early Mahāyāna Buddhism and the Shingon Buddhist doctrine. He is the author of numerous books on esoteric Buddhist paintings.

that which leads living beings to liberation and salvation.

Even though the realm of enlightenment cannot be expressed in everyday language, Esoteric Buddhism has another way to enable this: the mandala. It is not written in letters and characters like the scriptures, but rather expresses comprehensively the workings of enlightenment and wisdom using not words but only “form and color.” Kūkai, in his search for the esoteric teachings, went to China with the purpose of obtaining mandalas that portrayed the realm of enlightenment in pictorial form. He eventually arrived at the Qinglong Temple in Chang'an where he was accepted as a student by Huiguo, and in a few months received the final esoteric initiation, enabling him to take the mandalas he so dearly sought back to Japan. According to the inventory of items he brought with him from China, these mandalas included the Great Compassion Womb Realm Mandala, the Great Compassion Womb Realm Dharma Mandala, the Great Compassion Womb Realm Samaya Mandala, the Diamond Realm Mandala in Nine Assemblies, and the Diamond Realm Mandala with Eighty-One Divinities.

Huiguo, who gave these mandalas to Kūkai, said, explaining the primacy of the mandala in which was depicted the essence of the esoteric teachings, “The secret treasury of Shingon is hidden from the commentaries; it can only be transmitted through diagrams and paintings.” Large numbers of buddhas and bodhisattvas, among others, are

depicted in the mandalas, but the latter are far more than just pictures. The pictures in a mandala represent the enlightenment of the secret treasury of Shingon, and the working of wisdom. At the same time, it seeks to fuse the two. If we can contemplate the mandala correctly, we too can enter the realm of enlightenment.

The Four Types of Mandalas

Mandalas depicting the inner reality of enlightenment are not intended to be explained or understood through words, but rather to be experienced by the practitioner becoming one with the images drawn within them. The realm of enlightenment is not to be understood intellectually; rather it is something that is embodied by the Shingon practitioner as the culmination of his or her training. Esoteric Buddhism teaches the practice of the “three mysteries” as the training to embody enlightenment. The “three mysteries” refers to that domain in which the activities of the body, speech, and mind of the practitioner become one with those of the Buddha. This, in other words, is the form of one who has attained enlightenment. The practice of the “three mysteries” is the religious training of Esoteric Buddhism. The Shingon practitioner aspiring to enlightenment makes mudras with his hands, recites mantras with his mouth, and maintains a mind of perfect quietude. And it is the mandala that expresses that realm

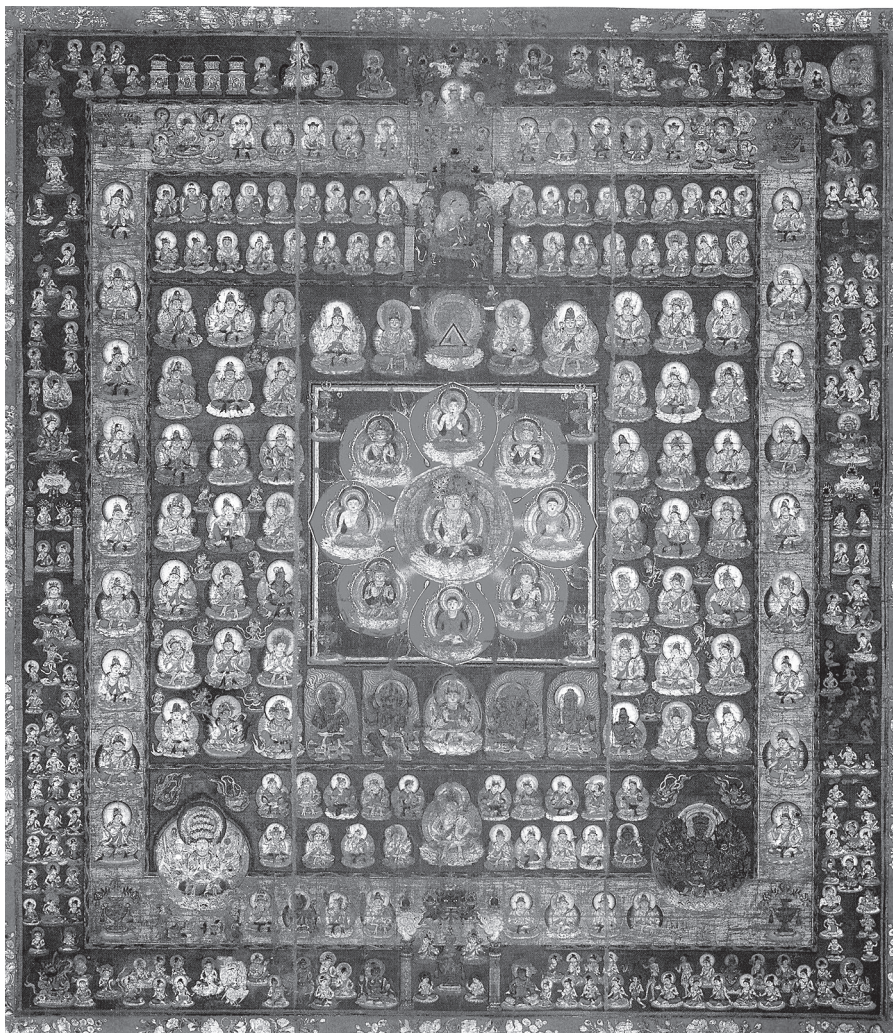
of unity between the practitioner and the Buddha.

To put it simply, the mandala portrays the actuality of the “three mysteries” practice as a picture. Kūkai spoke of this actuality in terms of the “four mandalas.” In his *Sokushin jōbutsugi* (On attaining enlightenment in this very existence), he quoted from the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, describing the four forms of the mandala as follows:

The *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* says that “there are three esoteric forms of expression [i.e., of enlightenment] for all the Tathāgatas. They are letters, mudras and images. “Letters” refers to the Dharma Mandala, “mudras” or symbols refers to the Samaya Mandala, and “images,” or the marks of the physical form of the Buddha, refers to the Great Mandala. Implicit in each of these three mandalas are the proper deportment and activities that are called the Karma Mandala.

Great Mandala

The Great Mandala expresses each of the buddhas and bodhisattvas through their marks of physical excellence, and they are depicted wearing garments of various colors. They are the personification of the ways in which the wisdom of Mahāvairocana operates, and they express the working of that wisdom in the practice of the fivefold meditation and in attaining unity with the figure being meditated upon. The “fivefold meditation for realizing buddhahood” is a



The Womb Realm Mandala. Toji, Kyoto. Ninth century.

practice unique to Esoteric Buddhism. It consists of five meditations to achieve the body of a buddha, with the purpose of concentrating the mind on one point and merging with enlightenment. The first meditation is to visualize the mind to be like the full moon, and the second is the perfection of the previous meditation. The third is to see the mind as a diamond, while the fourth is attaining the adamantine (*samaya*) body. The fifth is to become one with the Buddha. A good example of a mandala that expresses this is the central “Perfected Body Assembly” of the Diamond Realm Mandala.

