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‘‘FLOATING PHRASES AND FICTIVE UTTERANCES’’: THE RISE AND FALL OF SYMBOLS

They say that poetry at its height
extols the All which escapes us,
and they deny that the tortoise
is more rapid than lightning.
You alone knew that movement
is not different from stasis
that emptiness is fullness and clarity
the most diffused of clouds.

—Eugenio Montale, *Xenia*¹

THE INTERPRETATION OF SAIGYŌ’S DREAM

SOME OF THE world’s poetry and prose seems to have such directness and simplicity that, even when translated from one language to another or from one epoch to another, it seems clear and compelling. It has what we sometimes call an obvious universality. Other fine examples of literature, however, lie hidden in the opaque recesses of a particular culture or era in history and need a good deal more than mere translation to be understood in later time and in another place.

Much of the literature of medieval Japan is, for us in the modern West, decidedly of this second type. It does not charm us with the terse but clear action of a haiku, a comparatively late development in Japanese literature. Nor does it engage us as does a novel by Yukio Mishima with its neatly structured plot line and its twentieth-century interest in explorations of the psyche. Instead it hides away from us. It has literary modes, techniques, and values quite different from those of our own time. But perhaps even more important, it originated in a culture that had intellectual assumptions at variance not only with those of the modern West but also somewhat at variance with those of modern Japan.

Such poetry and prose might sometimes be so dense and full of cultural presuppositions that we are tempted to turn it aside, or dismiss it as unimportant and unworthy of our time. To do so, however, would be to overlook that it is often the past's most recondite and forbidding texts which enable us to reconstruct and understand the particular shape and scope of an era. Moreover, it is often from such texts that we can expand our perception of the literary experience and the history of human thought. The following poem with prose introduction by Saigyō, a Buddhist monk of twelfth-century Japan, is an apt illustration:

At the time that the priest Jakunen invited others to contribute to a hundred-poem collection, I declined to take part. But then on the road where I was making a pilgrimage to Kumano, I had a dream. In it appeared Tankai, the administrator of Kumano, and [the poet] Shunzei. Tankai said to Shunzei: "Although all things in this world undergo change, the Way of Poetry extends unaltered even to the last age." I opened my eyes and understood. Then I quickly wrote a verse and sent it off to Jakunen. This is what I composed there in the heart of the mountains:

sue no yo no
kono nasake nomi
kawarazu to
mishi yume nakuba
yoso ni kakamashi

'Even in an age
gone bad the lyric's Way
stays straight'—
Not seeing this in a dream,
I'd have been deaf to truth.²

Although it has not gained much attention even in Japan in recent centuries, this is a fascinating poem in many ways. The autobiographical element is fairly clear. Saigyō tells us that an invitation to contribute a poem to another monk's poetry collection arrived at what seemed to be an inconvenient time, namely, as he was about to begin a pilgrimage to an important Shinto shrine. Therefore, he at first declined. Along the way, however, he had a dream in which there occurred a conversation between Tankai, the head of the shrine to which he was going, and Fujiwara Shunzei (1114–1204), the doyen of poets in that era. The former told the latter that the practice of poetry was an abiding human disci-

pline, and this resolved Saigyō’s dilemma. The experience became the material for the poem he wrote and sent off to the collection.

But this is scarcely all that is needed for us to understand the poem today. At least, it neglects to point out ways the situation and the poem it brought into being were deeply implicated in the world view and characteristic problems of medieval Japan. That is, the cognitive dimension of this poem cannot be overlooked, since the mind of the poet who composed it was shaped by the questions and answers—primarily Buddhist questions and answers—of his epoch. In order to illustrate this, three elements can be singled out.

First, it is important to realize that people in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of Japan’s history were deeply absorbed in a debate as to whether the entire world had just entered a necessarily evil era called *mappō*, the final epoch of the current Buddhist cycle. Many of those who embraced this idea had calculated that as of the year 1052 (or approximately 130 years before this poem was written) there had commenced a lengthy period during which the correct understanding and practice of Buddhism had been virtually nonexistent.³ In Saigyō’s own day there was enough change and chaos in society to give what looked like empirical support to those who fixed on this idea.

