

2. Kukai - 774—835 CE

Overview

Kukai (also known as Kobo-Daishi) was a Japanese monk, scholar, and artist. He founded the Shingon or “True Word” school of Buddhism in Japan. This is a form of tantric Buddhism. It is strongly influenced by the Tathagatarbha teaching which says all beings are inherently pure from the very beginning.

Kukai lived in a time when the Japanese emperor controlled religion, and even decided whether a particular form of Buddhism should be allowed to operate. [This was not an ideal environment from a spiritual point of view, even though the emperors were sympathetic to Buddhism]. At that time Buddhism was still in a relatively early phase of development in Japan, even though it had been flourishing for many centuries in India and elsewhere. Buddhism, as well as many other things travelled to Japan from China. But the journey to China and back was very perilous in those days. There was a significant risk you would perish at sea.

Kukai had many skills. As well as founding the Shingon form of Buddhism he was a famous as a calligrapher, and an overseer of engineering projects. He is said to have invented kana, a system of syllables for writing the Japanese language. He wrote some 50 religious works, and is also thought to have written the iroha, one of the most famous poems in Japanese.

Fact and legend

In addition to verifiable historical fact, the traditional biographies contain a large mixture of mystical legends. Most ubiquitous are tales about wells and springs associated with Kukai. A typical story is that in a certain village there is insufficient water for irrigation, and the villagers have to be generally sparing in their use of water, which they drew from a far-off well. One day Kukai comes along and asks for a drink. The villagers willingly give him one, and in thanks Kukai strikes the ground with his staff. At the point where he strikes the ground a spring of water comes gushing up. At the core of such legends is the historical fact of Kukai's multifaceted social undertakings.

The best known of his social undertakings is his direction of the reconstruction of a reservoir called Mannoike on the island of Shikoku. It was, and is, the area's largest reservoir.

Popular legend says it was Kukai's supernatural abilities that enabled him to complete this huge job. But reliable historical sources indicate Kukai's success rested neither on magical ability nor on engineering skill, but on the confidence the local people had in him, as demonstrated by the governor's words, "If they hear that the master is coming, they will fly to welcome him". Wherever Kukai went, people swarmed of their own accord to meet him. This charisma was the fundamental reason the Mannoike reservoir was completed successfully. He caught the imagination of the people in a way that national and local community controls could not match.

Early part of Kukai's life

Kukai was born in 774 on the island of Shikoku into an aristocratic family. From childhood he was highly gifted, and was sent to the capital at fourteen to study under the tutor to the crown prince. At seventeen he succeeded in entering the university, where he studied *Tso's Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* and China's Five Classics (the *Classic of Changes*, *Classic of History*, *Classic of Poetry*, *Collection of Rituals*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*). It was in this period that he accumulated the wealth of knowledge that so astounded literary circles when he later visited China.

The turning point in Kukai's life, set as it was toward an illustrious official career, came during his university studies when he came across a text called the *Mantra of Akashagarbha*. After reading this he cast aside his prospective career and threw himself into the life of a mountain ascetic, travelling around Shikoku's secluded holy places such as Mount Otaki and Cape Muroto.

Kukai's abandonment of university life and his espousal of ascetic practice also seems to have come about through his awareness of the suffering the poor, such as farmers. His university education seemed to be of no use in resolving their problems.

Visit to China

The tantric form of Buddhism had already become well established in China, and Kukai therefore wished to visit it. In 804 he went to China as part of a diplomatic mission. After a long and arduous journey he reached the capital (Ch'ang-an). Though Ch'ang-an had declined following a rebellion, it was still the greatest city in the world. The Chen-yen (Shingon) school of tantric Buddhism was the

most popular of all the Buddhist schools in the capital, particularly through the efforts of the famed Tantric master, Amoghavajra.