Samaya Mandala

The Samaya Mandala is known as the “secret” mandala. *Samaya* is a Sanskrit

word whose meaning in Esoteric Buddhism is explained as the working of the Buddha-mind that has empathy for living beings. It is defined as “original vow,” the vow of a buddha or bodhisattva to liberate living beings. A way to convey this original vow is through symbolic forms such as the various implements or accessories associated with the buddhas and bodhisattvas that represent those vows. They include swords, wheels, vajras, and lotuses. Mudras performed by joining the hands together are also included here. The Samaya Mandala thus depicts objects representing the deities. An example is the “Samaya Assembly” in the middle of the bottom row of the Diamond Realm Mandala.

Dharma Mandala

Because the Dharma Mandala is made up of Sanskrit letters, it is also known as the “mandala of words” or the “mandala of the mouth-mystery.” And since it uses Sanskrit letters to represent the deities, it is also known as a “seed-syllable mandala.” Mandalas have Mahāvairocana as their foundation, and depict the buddhas and bodhisattvas who represent his workings, but in a “seed-syllable mandala,” Sanskrit letters alone are used. The word “seed” (Skt *bija*) is used here to indicate that all is concentrated within the mandala, like flowers and trees growing from a seed. Sanskrit letters are chosen because they are the sacred characters used to write the sutras.

Karma Mandala

The Sanskrit word *karma* means “action” or “behavior.” The Karma Mandala represents the dynamic state of enlightenment—that is, the noble activities of buddhas and bodhisattvas. This is expressed physically using statues of sacred beings; the three-dimensional mandala of twenty-one sculptures at Tōji is an example of a Karma Mandala. However, since this mandala too expresses the figures of buddhas and bodhisattvas, it can also be termed a Great Mandala. It is difficult to give form to the workings of enlightenment, which permeate all existence, and so the Karma Mandala is implicit in the other three.

As we see from the above, the four mandalas depict the experience of the three mysteries as a way of expressing enlightenment. Works about the doctrine of Esoteric Buddhism speak of the Dual Mandala—that is, the Mandalas of the Diamond and Womb Realms, where this doctrine is arranged systematically. Given our limited space here, I hope we will have another opportunity to discuss this more fully. □

No Justice Without Equality

by Zainah Anwar

Board Chair, Musawah



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The Niwano Peace Foundation awarded the forty-second Niwano Peace Prize to Musawah, a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family that advances human rights for women living in Muslim contexts, in recognition of its immense efforts to strengthen citizenship and peaceful coexistence in diverse societies, and to create contexts and platforms for interfaith dialogue and spiritual solidarity. The award ceremony took place on May 14, 2025, at the International House of Japan, in Tokyo. The recipient's address follows.

It is an honor for me to represent Musawah to receive the forty-second Niwano Peace Prize for 2025. I would like to express our deepest appreciation to Dr. Hiroshi Niwano, chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Niwano Peace Foundation, and to the Niwano Peace Prize Committee for recognizing Musawah's body of work as deserving of this honor.

This recognition means a lot to us in Musawah and our partners in the Muslim world, and among Muslims living in minority contexts, given the challenging work that we undertake in standing up for equality and justice in our faith, within very difficult political and social contexts.

Over sixteen years ago, when Musawah was born, I shared the vision of its founding members in my opening speech at the launch in Kuala Lumpur. We wanted to bring to the larger women's and human rights movement:

- An assertion that Islam can be a source of empowerment, not a source of

oppression and discrimination.

- An effort to open new horizons for rethinking the relationship between Islam and human rights, equality and justice.
- An offer to open a new constructive dialogue where religion is no longer an obstacle to equality for women, but a source for liberation.
- A collective strength of conviction and courage to stop governments and patriarchal authorities, and ideological non-state actors from the convenience of using religion and the word of God to silence our demands for equality, and
- A space where activists, scholars, decision makers, working within the human rights or the Islamic framework, or both, can interact and mutually strengthen our common pursuit of equality and justice for Muslim women.

The roots of Musawah go back much further than its official launch. In 1987, I cofounded Sisters in Islam in

Zainah Anwar cofounded Sisters in Islam in 1987 in Malaysia and was its founding Executive Director from 1999 to 2008. In 2009, she also cofounded Musawah, the global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family, and became its founding Executive Director. She stepped down in 2021, and now chairs the Musawah Board.

Malaysia—a group of Muslim women committed to advocating for justice and equality within the Islamic framework. From those pioneering efforts, engaging with Islam from a rights perspective, asking questions based on our lived realities, and demanding the urgent need for change, our work has grown into a global movement. Today, through Musawah, Muslim women around the world are at the forefront of advocating for justice, pushing for legal reforms, and challenging discriminatory understandings of our religion that deny us our rights.

The message is simple and clear: For there to be justice in the twenty-first century, there must be equality.

For too long, Muslim women who demanded reform to discriminatory laws and practices have been told, “This is God’s law” and therefore not open to negotiation and change. They said we cannot question, challenge, nor demand equality as this is against shariah (God’s revealed way). Such actions will weaken our faith, and lead us astray, they alleged. We have been accused of being Westernized elites, anti-Islam,

anti-shariah, anti-God, people who have deviated from our faith.

As Muslim feminists, as activists and as believers, we take the position that when our religion is used as a source of law and practice, our lived realities give us the right to speak out on how this religion is misused to inflict harm on us and society at large. This is not about theology that only the religious scholars have the authority and legitimacy to speak on; this is about engaging with religion at the intersection of law and public policy, politics and gender.

In a world where women's rights are considered part of human rights, where modern constitutions of Muslim countries uphold equality and non-discrimination, where women are also providers and protectors of their families, the relentless discrimination against women in the name of Islam and reflected in many Muslim family laws until today, is unacceptable.

While all Muslims accept the Qur'an as one, it must be recognized that the interpretation of the Qur'an is a human effort that has led to diverse opinions and schools of thought. What Musawah brings to the table is a rich and diverse collection of interpretations, juristic opinions and principles that makes it possible to read equality and justice in Islam.

Musawah is building and sharing at the global level new feminist knowledge in Islam. We unearth the gems within our *tafsir* (interpretive) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) traditions, to open the public space for debate and for a new public discourse to emerge on Islam and women's rights, and most importantly to build a movement of women's rights advocates, policy makers, and religious leaders with the courage of conviction that equality and justice for women in Islam is necessary and possible.

Our vision is to build a world in which gender equality, justice and non-discrimination are embraced as inherent in Islam and reflected in laws, policies and daily practices.



The award ceremony for the forty-second Niwano Peace Prize was held at the International House of Japan in Tokyo on May 14. From left, Rev. Nichiko Niwano, honorary president of the Niwano Peace Foundation and president of Rissho Kosei-kai; Ms. Zainah Anwar, board chair of Musawah; and Dr. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, its board member.