Although this was a question of paramount importance for the era, there was anything but unanimity about it. Some took the calculations to be correct and the current laxity of monastic discipline as proof that the theory was true. Others, especially the Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253), argued against the *mappō* theory; they held that the possibility of understanding and practicing Buddhism was as good as it had ever been and that theories such as that of *mappō* were merely mental contrivances by which shallow understanding and loose practice were rationalized.⁴ One scholar, the Tendai abbot and important poet Jien (1155–1225), was able to use the notion of *mappō* very creatively in his great work of historiography, the *Gukan-shō*.⁵

Saigyō was a man of his era in that he too was vexed by these questions. To him, a monk, they were not esoteric or arcane but had immediate implications. These implications had to do with the nature, possibility, and value of his austerities as a monk. In the following poem, for example, he seems quite clearly to be referring with disapproval to adherents of the *mappō* idea. (“Vulture Peak” refers to the place in India where the *Lotus Sutra* was said to have first been promulgated.)

On that chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* called “Duration of the Life of the Tathagata”:

Washi-no-yama
tsuki o irinu to

Those who view the moon
over Vulture Peak as one

miru hito wa
kuraki ni mayou
kokoro nari keru

now sunk below
the horizon . . . are men whose minds
confused, hold the real darkness.⁶

In the poem quoted earlier, however, Saigyō seems to give the mappō concept at least the benefit of the doubt. He claims to have finally understood through his dream that the way of poetry remains as strong and vital as it has always been; this is so even in an era some call the final era ("sue no yo")—by which they mean that it is an evil epoch because there has begun a serious deterioration of mankind's knowledge of the truth of Buddhism. To see poems such as these two in the context of discussions going on in that era, and as reflecting Saigyō's own struggle over such questions, is to identify an important node where the world of poetry and the world of medieval Japanese intellectual life intersect.

The second thing that locates Saigyō's dream poem in a medieval Japanese context—and so hides it behind a veil for us—is Saigyō's assumption that conversations that take place in dreams cannot be dismissed but have some very special significance and message that must be accepted by the dreamer. It is one of the hallmarks of this era that *muchū mondō*, "conversations taking place in dreams," are highly valued and are considered so directly relevant to the problems faced by the dreamer that they require no act of interpretation. They are not cryptic messages that need to be decoded by someone with expertise in such things but direct exchanges between dead persons and living ones. The conversation in Saigyō's dream was between Tankai, an old friend of Saigyō's who had died about six years earlier, and the poet and critic Fujiwara Shunzei, who was still living.

Although the origins of this belief may lie in the most archaic levels of Japanese society and in religious practices that antedate the introduction of Buddhism, it would be wrong to view the attitude to dream conversations as merely a naïve and primitive folk-belief that survived, although very oddly, in the practice of Buddhists such as Saigyō and his contemporaries. On the contrary, this belief fit rather nicely into some fairly sophisticated philosophical discussions carried on by Buddhist thinkers throughout most of Asia at this time.⁷ For, in the opinion of large numbers of Buddhists, man's capacity for dreaming posed serious questions about the nature of reality—questions that were more philosophical than psychological. Dreams raised questions about the stability and reliability of what we ordinarily regard as the "reality" of the world we experience when awake.

Perhaps it would be most accurate to say that the Buddhists of this period were interested in flattening or relativizing our habitual and easy distinction between what we identify as the *reality* of the world we experience when awake

and the *illusion* of all the events that take place in our dreams. As Buddhists, their claim and conviction was that the difference between ordinary waking consciousness and ordinary dream consciousness pales to insignificance when both of these are set in contrast to something else, namely, the consciousness of the mind that has achieved enlightenment. In other words, the Buddhists made it their business to point out that it is not a matter of a black-or-white difference between waking consciousness and dream consciousness but rather of both of them being *on a continuum* of consciousnesses. To them our ordinary juxtaposition of only two types of consciousness divided sharply into the categories of reality and dream was inadequate, itself an illusion.

This was a philosophical move that had a direct effect on the status of both waking and dreaming consciousness. Especially in the traditional considerations of the Hossō school, one of the continental schools of Buddhist philosophy, which established itself during the Nara period of Japanese history (710–784) and set the problematic for subsequent centuries, the phenomenon of dreams was a subject of close scrutiny. The reality status of ordinary waking consciousness was radically lowered by placing it on a continuum with dreaming consciousness. This was emphasized through language describing the fact that, contrary to our hopes and projections, all the phenomena and relationships we experience in our daily lives are bound to disappear with time. Nothing is permanent; all things succumb willy-nilly to the law of impermanence (*mujō*)—often almost as quickly as the things we see at night in our dreams.