On his arrival in Ch'ang-an, Kukai went first to study Sanskrit under the north Indian masters Prajna and Munisri. Mastery of Sanskrit was essential for the study of tantric Buddhism. It was typical of Kukai's thoroughness that he gave his attention to language before going to study under Hui-kuo, the true master for whom he had been searching for. Kukai became a student of Hui-kuo in the middle of 805. As soon as Hui-kuo saw Kukai, he cried out: "I have long known that you would come. How happy I am to look upon you at last, especially as my life is nearing its end". Over the next three months he received various initiations. Hui-kuo died near the end of the year.

In the autumn of 806, Kukai returned to Japan aboard a diplomatic ship and came ashore in northern Kyushu, bringing with him many Buddhist texts as well as various graphic works and ritual implements.

Kukai and Saicho

Kukai remained in Kyushu for over two-and-a-half years after his arrival. His circumstances over this period are not clear. His long stay was in contrast to Saicho, the other prominent Buddhist leader of the day (who the founder of the Tendai school of Japanese Buddhism). Saicho had returned to the capital soon after landing in Japan and had quickly received imperial sanction to ordain two annual quotas of priests.

An association between Saicho and Kukai, developed soon after Kukai arrived in the capital in 809. At the time, Saicho was forty-two, and Kukai was thirty-five. The first communication that can be verified as being sent by Kukai to Saicho is brimming with self-confidence:

You [Saicho] and I and [Shuen of] Murou-ji should meet in one place, to deliberate upon the most important cause for which the Buddha appeared in the world, together raising the banners of the dharma and repaying the Buddha's benevolent provision.

[The calligraphy of the letter is considered a masterpiece.]

Despite the initial friendship between Saicho and Kukai, they eventually parted ways. The personalities of these two shaped the development of the Tendai and Shingon

schools and stamped a deep individualism on the Buddhism of their era.

Kukai did not exhibit Saicho's belligerence towards the earlier schools of Buddhism that had been introduced into Japan. The tolerance inherent in Shingon prevented the earlier schools from coming into direct conflict with it. Almost without these schools realising it they became absorbed within Shingon.

Mount Koya and To-ji

Kukai's brilliance soon brought him into contact with the court of emperor Saga. In the winter of 809 Kukai had already answered the emperor's request to write calligraphy on a pair of folding screens. Exchanges between the emperor and Kukai continued. The friendship between the two is apparent in emperor Saga's poem "Farewell to Kukai, Departing for the Mountains":

*Many years have passed
Since you chose the path of a priest.
Now come the clear words and the good tides
of autumn.
Pour no more the scented tea;
Evening is falling.
I bow before you, grieving at our parting,
Looking up at the clouds and haze.*

Kukai gained entry into court circles as the leading exponent of Chinese culture and won the emperor's patronage. In the summer of 816 Kukai asked the emperor to grant "a flat area deep in the mountains" on Mount Koya, where he could build a centre for Shingon training. This was granted; as was Toji temple, situated at the entrance to Kyoto. With the establishment of Mount Koya and the grant of Toji temple the foundations were laid for the organization of the Shingon school.

Next to Toji an educational school was established by Kukai. It offered education for poor people in a range of subjects, including Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist studies.

In the summer of 823, Saga abdicated in favour of Emperor Junna. During the reign of this emperor Kukai's glory reached its peak.

Later Years and Entry into Samadhi

In 830 he completed a ten volume work on the classification of the teachings: *the Ten Stages of the Development of Mind*. [This was written in response to an order by Emperor Junna that all the schools of Buddhism in Japan had to describe the essentials of their teachings.] In this work Kukai formulated a hierarchy of

spiritual teachings and practices which included Confucianism and Taoism as lower stages on the path, and placed the Mahavairocana Sutra (an early tantric text) at the pinnacle.

Kukai died on Mount Koya in 835, and was buried there. There is a folk belief that he is not dead but deep meditation, and will one day rise again. The title “Kobo Daishi” (propagator of Dharma) was given posthumously to Kukai.