And we are doing these through four key initiatives:

1. By expanding the public discourse on equality and justice in Islam to break the hegemony of conservative and extremist forces who define what Islam is and what it is not.
2. By building a collective force for change, bringing together activists, academics, policy makers and organizations to build a global momentum to end discriminatory laws and practices in the name of Islam, and prevent rollbacks on rights already gained.
3. By developing new rights-based knowledge in Islam and facilitating access to knowledge, legal concepts and narratives on the possibility and necessity of reform.
4. By building the capacity and courage of activists, decision-makers and rights groups to critically speak out on the harmful impact of discriminatory laws, policies, and practices justified in the name of Islam and to promote an understanding of Islam that upholds equality and justice.

It is this search for justice, equality, beauty and compassion in Islam's sacred Text that drives us forward. Our work transcends ideological dichotomies such as 'secular' versus 'religious' feminism, or 'Islam' versus 'human rights,' or 'Islam' versus 'women's rights'; we show these dichotomies to be false and arbitrary. Certainly, not at all helpful to deal with the challenges we face living in conservative and patriarchal Muslim contexts.

We point out that the real battleground, as one of our founding members, Dr. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, said, "is not between Islam and secularism, or human rights or women's rights, but between despotism and patriarchy on the one hand, and democracy and gender justice on the other."

We are calling out these men in authority who are abusing religion to perpetuate their power and privilege and to silence dissenting voices. We know that it is their authoritarian rule that is under threat. Not Islam. We are challenging their abuse of an authoritative text for authoritarian purposes. Not the word of God.

And in building this new counter narrative of equality and justice for women in Islam, we are empowering

women and men with knowledge, language and courage to speak out. We are giving voice and conferring authority on ourselves—on those long silenced, who live in fear of being accused of being a bad Muslim, of being anti-God, anti-Islam, anti-shariah.

Since our launch in 2009, Musawah has gained an international reputation for its groundbreaking work in knowledge building, capacity building and international advocacy.

In knowledge building, we work closely with Islamic scholars and activists to produce two books, *Men in Charge: Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition*, and *Justice and Beauty in Muslim Marriage*. These groundbreaking books are now used in university courses in law, religion, and gender studies. We produce short knowledge briefs and policy briefs to make our knowledge on equality and justice for women in Islam and the possibilities of law reform more accessible to policy makers and activists advocating for change at the national and global levels.

In capacity building our transformative course on 'Islam and Gender Equality and Justice' (I-nGEJ) exposes women's rights activists and policy makers to how knowledge is produced in the Islamic tradition, by examining the methodology and conceptual tools used to build the rich interpretive and legal traditions in Islam, and how these make reform possible.

This training is critical as we believe that change can only happen if we can build a multiplicity of voices in the public space to break the hegemony of conservative and extremist state and non-state actors over matters of religion. We are now developing the Musawah Institute to offer this training online to reach a larger audience. Knowledge is key to our movement building. It is knowledge that gives us courage to stand up, speak out, and hold our ground when attacked.

In the area of international advocacy, Musawah is engaged deeply with



Ms. Zainah Anwar and Dr. Ziba Mir-Hosseini visited Rissho Kosei-kai headquarters in Tokyo together with Dr. Hiroshi M. Niwano, chairperson of the Niwano Peace Foundation, on May 15. Dr. Mir-Hosseini made an address before the organization's members gathered during a monthly ceremony at the Great Sacred Hall.

the CEDAW process (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) and the UN system, amplifying the voices of women living in Muslim contexts on the international stage.

We have intervened in the reporting process of 39 countries, regularly submitting thematic reports and issuing oral statements on Article 16 on marriage and family relations—not surprisingly, the most reserved article of all UN human rights treaties. This has led to a more constructive dialogue between the CEDAW Committee and governments as they are exposed to the examples Musawah provides of good practices from various Muslim countries to show that reform towards equality and justice for women is indeed happening. If indeed these discriminatory laws are divine and cannot be changed, as governments claim, why then do different Muslim countries have different laws and practices on any particular issue—be it age of marriage, polygamy, guardianship, right to divorce, division of marital assets—all on the basis of Islam?

We point out that these discriminatory laws are made by humans, not God.

Thus, the difference and diversity. The problem is not with Islam, but the lack of political will to recognize women as human beings of equal worth and dignity.

In 2020, we launched the Campaign for Justice in Muslim Family Laws, working with partners at the national level in Asia, the Arab world, and Sub-Saharan Africa to organize, mobilize, and build support to advocate for reform. We also initiated the Global Campaign for Equality in Family Law across all faiths and traditions, with several regional women's rights groups, an ecumenical global organization, and with support from UN Women, to make family law reform a global priority issue.

As we build our Campaign for Justice, we will be using the Peace Prize money to enhance the capacities of advocates globally through digital and face-to-face trainings and make our knowledge more accessible by expanding our online presence and digital reach to engage with a wider audience.

Given the focus of the Niwano Peace Foundation, I want to take this opportunity to draw your attention to the work of Valerie Hudson and her colleagues on Women, Peace and Security, and make the case why gender equality is critical



A group photo of Musawah members. Musawah, which means 'equality' in Arabic, works for the advancement of human rights for women in Muslim contexts, both in their public and private lives.

to world peace. In her book *Sex and World Peace*, she and her team found, the larger the gender-gap between the treatment of men and women in a society, the more likely a country is to be involved in intra- and interstate conflict, to be the first to resort to force in such conflicts, and to resort to higher levels of violence. On issues of national health, economic growth, corruption, and social welfare, the best predictors are those that reflect the situation of women. They found women's disempowerment in the household affects the security, stability, prosperity, bellicosity, corruption, health, regime type, and the power of the state. The data is robust based on 161 outcome variables within nine dimensions of nation-state outcomes—political stability and governance, security and conflict, economic performance, economic rentierism, health and well-being, demographic security, education, social progress, and environmental protection. These findings, they assert, are clear, consistent and statistically robust across the board. And yet because they relate to women, political leaders and decision-makers are not paying attention.

Dr. Hiroshi Niwano echoes the view that peace is not simply a state without war. But he also said something more profound—the conviction that peace will only be achieved when it inhabits

the heart of every single person. And for this to happen we need to nurture peace on the inside of each person. This begins with peace in the family, the basic unit of society, for there can be no true peace without justice.

As Valerie Hudson asked, WHEN is peacetime for women? WHERE is peacetime for women? The physical insecurity of women, at home and in public; the gross inequity in family law in many parts of the world, not least the Muslim world; and the relative absence of women in decision-making platforms make gender inequality the overwhelming injustice of our day—the most profound and most difficult challenge. The treatment of women informs human interaction at all levels of society.

The struggle for gender equality is not getting any easier, as we all know. The hopeful world of Beijing 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women—which adopted the Declaration and Platform for Action to end discrimination against women in 12 critical areas—that period of excitement over transitions towards democracy and real progress towards gender equality is gone. Much of our world today is dominated by a gender backlash in the midst of democratic backsliding.