Any acquaintance with the prose and poetry of the Heian period reveals that it is replete with references to all things of this world as in reality as “fleeting as a dream.” The literature of the period abounds with such statements, so much so that they sometimes seem almost hackneyed and mechanical. But what we usually tend to overlook is that this was the extension deep into belles lettres of serious philosophical discussions going on concurrently within the confines of Buddhist monasteries, and quite probably also in the salons of the educated courtiers. The repeated statements about impermanence must be viewed against the background of the era’s discussions about the nature of reality, the propensity of the human mind to delude itself, and the variety of complex relationships that can exist between the world and the mind. The rich literature of the Heian period—that of both men and women, clergy and laity—abundantly shows that people carried their fascination with these questions concerning reality, illusion, and knowledge into the concretely imagined poetry and prose they were composing.

The corollary of the Buddhist philosophical preoccupation with dreams was equally interesting and important. People in medieval Japan assumed that, if it were demonstrated that things experienced in waking consciousness were little

different from those experienced in dreams, it must also be true that things experienced in dreams are at least as real as those encountered in waking consciousness. Saigyō reflects lyrically on this in the following poem:

utsutsu o mo	Since the "real world" seems
utsutsu to sara ni	to be less than really real,
oboeneba	why need I suppose
yume o mo yume to	the world of dreams is nothing
nanika omowan	other than a world of dreams? ⁸

Saigyō seems to be saying that the hard edge of distinction that we raise between the world of perceived phenomena ("utsusu") and that of dreams ("yume") can be honed down and, as a consequence, dreams can be seen to have more of "reality" in them than was expected.

For the Buddhists, this seemed especially true of certain dreams, dreams that appear to press in on the dreamer with even more reality and more significance than things experienced in ordinary diurnal consciousness. Such a dream even lay at the beginning of Buddhism—at least according to legend. As retold in Japanese literature in the opening episode of the *Konjaku-monogatari* of the early twelfth century, Śākyamuni Buddha's birth in India many centuries earlier had taken place because he, while still a bodhisattva or Buddha-to-be in the Tusita heaven, had decided to be born on earth and then deliberately entered the womb of Queen Māyā. The rather fabulous account in the Japanese retelling of this foundation tale continues:

As the Queen lay sleeping in the night, she dreamed that the Bodhisattva descended from the skies riding upon a white elephant with six tusks, and that he entered her body through her right side. Her body was transparent, and he was visible through it, like an object inside a beryl jar. The Queen awoke with a start. She went to the King and told him her dream. "I too," said the King, "have had such a dream."⁹

They then sought an interpreter who explained to them that this was a wondrous sign that indicated the child in the Queen's womb would become a Buddha.

Thus, even in the continental tradition of Buddhism, there was a good precedent for the seriousness with which dreams were taken in medieval Japan. Especially significant to the Japanese, however, was the kind of dream incident that seems to indicate to the dreamer that a problem in his life could be readily solved or that he must take some definite action. For example, the author of the *Nihon ryōi-ki*, who wrote at the end of the eighth century, tells us that his purpose for becoming a Buddhist monk was made clear to him through a concatenation of strange events and a preternatural dream.¹⁰

Saigyō, then, in stating that the solution to his dilemma came through a dream in which two important figures had a conversation about that very problem, was being neither pretentious nor simpleminded. He was merely participating in the mental structure of his era, in what everyone at the time would have regarded as common sense, the expectations about the world that are implicitly held as true by the vast majority of people in a society. Saigyō's trusting the contents of his dream as genuine reality was a way of drawing practical benefit from a long tradition in Asian Buddhism and from fairly sophisticated discussions in contemporary Buddhist circles concerning the relationship of illusion to reality.

The third and perhaps most important element lying in the intellectual background of Saigyō's dream poem is one that engaged many of the best minds of that era. It has to do with attempts to comprehend the exact nature of the relationship between Buddhism and the composition of poetry. It is obviously the basic problem of this episode, and it was a problem Saigyō struggled with during most of his life.¹¹ But he was not alone. Throughout this period many of the practicing poets were Buddhist monks and nuns, and so it became for them a matter of considerable importance to define the relationship between the writing of poetry and their religious vocations.

Part of the problem arose because a good poet or poetess was expected to be capable of writing poems on a whole range of topics. This included poems on love between the sexes, which Buddhist monks and nuns were supposed, at least, to be beginning to transcend. Ever since the publication of the *Man'yō-shū* in the middle of the eighth century, the Japanese world of poetry had included a tradition of poems of passion and of gently handled eroticism. For Buddhist clerics who wished to be both traditional and spiritually serious, this obviously created a dilemma.

This was only part of an even larger problem, however, a problem that arose because the writing of poetry and involvement in the world of lyrical exchange and competition constantly threatened to deflect the energies of those who had chosen a religious vocation. The conflict of interests was potentially very serious. Once having left life as a householder (*shukke*) and taken the tonsure, monks and nuns in medieval Japan often feared that the whole purpose of that decision would be compromised—perhaps even totally lost—if they were to become deeply involved in writing lyrics and start hankering after the praise, prizes, and prestige lavished on good poets in this era. Yoshishige Yasutane (?–1002), who had once been a famous court poet, took the name of Jakushin when he became a monk and eventually gave up writing poetry completely.¹² Especially during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, there came into

Japanese Buddhism a strong emphasis on single-mindedness and concentration on one and only one kind of religious practice. Different schools placed the emphasis on different kinds of practice and different foci of concentration, but almost all alike stressed the importance of focused rather than diffused and scattered energies. Even the great Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253) is quoted as having said that the writing of poetry was a dangerous diversion for those who really ought to be single-mindedly sitting in meditation. In such a climate the monk or nun who went on writing verse had reason to be anxious about his or her attainment of Buddhahood. Saigyō seems to have experienced a special agony in his attempts to resolve this problem.

This is not to say that the clergy stopped writing poetry, however. It is merely to note that for those who went on writing while in clerical robes there was a serious intellectual and religious problem. The result was a discussion that went on for centuries. It was one of the most interesting sources of disagreement and debate in medieval Japan, as this was a period when both poetry and Buddhism were taken with great seriousness and were important in the lives of all literate Japanese.

The presupposition of many in this period was that at bottom the practice of poetry and the practice of Buddhism were fully compatible; but this had to be proved and demonstrated, not merely asserted. Those who shared the problem shared also the task of locating good precedents in the past and constructing new arguments in the present. For precedents none served better than Po Chū-i (772–846), the Chinese poet who was known affectionately to the Japanese as Hakurakuten and whose poetry and personality were much revered throughout this period. Part of the reason for Po's popularity lay in the comparative simplicity and directness of his verse. However he was also seen as something of a paragon for having worked out a rapprochement between that part of him which was a Buddhist and that part which was a poet.¹³ Late in his life, during the year 839, Po Chū-i gave a copy of his poetry to a Buddhist library. His written explanation referred to his poems as nothing more than "floating phrases and fictive utterances" ('k'uang-yen i-yu') but expressed the hope that even as such they might in the future somehow bring honor to the Buddhist dharma. For many Japanese this phrase, which they rendered as "kyōgen kigo" or "kyōgen kigyō," and the hope that even such ephemeral utterances might serve the Buddhist dharma, were important, and the phrase became much celebrated.¹⁴ Since Po had found a way to reconcile the writing of verse with the practice of Buddhist disciplines, the Japanese poets of the medieval period were much encouraged. The phrase and its implicit suggestion that the problem had been or could be resolved reverberated down the centuries for those

Japanese who wished to retain the best of both poetry and Buddhism.¹⁵ It was their way of reconciling the “Way of poetry” (*kadō*) with the “Way of Buddhism” (*butsudō*).

This problem will be examined in greater detail in the chapters that follow. Here my purpose has been simply to throw some light on the context of an otherwise puzzling selection from Saigyō in order to suggest the dynamics of the many-faceted relationship between Buddhism and the literary arts in medieval Japan.