But as activists, we cannot give up. We have the knowledge to make the case why change is possible, why it is necessary.

We need to spread that knowledge, build the courage, amplify the voices demanding change, and build multigenerational and collective power. We need to stand our ground and build our resilience in the face of growing anti-rights forces that promote hate and cruelty, that are against diversity, equity, and inclusion, and most threateningly, legitimized by the President of the richest and most powerful country in the world and funded by the richest man in the world. The voice of resistance is critical. Our work in the women's rights movement, our place in the larger human rights and democracy movement, must be supported and strengthened, and be well-resourced.

It is our knowledge, our conviction, our courage and our solidarity that will enable us to stand up every time we are attacked, dust off the battle scars, build new allies and champion a vision of positive social change towards a better world for all—a more peaceful and just world. We are not giving up no matter how difficult. Because we believe, in the end, that justice will prevail, must prevail.

Let me say it again: In the twenty-first century, there cannot be justice without equality. It is as simple as that. And without justice and equality within the basic unit of society—the family—there cannot be peace.

Thank you.



What Is the Place of Emptiness in Risshō Kōsei-kai Buddhism? Part Two: Emptiness in the Second Half of the Lotus Sutra

by Dominick Scarangelo



The vivid descriptions of tangible and concrete phenomena in Chapter Sixteen of the Lotus Sutra may initially seem irreconcilable with the doctrine of emptiness. However, the subsequent chapters, which highlight the merits of awakening to the Buddha's eternal life and recognizing his presence in the world, suggest that realizing emptiness is not only integral to, but also ultimately transcended by, the realization of the Buddha's eternal life.

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I. A Recap

This time, we continue our exploration of emptiness in the Lotus Sutra as part of our broader consideration of its role in Risshō Kōsei-kai teachings and practices. “Emptiness,” or *śūnyatā* in Sanskrit, is a concept frequently encountered in Buddhism, particularly in the traditions of Tibet, Northeast Asia, and Vietnam. Realizing or awakening to the emptiness of all things is often described as a crucial step on the path to buddhahood, especially within the Perfection of Wisdom sutras and their commentaries.

However, as I noted in the previous installment, those who explore Risshō Kōsei-kai Buddhism are often surprised to find that emptiness is not a central focus in its teachings. Nor does the realization of emptiness seem to hold the same priority in practice as it does in other Buddhist traditions. This contrast can be puzzling and naturally raises the question: Where is emptiness in Risshō Kōsei-kai?

This essay is the second in a three-part series addressing that question—one

I have frequently been asked. In the previous piece, we examined the meaning of emptiness in Buddhism and explored its role in the first half of the Lotus Sutra, particularly in relation to the concept of the One Vehicle—the teaching that all sentient beings have the potential to attain buddhahood. This time, as we prepare to understand the place of emptiness in Risshō Kōsei-kai, we will turn our attention to its role in the latter half of the Lotus Sutra.

I highly recommend reading the first piece in this series before continuing with this essay (Scarangelo 2024). However, in brief, our working definition of emptiness refers to the nature of phenomena: everything that exists arises from causes and conditions and is therefore empty of any inherent, independent existence or fixed nature. Since nothing comes into being *ex nihilo* or through its own power, all things exist in interdependence—what Thich Nhat Hanh described as interbeing.

When this fundamental nature of phenomena is perceived, all things appear as dreams, mirages, space,

reflections in water, echoes, shadows, dewdrops, bubbles, or flashes of lightning (Gethin 1998, 237). Nāgārjuna (c. 2nd century CE) and his later followers in the Mādhyamaka (“Middle Way”) school of Buddhist philosophy synthesized various sutra teachings on emptiness into a rigorous system of thought that carefully avoided reifying emptiness as an absolute. However, as the Japanese scholar Gadjin Nagao notes, the negation of emptiness also implies an affirmation: to see emptiness is to see the true nature of reality (Nagao 1991, 209).

In the previous piece, which focused on the first half of the Lotus Sutra, we examined key passages that seem to critique the doctrine of emptiness, while highlighting others that emphasize its significance. We also explored an often-overlooked passage suggesting that the concept of emptiness is essential to the Lotus Sutra because the universal potential for buddhahood is a

direct soteriological consequence of emptiness.

To summarize, in Chapter Two of the sutra, the Buddha explains that all living beings have the potential for buddhahood, precisely because no existence has a fixed nature—they are empty. Given the right conditions, they can therefore be transformed and led to awakening. As the Japanese scholar Kōtatsu Fujita explains, “It can be concluded that the One Vehicle is nothing other than the practical expression of the concept of emptiness” (Fujita 1969, 399). Most of the parables and analogies illustrating the universal potential for buddhahood in the Lotus Sutra align with this perspective, demonstrating that beings attain buddhahood through dependent origination. For these reasons, emptiness is indeed present in the first half of the Lotus Sutra, though it appears in the form of the One Vehicle—the teaching of universal buddhahood.

I concluded the previous essay with the suggestion that realizing buddha-nature—a concept implied by the Lotus Sutra, even though the term itself does not explicitly appear—encompasses the realization of emptiness. This is because, as we saw, what one perceives in seeing buddha-nature is fundamentally tied to the absence of any fixed essence. But rather than merely recognizing an absence, one perceives it as the space of limitless potential.

This is indeed the kind of direction in which the Lotus Sutra moves in its second half, particularly in Chapter Sixteen. Here, Śākyamuni Buddha declares that his imminent *parinirvāṇa* is, in truth, merely a display—he has always been in this world, continuously expounding the Dharma. He tells the assembly that his lifespan, for all intents and purposes, is infinite. Below, we will examine Śākyamuni Buddha’s profound and startling assertion and explore how it relates to the role of emptiness in the second half of the Lotus Sutra.

II. The Core Narrative of the Second Half of the Lotus Sutra

In Chapter Fifteen of the Lotus Sutra, a vast multitude of “innumerable thousands of millions of bodhisattva-mahāsattvas” suddenly emerges from beneath the earth. These bodhisattvas, adorned with “golden-hued bodies, the thirty-two marks [of sagely beings], and immeasurable radiance,” are clearly highly advanced, having practiced the Way for an inconceivably long time (Risshō Kōsei-kai 2019, 262). Yet when Maitreya Bodhisattva asks the Buddha who they are and from whence they came, Śākyamuni replies that he himself had “taught, transformed, instructed, and guided them” (ibid., 270). This response astonishes Maitreya and the assembly, as it seems impossible—after all, Śākyamuni attained awakening only some forty years earlier at the Place of the Way near the town of Gayā. Representing the entire assembly, a confused Maitreya asks how this could be possible.

The next chapter, “The Life Span of the Eternal Tathāgata,” presents the Buddha’s response. Śākyamuni explains that while his disciples assume he attained buddhahood only a few decades earlier, he had, in fact, become a Buddha in the infinite past. He reveals that his lifespan is unfathomable, extending indefinitely into the future. To illustrate this, he offers two extended analogies—condensed here for brevity—which suggest that the Buddha transcends not only time but also space. In other words, he asserts his omnipresence. Śākyamuni further astonishes the assembly by revealing that all other buddhas who have appeared were, in reality, manifestations of himself, responding to the unique needs of sentient beings in countless ways.