THE ARC OF JAPAN’S MEDIEVAL EXPERIENCE

To continue on in this same fashion, however, would be to cast this entire study in the format of lengthy footnotes appended to dense texts. These might illuminate aspects of those texts to some degree, but the study as a whole would fail to provide what is most needed in our knowledge of medieval Japan—namely, a reconstruction of the basic intellectual and religious *shape* of that epoch. This is to say that all the bits of seemingly esoteric information and the lines of seemingly arcane discussions were not esoteric or arcane to the medieval Japanese, and we will really understand that era and its texts only if we see these disparate things as parts of a framework. This framework was one of interrelated problems and concepts shared jointly by all literate Japanese and possibly a portion of the illiterate population as well.

In other words, when medieval Japan is described in terms of its intellectual shape and suppositions, it can be seen to form what today is often called an *episteme*. It was a period during which there was a general consensus concerning what kinds of problems needed discussion, what kinds of texts and traditional practices constituted authority worthy of citation and appeal, and what kinds of things constituted the symbols central to the culture and to the transmission of information within it. This means that we are able to come to an approximate definition of medieval Japan in intellectual terms.¹⁶ I would suggest that we can best account for the vast array of materials in this period by defining *medieval* Japan as that epoch during which the basic intellectual problems, the most authoritative texts and resources, and the central symbols were all Buddhist. This is not to say that Buddhist problems, texts, and symbols were the sole ones of the era; it is merely to claim that they held intellectual hegemony during that period of time. I would further suggest that through a careful analysis of materials at our disposal we can not only observe and describe the inception of this epoch but can also see that, at a point in time many centuries later, Buddhist problems, texts, and symbols ceased to hold the

central place they once occupied. Although they continue to exist and even have a certain vitality in the twentieth century, they now live alongside serious competitors in the intellectual and cultural arena.

A serious concern to depict the intellectual and religious history of Japan forces us to redefine the edges of the medieval experience of the Japanese in such a way that it does not remain entrapped in the rubrics found useful by institutional historians. During at least the past decade, a number of Japanese scholars have demonstrated the need to take a new look at the problem of periodizing Japanese history.¹⁷ When it comes to describing what makes medieval Japan really medieval in intellectual terms, we need to see that events such as the growth of feudalism or boundary marks such as "the end of Nara" or the "beginning of Kamakura" can blind us through their very familiarity and handiness. There is no reason to assume simply that a sudden radical change in the political order had an immediate and pervasive effect on all the literary and intellectual endeavors of the time.

The so-called idealist alternative may be just as problematic, however. There is no reason to assume that ideas float freely through history, completely impervious to the changes in society, the pull of power politics, and the intellectual's lurking need in every era to demonstrate to himself and others that ideas in general, and his own ideas especially, have real relevance. The influence of contemporaneous events on a writer's program of writing is fairly obvious, for example, in the case of the priest Jien and his writing of the *Gukan-shō*. It often seems much less important when it is a piece of poetry or a random essay that is being considered, but even then we should never assume that literary and intellectual life exist in a world apart. With only a few exceptions, the poets of the Heian period wrote as if power politics and social struggle did not exist; but this was a very conscious ignoring of part of their world and constituted a constriction of the perceptual field that was almost a litany inviting anything outside that field—social and political change especially—to leave the world of their experience.¹⁸ Through their very genteel tastes and constricted vision they asserted what they took to be their right to social preeminence.

The view that a literary world is a world unto itself unaffected by other things makes it possible to do literary history in a tidy, hermetic environment; but it belies the fact that writers are also people with concerns other than writing and that those concerns will inevitably find a place in what they write. Yet to attempt to view literary or intellectual history as something that merely takes its shape in the powerful wake of politics and social change is to forget that writers are also readers. As literati they are influenced not only by contemporaneous

events but also by the books they read and the past, which through that reading is made contemporaneous. Literati are, by definition, men and women who are bound to be influenced to an unusual degree by the past—that is, by the manuscripts with which they are in almost daily interaction. These books are not only a source but also a standard; they comprise a canon that cannot be lightly dismissed. It might be best, then, to take the complex view: a literatus is neither the pawn of social pressures nor the purveyor of pure ideas. His role might be best described as that of a mediator between books from the past regarded as classics and the particular problems and opportunities of his own time.

Recognition of the essential engagement on the part of a literatus with a collection of books widely regarded as canonical provides a useful tool for defining the arc of the medieval experience in Japan. It gives none of the usual comfort and convenience of a date fixed on a time line—as when a seat of power changes location or a great ruler dies; but it does provide greater specificity to the attempt to define medieval Japan as an epoch dominated by the problems, texts, and symbols of Buddhism. By thinking of this epoch in terms of its canon, we can describe Japan's medieval period as that span of time during which the literate people of the country held the classics of Buddhism to be the ultimate norm—that is, the canon for integrating, interpreting, and judging a much wider range of books and experiences they also accepted as valuable and, to a lesser degree, authoritative.

The Japanese inherited from the continent not only the sutras of Buddhism, in a flow that lasted for centuries, but also, and at the same time, the non-Buddhist classics of China. They also came to possess in written form a record of indigenous experiences, narratives, and mythologies all of which were authoritative in some sense even though they were not overtly Buddhist. Still, in what is here defined as the medieval epoch, scholarship and learning were largely carried on in Buddhist monasteries. It was, then, an era in which the Buddhist works had an edge in importance. They were usually referred to as *naikyō*, "inner scriptures," and distinguished from *gesho*, "outer books," the non-Buddhist works that, while great and valuable, were given a position subordinate to the sutras of Buddhism.

The temper of the times was to be as synthetic and syncretic as possible. Great effort was expended in harmonizing Shinto, Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist perspectives. The ancient practices of indigenous Shinto and the imported doctrines of Buddhism especially were seen as fully compatible within the scheme of *honji-suijaku*, according to which the various deities of ancient Japan were understood to have been local manifestations of an under-

lying Buddhist reality. The assumption was that no conflict between the two need arise since each was an expression of the other.¹⁹

A synthesis is an accomplishment, however, not a given. And it is, moreover, an accomplishment attained through the assertion of priorities. Even within the most tolerant of intellectual and religious frameworks, there is often the assumption that one form, maybe because it is seen as the basis for the others, has a higher place as an articulation of truth. Such was the case in medieval Japan, where the Buddhists held sway over the era because they were in a position to define the issues and the answers to those issues. We can detect evidence of opposition to this, and we can see how the Buddhists fashioned the intellectual tools that would guarantee their hegemony. Both the possibility of conflict and the formula for harmony are present in the opening sentences of the *Nihon ryōi-ki*, an early Heian work:

The Inner [Buddhist] scriptures and the outer [non-Buddhist] classics originally came to Japan through the [Korean kingdom of] Paekche in two waves. The latter came during the reign of emperor Ōjin who lived at the palace of Toyoakira in Kurushima, whereas the former arrived during the reign of emperor Kinmei who lived at the palace of Kanazashi in Shikishima. It seems fashionable these days for those scholars who study the outer classics to slander the teachings of Buddhism, and for those who read the inner scriptures to neglect the outer classics. They are all foolish and delude themselves. The wise, however, are well-versed in both the inner and outer traditions; they have a sense of awe and believe in the law of karmic causation.²⁰

Although this is a call for social and intellectual harmonization, it is offered with Buddhist terms and concepts as the guidelines. The very use of the inner/outer distinction implies the priority in importance of the former; it is understood to be the more profound and penetrating of the two types of books. In addition, the implication is that the Buddhists are less culpable than their opponents; theirs is merely the fault of neglect, whereas the non-Buddhists are actively slandering Buddhist teachings. Finally and most tellingly, the consequences of failing to achieve harmony are depicted in classically Buddhist terms; those who upset the needed harmony deceive themselves and will suffer the consequences of bad karma. The price to be paid by those who refuse to synthesize Buddhism and other teachings is to be paid in distinctively Buddhist currency.

A roughly contemporaneous work, the *Sangō shiiki* by the Shingon master Kūkai (774–835), is more polished and literate than the *Nihon ryōi-ki*, but it too articulates the need for synthesis within a framework in which Buddhism clearly has preeminence. It is cast in the form of a conversation in which

representatives of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism debate one another and enter a competition to win the adherence of a young profligate. In the end, all the participants, even the Confucianist and Taoist, are convinced by the arguments of the Buddhist mendicant and recognize the comprehensive superiority of the teaching he espouses. They tell him:

How superficial the teachings of Confucius and Lao Tzu are: From now on we will observe faithfully your teaching with our whole beings—by writing it on the paper of our skins, with pens of bone, ink of blood, and the inkstone of the skull. Thus your teaching will be the boat and wagon by which we may cross over the ocean of transmigration.²¹

It is a plea for harmony but also for the hegemony of Buddhism within that harmony.