The elderly Śākyamuni Buddha also cautions the assembly that his impending *parinirvāṇa* will not be his ultimate extinction but rather a skillful means to

awaken longing for the Buddha in the hearts of living beings, inspiring them to embark on the Buddha Way. He illustrates this with the famous Parable of the Good Physician, in which a doctor, to persuade his poisoned children to take the antidote, feigns his own death. In the verses concluding the chapter, the Buddha assures the assembly that he remains ever present on Divine Eagle Peak and throughout all realms. He describes this world as his pure land—one that is never destroyed, even though, to ordinary beings, it appears to undergo cycles of arising and extinguishing.

These claims may seem startling to those who have learned that Buddhism teaches the impermanence of all things. Chapter Sixteen is undoubtedly the most challenging part of the Lotus Sūtra, particularly in its revelation of the “eternal” or “cosmic” Buddha. I have explored this in detail elsewhere (see Scarangelo 2019), but suffice it to say that, despite common assumptions, Buddhism has always affirmed at least one form of permanence—the permanence of the truth to which Śākyamuni Buddha awakened. This is explicitly stated in numerous sūtras, including some of the earliest texts of the tradition. One such example appears in the *Nidānasamyutta* (Connected Discourses on Causation), part of the *Samyutta Nikāya* of the Pāli Canon.

Whether there is an arising of Tathāgatas or no arising of Tathāgatas, that element [dependent origination] still persists, the stableness of the Dhamma, the fixed course of the Dhamma, specific conditionality. (Bodhi 2000, 501)

Without delving too deeply into technicalities, the Buddha teaches his disciples that causation is the fundamental truth of the world, timeless and universal. Phenomena arise in accordance with the process outlined in his exposition of dependent origination. He reiterates

this principle in many sūtras, including a variation found in Chapter Two of the Lotus Sutra. This truth is omnipresent—buddhas do not create it; they merely rediscover it and share their realization with humanity.

What I want to emphasize to readers is that while Buddhism indeed teaches that all conditioned phenomena—things that arise through causes and conditions—are impermanent and destined to pass, the truth Śākyamuni Buddha realized through his gnosis is said to transcend time and space. The Buddha's passing did not mean that the possibility of awakening vanished with him. The Dharma—the fundamental truth of all things—is fixed and permanent. What is new in this chapter is the assertion that this omnipresent truth is, in some way, an enduring presence of Śākyamuni Buddha himself in the world. Whether this represents Śākyamuni in his entirety or merely an aspect of him is not entirely clear. Over time, scholar-monks sought to clarify this question. However, setting aside these doctrinal discussions for the sake of simplicity, I will refer to this ever-abiding dimension of Śākyamuni as the “Eternal Buddha.”

Previously, we saw how the Lotus Sūtra construed a void—the absence of any fixed nature—as the universal capacity of all living beings to become buddhas, a potential awakened when the right conditions, namely the Buddha's skillful means, are present. Thus, if we speak of this potential as “buddha nature,” then paradoxically, “no-nature” is precisely buddha nature. In Chapter Sixteen, the Lotus Sūtra similarly interprets absence—this time, the apparent absence of the Buddha in the world. It reveals that omnipresent truth is an eternal aspect of Śākyamuni Buddha that always remains. In other words, at the most fundamental level, “Buddha” is the omnipresent truth itself.

This idea may not be as strange as it first appears. Those of us who study Buddhism receive its wisdom from our

teachers, who, in turn, learned from their teachers, tracing an unbroken lineage back to Śākyamuni Buddha, the teacher of us all. This is why we take refuge in him—he is the source and wellspring of our tradition. But if Śākyamuni is our source, then from whom did he learn? In whom did he take refuge?

Śākyamuni Buddha's biography recounts that after leaving the palace to seek the Way, he studied under two teachers in succession. However, he eventually parted ways with them to embark on a solitary quest. Shortly after his awakening, Śākyamuni encountered a wandering mendicant named Upaka, who, struck by the serenity of Śākyamuni's appearance, inquired about his teacher and the teachings he followed. Śākyamuni replied that he was self-awakened and posed the rhetorical question, “Whom shall I regard as my teacher?” (Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research 2003, 29). The only teacher and refuge Śākyamuni had was ultimate truth itself—the omnipresent truth he had discovered. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to view this ever-abiding truth as the essence of what is most fundamentally “Buddha”—the source and teaching of all other buddhas, the “Buddha of buddhas.”

However, the chapter goes beyond simply personifying omnipresent truth as Buddha. It presents something affirmative and active in this portrayal. Chapter Sixteen's Eternal Buddha is not merely a truth that abides silently, waiting to be rediscovered. It is described as an active force, driven by compassion, continually working in the world—always expounding the Dharma and reaching out to liberate beings. Omnipresent truth is portrayed as a subject with will and aspirations, extending itself to respond to living beings by phenomenally manifesting in diverse forms and offering myriad teachings. Furthermore, not only is the Buddha still present in the world, but the chapter also asserts that those who awaken to the Eternal Buddha's presence

perceive it as a pure land—“tranquil and calm,” with “gardens, groves, halls, and pavilions / Adorned with every kind of gem” (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 283).

The vivid descriptions of tangible and concrete phenomena in Chapter Sixteen of the Lotus Sutra may initially seem irreconcilable with the doctrine of emptiness. However, the subsequent chapters, which highlight the merits of awakening to the Buddha's eternal life and recognizing his presence in the world, suggest that realizing emptiness is not only integral to, but also ultimately transcended by, the realization of the Buddha's eternal life.

III. Emptiness and the Merits of Realizing the Eternal Life of the Buddha

In the opening of Chapter Seventeen, “Specification of Merits,” we learn of the attainments of beings who have awakened to the truth of Śākyamuni's infinite lifespan—the omnipresence of the Buddha. For example, the Buddha states that bodhisattvas as numerous as the particles of dust in a thousand small worlds will become buddhas after just eight more lifetimes. Others, as numerous as the particles of dust in four worlds, will attain buddhahood after only four lifetimes. Some will even reach buddhahood after just one further lifetime. Awakening to the omnipresence of the Buddha has thus propelled these bodhisattvas to the threshold of buddhahood. The most basic levels of awakening—“basic” in a comparative sense—are described as beings as numerous as “the particles of eight worlds,” who develop the aspiration for Supreme Perfect Awakening, and those “as numerous as sixty-eight hundred thousand million myriad times the sands of the Ganges,” who have attained the “cognition of nonorigination.”

Buddhist traditions offer varying interpretations of both developing the

aspiration for Supreme Perfect Awakening and the cognition of nonorigination. Broadly speaking, generating the aspiration for Supreme Perfect Awakening, or *bodhicitta*, involves cultivating a firm, overarching goal to become a buddha in order to liberate both oneself and others. Many traditions assert that this aspiration becomes genuine and steadfast once one overcomes the influence of delusions—both those stemming from mistaken perceptions of the world and those rooted in deeply ingrained flaws in the way our minds perceive reality. In many accounts, the power of these delusions is broken when one begins to nonconceptually perceive the emptiness of all things. Authentically generating *bodhicitta* is viewed by many traditions as the starting point of the bodhisattva path, marking a transformative shift in consciousness and the practitioner’s attainment of the first of the “ten bodhisattva grounds” (Williams 2009, 80–81; 201). This transformation is closely linked to acquiring the ability to directly perceive the emptiness of both self and other.

Similarly, the “cognition of non-origination” (Skt., *anutpattika-dharma-kṣānti*; Chn., *wushengfaren* 無生法忍) is fundamentally a realization of emptiness. As described in the Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom, this awakening occurs when the practitioner perceives that all things arise dependent on causes and conditions, and thus lack a fixed, independent self-nature. As a result, their attributes are changeable and impermanent. Since nothing possesses a fixed nature or independent, immutable qualities, nothing in the world manifests as a permanent, unchanging reality (T 25.1509.204a19–22). So far, so good. From this point, however, things become a bit more complex.



A wall painting of Dipankara and Sumedha. Sumedha lies on the ground before Dipankara Buddha. In Buddhist texts, Sumedha is a previous life of Gotama Siddhartha in which he declares his wish to become a buddha. Bezeklik Cave 9, Turfan, China. Ninth–eleventh centuries.

Because nothing exists in a “real” or “substantial” way—as a permanent, fixed reality—when things cease, nothing truly permanent or fundamentally existent is lost. Nothing substantial ever truly arises to begin with. Buddhist texts offer a variety of analogies to convey this: when one observes things, they appear devoid of substantiality or permanence—like dreams, reflections, the fleeting foam on churning waters, or the echoes of sound. What we witness is a continuous flow of transformation, extending from the infinite past into the infinite future. To offer a metaphor, the phenomenal world is like a flowing river—constantly moving, changing, and transforming. This river is infinite in both directions: it has no beginning, as it has always existed, and no end. To directly and nonconceptually realize that everything is merely flow—that nothing truly arises in the first place, and thus nothing ever truly extinguishes—is the “cognition of nonorigination.”

When Śākyamuni Buddha tells us that realizing the eternal life of

the Buddha allows one to attain the merits of the aspiration for Supreme Perfect Awakening and the cognition of nonorigination, it suggests that perceiving the Eternal Buddha’s presence in the world somehow encompasses an understanding of emptiness. If the Eternal Buddha is omnipresent truth, then it must be synonymous with emptiness, which is the fundamental truth of phenomena, regardless of time or place. It is the way in which all things manifest through causes and conditions—dependent origination—and exist in this world. To perceive the omnipresent truth in this world—the Eternal Buddha—would be to see the emptiness of all things. Furthermore, as the omnipresent truth that has always abided in this world, realizing it would inherently involve an apprehension of non-

origination. It therefore makes perfect sense that one of the merits of realizing the eternal life of the Buddha would be the cognition of nonorigination.

IV. The Eternal Buddha and the “Non-empty”

However, to see the Eternal Buddha is also to glimpse something more. Ordinary phenomena are non-originated because they are “insubstantial.” They never come into existence as substantial entities; instead, they are conditioned phenomena—dependent on causes and conditions. As such, they never truly or substantially exist, and therefore, nothing substantial or “truly” existent passes into extinction. Truth, in contrast, is neither born nor perishes because it simply is. It is not a conditioned phenomenon, as it does not depend on causes and conditions. It just is. Thus, to see the Eternal Buddha is also to see the truly real.

Perhaps this “realness” is connected to the positive and dynamic activity of

the Eternal Buddha described in Chapter Sixteen. The verses that conclude the chapter portray the Eternal Buddha not merely as a dormant truth waiting to be discovered, but as a dynamic force actively working in the world to liberate living beings.

I have ceaselessly expounded the
Dharma,
Teaching and transforming count-
less millions of beings
.....

For I always abide here teaching
the Dharma. (Rissho Kosei-kai
2019, 281)

The Eternal Buddha always abides in this world—not as an inert, passive truth, but as a ceaseless force, actively teaching living beings and refining their hearts and minds toward liberation. The will and agency of the Eternal Buddha are further emphasized in the final verses, some of the most renowned in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

I am ever thinking:
“How can I cause living beings to
Embark upon the unsurpassable Way
And quickly accomplish embodi-
ment as buddhas?” (Rissho Kosei-
kai 2019, 284)

These passages create a stark contrast between the Lotus Sutra’s earlier portrayal of omnipresent truth in the world and the depiction found in the Connected Discourses, where truth is passive, awaiting revelation. The question then arises: Is this active portrayal merely a result of personifying omnipresent truth, presenting it as a subject, or does it represent a conception of truth that transcends what we have encountered previously?

In the East Asian tradition of the Lotus Sutra, the Eternal Buddha as omnipresent truth is understood not only as the truth of emptiness, or a negation, but as a dynamic, active force. This

dynamic aspect of truth is sometimes referred to as the “non-empty” (Chn., *bukong* 不空). The Lotus Sutra tradition picks up this term from the *Mahāyāna Nirvāṇa Sūtra* (Chn., *Daban niepan jing* 大般涅槃經; Skt., *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*), where it critiques the four disciples of Śākyamuni—Subhūti, Mahākātyāyana, Mahā-Kāśyapa, and Mahā-Maudgalyāyana—for their hesitation to embrace bodhisattva practice. In the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, they are criticized because they “see all as empty and do not see the non-empty” (T 12.374.523b20). The “non-empty” refers to the active, dynamic workings of truth, as the Lotus Sutra illustrates when recounting the self-critique of these disciples in the “Medicinal Herbs” chapter: “We took no pleasure in considering bodhisattvahood, with its enjoyment of transcendent powers, its purifying of buddha lands, and its bringing of all living beings to perfection” (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 121). Resting in the quiescence and tranquility of emptiness and refusing to be conduits for a kinetic energy that transforms individuals and society, the four disciples are archetypes of emptiness as a nihilistic one-sided truth.

Reading Chapter Sixteen of the Lotus Sutra leaves us with the impression that its Eternal Buddha, as omnipresent truth, incorporates or integrates the truth of emptiness while simultaneously representing a dynamic, transformative activity of truth in the world. This kind of dual relationship between emptiness and activity, encapsulated by the Eternal Buddha as omnipresent ultimate truth, is suggested by two passages in Chapter Sixteen. One depicts the dynamic activity of the Eternal Buddha, while the other reveals the truth of the world as non-originated, or the “empty.”