Works such as the *Nihon ryōi-ki* and the *Sangō shiiki* appear at the beginning of the epoch here called medieval; they are argumentative and insistent because they came into being at a time when it was still less than obvious that Buddhism would be the dominant intellectual and religious framework of Japan. This situation had changed greatly by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when there were arguments within the Buddhist establishment as to which school was preferable but there was no longer any need to defend Buddhism as a whole against serious alternatives. According to the perspective offered in this book, in the late Heian to the Muromachi periods the arc of Japan's medieval experience reached its apogee: although there were often fierce debates within the camp of Buddhism, there was no question that Buddhism in one form or another was the final authority in all matters of the mind and social behavior.

In the Tokugawa period things changed rapidly. As Tetsuo Najita notes, “Whereas the governing intellectual force during the past 1,000 years may be characterized as being primarily Buddhist, Japan during the Tokugawa era concentrated with sudden and conspicuous intensity on Confucian studies.”²² Adherents of Neo-Confucianism and National Learning began to feel restive with the old synthesis; they began to assert that something other than Buddhism deserved to be aired and possibly recognized as more valuable than what had for centuries held intellectual hegemony. Certainly, Buddhism did not seem to offer what many now were searching for, namely, what Najita calls the “intellectual foundations of modern Japanese politics.” But this is not to say that the Buddhist hegemony disappeared overnight. To see this period as one in which the taken-for-granted truth of the Buddhist episteme began to collapse is only to note that Buddhists were forced once again to recognize competitors and to defend themselves where possible. It was a time during which alternative models and modes of understanding were presented to the Japanese, and

Buddhism was no longer the sole canon for thought and experience. In addition to Neo-Confucianism and the Neo-Shinto texts of the Tokugawa period, there was also the science of so-called Dutch Learning and an ever-growing acquaintance with the classics, methods, and criteria derived from Western sources. In this expanding intellectual bazaar Buddhists discovered that their ancient framework, problems, and symbols were only some among many. When Buddhism's implicit hegemony could no longer be taken for granted, Japan had come to the end of its medieval experience.

The focus of this book will be on the beginning rather than the end of the medieval epoch. There is an important sense in which Buddhism even today remains as a source, power, and influence in Japanese intellectual and social life. After passing through paroxysms of opposition during the *haibutsu-kishaku* movement of the 1860s, Japanese Buddhism has experienced something of a renaissance in the twentieth century among intellectuals interested in the continuation of the past into the present. Though Buddhist problems, texts, and symbols no longer dominate the intellectual life of Japan, they retain a very important presence. And, because ritual is often the most resilient aspect of culture, the perpetuation of the medieval into the modern is still very much a part of the ceremonial and ritual experience of today's Japanese.

THE BUDDHIST SYSTEM OF SYMBOLS

The medieval Japanese were like one of the various peoples of medieval Europe in having a distinct language and identity, while also being part of something larger. That is, they were part of the intellectual life of continental Asia and were involved in a lively exchange of ideas brokered primarily through the great Buddhist monasteries and temples of China. In the early portion of the Japanese medieval period, Buddhism was at the height of its influence in China. Many of the literati of T'ang China were still seriously involved with forms of Buddhist thought and practice that continued to arrive there from India. In terms of the exchange of both material and intellectual culture, it was an open and creative period; Japan lay at the far eastern end of an ecumene that stretched through Korea and China and along the Silk Road to India and Afghanistan. The treasures that were housed in Nara's Shōsō-in during the eighth century are an unmistakable, concrete index to the period's ready and wide exchange of goods and ideas.

It was under the aegis of Buddhism that most of this exchange was carried on. This was the first, and perhaps also the last, time in Asia's history that virtually all literate people from Afghanistan to Japan shared a basic set of books they regarded as the ultimate authority and fund of knowledge. They had

these books in different renditions and languages and certainly would not have agreed as to which was the preeminent text, or, the canon of the canon; but they would not have disputed the supreme value of the library that housed the words attributed to Śakyamuni Buddha. The institutional organization of Buddhism was never as sophisticated or as centralized as that of the Roman church in medieval Europe; nor was its concern for doctrinal orthodoxy quite as exacting. Nevertheless, the books, rites, and meditational practices of Buddhism gave to much of Asia during these centuries a single, common “universe of discourse.”

The literate part of the Japanese population participated fully in this common episteme. Some did so as monks by traveling to China or by studying in Japan with an immigrant master such as Chien-chen (686?–763), known in Japan as Ganjin and by the posthumous title the Great Master Who Crossed the Sea. Others, both clergy and the wider community of lay practitioners, participated in this same intellectual milieu by reading and copying the multitude of Buddhist texts in Chinese and by attendance at rituals and debates held in the great temples constructed during that era.

Not only the clergy but also the literate laity were involved in the digestion and dissemination of Buddhist learning. The proliferation of manuscripts was possible because of the extensive copying carried on as an exercise in piety for anyone who could read and write.²³ Whether the practice of copying manuscripts indicates that Buddhism was deeply internalized is a question that has vexed scholars of this period of Japanese history. Many have pointed out that the copying of the Chinese characters of a text may have been a rote, mechanical exercise and that it in no way proves the text was understood or that there was any serious engagement with the content of the manuscript. The suspicion that the Buddhism of the courtiers may have been quite superficial is reinforced, for instance, by Sei Shōnagon’s suggestion in her *Makura no sōshi* (*Pillow Book*) that it is really the prettiness of priests that she most likes in Buddhism.²⁴ We have no way of knowing how typical her tenth-century statement was; nor do we have any means of access to the minds of people copying texts in a long-ago age. We are probably correct in assuming that it was sometimes a mechanical exercise and sometimes one in which the copier internalized what he or she wrote down.

Perhaps the entire question is wrongly put; the real engagement with Buddhism on the part of the literate laity was through sustained exposure to the various symbols with which the texts and rituals of the period were replete. Even if the laity did not participate in the dialectic and debate carried on in the monasteries, they were very much involved in the pursuit of poetry, and the sutras of Buddhism were a natural, available, and rich repository of concrete

symbols and subtle metaphors. A scripture such as the *Hokke-kyō* (*Lotus Sutra*) was for these courtly writers a treasury that seemed to overflow with an abundance of images;²⁵ for most of the medieval epoch it was important not only for its teaching but also for its vivid manner of presentation. Likewise, the *Yuima-kitsu-gyō* was important to these Buddhist laymen because its main figure, the Indian Vimalakīrti, was an urbane and witty layman whose profound understanding of Buddhism was praised by Śākyamuni himself.²⁶ The poetry and prose written by the laity adopted, used, and reinforced Buddhist symbols and tropes received in the scriptures from the continent. For that reason, much of the literature of this period in Japan forms a part of one continuous and ever-evolving tradition.

Recognizing this partially resolves the long disputed question whether the Buddhism of the courtiers was or was not superficial. Although, from our distance, we cannot read "hearts" to judge the degree of understanding, we can read texts, the texts the courtiers themselves have left us. And from these texts—poems, random essays, tales, drama scenarios, and treatises—we can see that the symbol-system of classical Buddhism was imbibed deeply by the medieval Japanese.²⁷ Since the adoption and reiteration of the symbols pertaining to a religion or philosophy are tantamount to participation in its most fundamental aspects, we have every reason to conclude that Buddhism was part and parcel of Japanese intellectual and literary life at a fairly early point. It therefore seems a mistake to assume that it was for many centuries a veneer and only really came to be understood by the Japanese in the thirteenth century and the Kamakura era.²⁸ Although the impressive thinkers and charismatic leaders of that time brought Japanese Buddhism to a new stage of development, communicated Buddhism to the masses, and wrote important treatises still read today, we cannot (without ourselves becoming parties to their debates) judge the Buddhism of the earlier Asuka, Nara, and Heian periods to have been superficial or less than "real" Buddhism.

In connection with this it is also important to note that the extensive rituals of Tendai and Shingon Buddhism in the Heian period were actually modes through which the people of that time participated fully in the received Buddhist tradition and its teachings. These rituals should not be dismissed as some kind of excrescence or superfluity, not properly part of what we imagine the true intellectual or spiritual form of Buddhism ought to have been. They should not be seen by us as merely bodily, rote, or superficial—thereby implying that the Japanese had to wait many more centuries to gain a real understanding of Buddhism. As many modern anthropologists have shown, ritual is a mode of cognition.²⁹ It is a way of learning, reiterating, and retaining something new and important. That ritual is done with the body rather than with the mind alone