Let’s take a look at these two passages:

First, after revealing his infinite life in Chapter Sixteen, Śākyamuni explains how this omnipresent aspect of the Buddha is inherently present and



Wikimedia Commons File: Subhuti diamond sutra detail retouched.jpg

A detail of Subhūti, from the Dunhuang Diamond Sutra, the first known printed book. This picture appears in its second chapter, in which he asks the Buddha how bodhisattvas can achieve enlightenment. Ninth century.

active in the world, manifesting in various forms that reach out to all beings with compassion.

Good children, the sutras expounded by the Tathāgata are all for the purpose of liberating living beings. I may speak of myself. I may speak of someone else. I may appear as myself. I may appear as someone else. I may appear through my own deeds. I may appear through someone else’s deeds. And whatever I teach and whatever I say is valid and never in vain. (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 278)

This passage is referred to as “the six ways in which the Tathāgata manifests in the world.” Without delving into complex doctrinal details, Śākyamuni Buddha emphasizes that the Eternal, Original Buddha—omnipresent truth—continually manifests in the world through various forms and situations, all with the noble aim of liberating beings from suffering. In the Lotus Sutra tradition, this passage came to be interpreted as a form of pantheism or panentheism,

with “appearing as someone else” suggesting that the Eternal Buddha manifests as countless gods, teachers, and even political leaders, while “someone else’s deeds” is sometimes understood as the Eternal Buddha acting through the environment and events. Compassionately and actively, the Buddha reaches out to us, offering diverse teachings and practices that guide us toward liberation.

However, the Buddha immediately follows this description of the Eternal Buddha’s dynamic activity with another statement that reaffirms the world as “nonoriginating”—essentially empty. Śākyamuni Buddha reminds the assembly that nothing in the world arises as a fixed and independent entity, and thus, nothing truly perishes:

The Tathāgata perceives the character of the threefold world as it really is. Birth and death do not leave it or appear in it. There is no staying in the world or departing from it for extinguishment. It is neither substantial nor insubstantial. And it is neither thus nor otherwise. This is not how the threefold world sees itself, but the Tathāgata sees such things as these clearly and without error. (Ibid)

This, too, is a truth of the world. However, in contrast to the “six ways in which the Tathāgata manifests in the world,” the Buddha’s description of reality here takes on a more philosophical tone, presenting a vision that is essentially net-zero and motionless in substance.

In this way, Chapter Sixteen of the Lotus Sutra presents two perspectives on the ultimate. One is the omnipresence of truth as an imminent, active, and compassionate force in the universe—what I have referred to as the “non-empty.” The other perspective is the truth of things as nonorigination, which is essentially the truth of emptiness. A similar paradox appeared in the first half of the Lotus Sutra, where it

expressed “no-nature” as buddha nature, with its activity being the One Vehicle. I believe we can recognize a pattern here, from which we can draw some overall conclusions about the role of emptiness in the Lotus Sutra.

V. Seeing the Eternal Buddha as the Perfection of Wisdom

There is one more passage in the second half of the Lotus Sutra to which I would like to draw the reader’s attention. Later in Chapter Seventeen, “Specification of Merits,” the sutra highlights the profundity of seeing the Eternal Buddha—even if only momentarily or partially—describing it as “a single moment of faith and understanding.” The text then compares this realization to the bodhisattva’s practice of the six perfections (*pāramitās*), the virtues cultivated on the path to buddhahood. This comparison is particularly noteworthy because, while open to interpretation, it suggests that realizing the Eternal Buddha’s infinite lifespan is either equivalent to, or serves as a substitute for, the bodhisattva’s perfection of wisdom (*prajñā-pāramitā*).

First, allow me to provide some context. The bodhisattva’s six perfections encompass the cultivation of generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom. Generosity involves giving to others, whether through monetary donations, offering one’s labor, or teaching the Dharma. Discipline refers to adhering to the Buddha’s ethical guidelines. Patience and diligence are self-explanatory. Meditation includes practices that first calm and sharpen the mind and then facilitate analytical contemplation, allowing one to perceive the true nature of reality. This meditative practice, supported by the other perfections, ultimately leads to the perfection of wisdom—the attainment of a buddha’s wisdom and insight into the ultimate nature of all things, often described as their “true characteristics.”

In the Perfection of Wisdom Suttas that teach the bodhisattva perfections, perceiving the ultimate reality of all things is closely associated with the realization of emptiness (Nagao 1991, 210). To give an example, the Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom states: “If a bodhisattva perceives all dharmas as neither permanent nor impermanent, neither suffering nor bliss, neither self nor non-self, neither existence nor nonexistence, and yet does not contrive such conceptualizations—this is called the bodhisattva’s practice of *prajñā-pāramitā*” (T 25.1509.190b13–15). The reader should recognize this as essentially the cognition of nonorigination, as discussed above.

Returning to the Lotus Sutra, Chapter Seventeen compares the realization of seeing the Eternal Buddha to the practice of the bodhisattva’s perfections. I will quote from Cleary’s translation, as it is the closest to contemporary spoken English and thus the most accessible.

The merit which good men and good women gain by this [that is, faith and understanding in the eternal life of the Buddha,] would be hundreds or thousands or millions of times as much merit as they would gain by cultivating, for the sake of ultimate complete enlightenment, the perfection of generosity, the perfection of discipline, the perfection of patience, the perfection of energy focus [diligence], and the perfection of meditation—that is, five of the six perfections, with the exception of the perfection of wisdom. (Clearly 2016, chapter 17)

To our way of thinking today, this kind of comparison is rather convoluted. The sutra is telling us that seeing the Eternal Buddha is an awakening far more profound than what any bodhisattva could attain through the practice of generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, and meditation for an infinite span of

time. But why the curious exemption of the perfection of wisdom?

Many commentators have concluded that the exception of the perfection of wisdom is the sutra's way of indicating that realizing the eternal life of the Buddha is the perfection of wisdom, or in some way encompasses it. This is a radical assertion, and thus we can appreciate that the sutra would couch it in tentative language. However, the notion that this awakening the sutra has heralded—seeing the Eternal Buddha—would be a truer or more comprehensive vision of the ultimate reality of all things is strongly suggested by our analysis of Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen above.

VI. Emptiness and the Lotus Sutra: More than Meets the Eye

Gene Reeves, the translator of the most widely read English version of the Lotus Sutra, held the view that the Lotus Sutra is not primarily concerned with emptiness, or *sūnyatā* (Reeves 2010, 190). In our exploration, we have observed that the Lotus Sutra does not present detailed doctrinal discussions on emptiness, such as those found in other Mahāyāna sutras, and that its language is largely positive and cataphatic, emphasizing the universal potential of all living beings to become buddhas. In fact, the text of the sutra contains what could be interpreted as veiled criticism of the doctrine of emptiness. However, I have argued that it would be a superficial reading to conclude that emptiness is absent or irrelevant to the sutra and its teachings.

First, from a pivotal passage in Chapter Two, we saw that the One Vehicle is a practical consequence of the emptiness of phenomena—the absence of any fixed, independent identity or nature. Living beings are changeable, and given the right conditions—the skillful means and guidance of the Buddha—anyone can attain liberation and become a buddha. Thus, from the standpoint of



Thich Nhat Hanh at Hue City, Vietnam, in 2007.

the sutra's association of emptiness with the One Vehicle, the capacity to become a buddha, or buddha nature, would paradoxically be emptiness—"the nature of no-nature." Here, we are reminded of Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching that because phenomena are empty of any fixed, inherent, or independent nature, they are full of "everything else." Put differently, the other side of emptiness is infinite potential—buddhahood.

Next, we observed that the sutra's metaphors and analogies predominantly portray the universal capacity to become a buddha as a function of dependent origination, which aligns perfectly with the doctrine of the emptiness of all phenomena. Therefore, even though the sutra hardly discusses the emptiness of phenomena, what it focuses on is the "practical expression of the concept of emptiness" (Fujita 1969, 399). Emptiness is central to the doctrines of the first half of the Lotus Sutra, but the text is more concerned with the soteriological implications of emptiness within a practical framework.

In the second half of the Lotus Sutra, we find no doctrinal discourse related to emptiness; instead, we are confronted with a mythical narrative. Myriads of ancient bodhisattvas arise from beneath the earth, whom Śākyamuni Buddha claims to have personally converted and guided. When Maitreya questions how

Śākyamuni could have been the teacher of such ancient beings, the Buddha reveals that he has been in the world since the infinite past and will continue to abide in the world into the infinite future. He further astonishes the assembly by disclosing that, all this time, he has been actively working in the world to liberate living beings, even appearing in the guise of other sages to provide the appropriate teachings.

While I have attempted to address the second half of the sutra on its own terms, rather than immediately turning to the commentarial tradition, since we are dealing with mythos, any interpretation we offer falls within the realm of subjective understanding. I have followed the general consensus that the "Eternal Buddha," or the timeless aspect of the Buddha presented in Chapter Sixteen, is a cataphatic personification of ultimate truth that is always accessible in the world. If we understand the Eternal Buddha as omnipresent truth, then one way to read it is as a symbolic portrayal of emptiness, since all things arising through causation—what Buddhism maintains as the truth of the world—are empty. The merits of realizing the eternal life of the Buddha, particularly the cultivation of the aspiration for Supreme Perfect Awakening and the cognition of nonorigination, seem to suggest that

seeing the Eternal Buddha is, in some way, seeing emptiness.

Unlike older depictions of omnipresent truth in other sutras, in which it is passive, waiting to be discovered, the Eternal Buddha in the second half of the Lotus Sutra is dynamic and active, working in the world to liberate living beings. This portrayal may stem from the anthropomorphizing of omnipresent truth, presenting it as a subject with agency. However, the dynamism of the Eternal Buddha is one of the key aspects of Chapter Sixteen. It suggests that omnipresent truth, as the Eternal Buddha, is something beyond emptiness, though not separate from it. This idea is reflected in the Buddha's dual statements that characterize reality—one describing a universe where the Eternal Buddha's manifestations constantly reach out to liberate beings, and another asserting the truth of the world as its nonorigination. These two perspectives, though distinct, appear to be connected. One is dynamic and active, while the other is a net-zero equation, static or inert. Borrowing a term from the Nirvāṇa Sutra, I have referred to the former as the “non-empty” and the latter as the “empty,” suggesting that the former represents the activity of truth, while the latter is truth as such (for an in-depth discussion of the creative, active side of truth, see Ziporyn 2019).

Finally, we saw in Chapter Seventeen that the Lotus Sutra seems to indicate awakening to the eternal life of the Buddha is itself the perfection of wisdom, which is usually associated with seeing the emptiness of all things.

To explore the role of emptiness in the latter half of the Lotus Sutra more deeply, we must inevitably turn to the commentarial tradition. However, even without doing so, it is clear that emptiness is present in this section of the sutra, and that seeing the Eternal Buddha is in some way related to realizing emptiness. Yet, to see the Eternal Buddha seems to be an awakening that

transcends emptiness. Emptiness is not the entirety of truth; there is more. While realizing emptiness is crucial, the Lotus Sutra places it within a broader context. Recognizing this helps us better understand how the Lotus Sutra commentarial tradition articulates the role of emptiness in the second half of the sutra.

In general, for the Chinese Tiantai, Japanese Tendai, and Nichiren traditions, the Eternal Buddha represents the ineffable ultimate reality of all things—a holistic, all-embracing truth that integrates both the emptiness of things (the vision of absence or negation of fixed nature and substantiality) and the provisional existence of things (the vision of presence or affirmation of attributes that manifest and impact the world). Thus, the Eternal Buddha is neither separate from nor simply identical to either truth but encompasses both. Awakening fully to the Eternal Buddha involves awakening to a truth that is more than just emptiness. For the monk Zhiyi (538–597), effectively the founder of the Lotus Sutra tradition of Buddhism in East Asia, emptiness was static and quiescent, and thus a one-sided truth, while the dynamic activity was a characteristic of the ultimate, holistic truth (Ng 1993, 60–61). Zhiyi used many terms to describe this ineffable yet dynamic and active truth including the “non-empty” (as discussed above), “real emptiness” (Chn., *zhenkong* 真空), “wondrous existence” (Chn., *miaoyou* 妙有), “matrix of the tathāgata” (Chn., *rulai zang* 如来藏), “buddha nature” (Chn., *foxing* 仏性), and “middle-way buddha nature” (Chn., *zhongdao foxing* 中道仏性) (Ng 1993, 53–58). All of these terms for dynamic truth are essentially synonyms of the omnipresent truth that is the Eternal Buddha.

With a basic understanding of the place of emptiness in the Lotus Sutra, we are ready to consider the place of emptiness in Rissho Kosei-kai doctrine and practice. □

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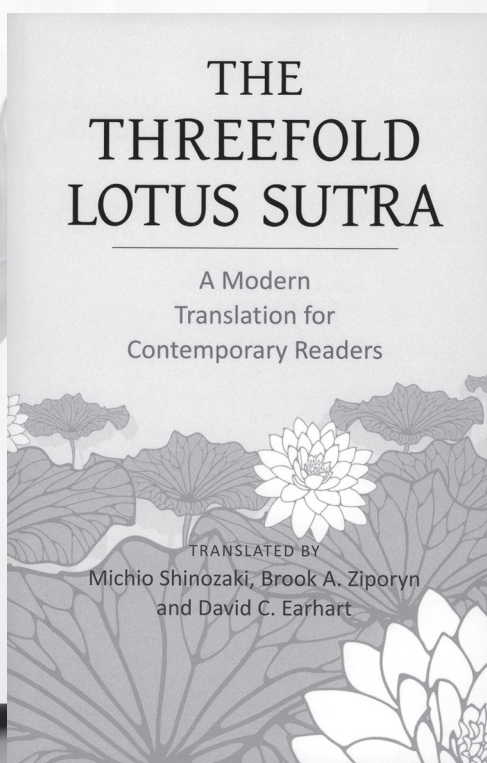
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