—33—

The Founding of Mount Kōya and Kūkai's Eternal Meditation

George J. Tanabe, Jr.

Mount Kōya, the headquarters of the Shingon sect, is one of the most beautiful of the monastic complexes in Japan. Situated high in the mountains of Wakayama Prefecture south of Nara, Mount Kōya can be reached by train and cable car or by a long, winding road through exceptionally verdant mountains. The monastery consists of dozens of temples scattered in a heavily forested, flat-bottomed bowl several miles across. Ancient cryptomeria trees as straight and majestic as redwoods surround the ornate temples and give to the artifice of sacred architecture the natural sanctity of the mountain. Splendid in isolation from the distant valleys of farms and factories, Mount Kōya is nevertheless crawling with people.

The visitors, mostly pilgrims, come from all over Japan. In this time of modern "tourist Buddhism," most of the temples, in fact, function as inns providing food and lodging for the faithful. They come to sightsee, but they do so as people of faith, filled with unquestioning belief in the sacred virtues of the mountain and its monasteries. Specifically, they believe in the holiness and power of Kūkai (774–835), the founder of the Shingon sect, who is more popularly known as Daishi-sama, a contraction of his posthumous title Kōbō Daishi, the Great Master and Propagator of the Teaching. Whereas believers of other sects chant praises to certain buddhas or scriptures, the Shingon faithful chant the name of their savior, Kōbō Daishi. He is their god.

The apotheosis of Kūkai began shortly after his death when admiring disciples expressed their adoration by writing legends of the virtues and miraculous feats of their master. Unlike fairy tales, which are totally fictional about make-believe people and places, legends center around real personalities and locations. There is a certain veracity to legends, at least to the degree to which they deal with real facts. These facts, of course, are then surrounded with a great deal of fabrication. The stories, however, do more than merely entertain by exaggeration; they make serious arguments as well.

It is these legends that define a good part of what people understand to be the content of their religion. The sublime doctrines studied by scholars and monks seldom reach the popular understanding, and the ordinary believers, if asked about the teachings of their sect, will often reply with reference to legends rather than philosophies. The stream of the philosophical teachings does not always converge with the rivers of popular belief, but it would be a mistake to think that their divergence is due to their having different sources. It is not the case that the popular legends, so filled with miracle and magic, originate from the unsophisticated minds of peasants and farmers and then are only tolerated by educated scholar/priests who know better than to accept those amazing fictions as facts. The origins of the legends can be traced, and the trail leads back to the scholar/priests themselves. They concocted the legends and propagated them to the people, who were the recipients, not the originators. The propagation of these legends was immensely effective: the same stories are still being told and are still attracting the faithful in large numbers.

The temples and shops at Mount Kōya sell a huge number of comic books, banners, plaques, and other paraphernalia that depict three legends in particular. The first of these enduring stories speaks of how Kūkai was led to Mount Kōya by two dogs loaned to him by a hunter. The second legend tells of how Kūkai, led by the dogs, arrived at Mount Kōya only to find hanging from a pine tree (a scion of which still grows at the main compound) a three-pronged ritual implement he had thrown from China. The third is perhaps the most important and claims that Kūkai did not really die but is still alive in his mausoleum (Oku no In), sitting in eternal meditation. The stories of the dogs and the pine tree were first written by a scholar/monk in *A Record of the Practices and the Establishment of the Temple of the Diamond Peak* (*Kongōbuji konryū shugyō engi*, 968). This text, from which the following translation is made, tells of the founding of the Temple of the Diamond Peak, the main compound at Mount Kōya, and weaves all three legends along with a variety of other stories into a more or less coherent account.

The stories are entertaining, but all have serious points to make. While Kūkai was granted the land on Mount Kōya by an imperial decree, the exact boundaries were not fixed. By the eleventh century, when this text was written, the monastic complex had grown, and neighboring landlords complained of encroachments into their properties. The story of the hunter's dogs makes it clear that Kūkai did not wander into the place by accident, and, furthermore, the king of the mountain as well as the resident Shintō deities gave the property to Kūkai. The temple's claim to the lands it occupied was therefore legitimate, and even preordained, as the story of the ritual implement in the pine tree attempts to argue. The land, which only ostensibly belonged to a Shintō deity, was originally the "ancient place of an old buddha." In the hands of Buddhist monks, the land is now possessed by its rightful owners and is vitalized by the power and sanctity of Kūkai, who still reigns over Mount Kōya. The conclusion of the arguments is clear: Mount Kōya was chosen in a divinely special way to be Kūkai's monastery and continues to exude its power and virtue through the majesty of its trees, the loftiness of its

mountains, the sanctity of its temples, the purifying practices of its priests, and the living presence of its saint.

The stories are engaging, and their arguments are persuasive to scores of people who take them seriously and go to Kōyasan to worship and make offerings. Take away the philosophy and Mount Kōya will still thrive, but remove its legends and the monastery will lose its call to the people.

The text for this translation of *Kongōbuji konryū shugyō engi* is from Hase Hōshū, ed., *Kōbō Daishi den zenshū* 1 (Tokyo: Pitaka, 1977): 53–55. Authorship of the text is traditionally atributed to the scholar/monk Ninkai (951–1046), but since the work is clearly dated for the year 968, when Ninkai was only seventeen years old, scholars doubt the authenticity of this attribution. Kongōbuji is the name of the main temple that still serves as the headquarters of the Shingon sect at Mount Kōya.

Further Reading

Yoshito S. Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972); Edward Kamens, tr., *The Three Jewels: A Study and Translation of Minamoto Tamenori's* Sanbōe (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1988); Robert E. Morrell, tr., *Sand and Pebbles: The Tales of Mujū Ichien, a Voice for Pluralism in Kamakura Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985); Kyoko M. Nakamura, tr., *Miraculous Tales from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition:* The Nihon Ryōiki *of the Monk Kyōkai* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); Marian Ury, tr., *Tales of Times Now Past: Sixty-two Stories from a Medieval Japanese Collection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

A Record of the Practices and the Establishment of the Temple of the Diamond Peak

In midsummer of the year 816, Kūkai left the capital to travel beyond it. In Uchi County in the province of Yamato, he met a hunter, who was deep red in appearance and stood about eight feet in height. He wore a short-sleeved blue coat and had long bones and thick muscles. He carried a bow and arrows strapped to his body, and he was accompanied by dogs, one large and one small. He saw Kūkai pass by and asked some questions. Kūkai stopped and also inquired about certain details.

The hunter said, "I am a dog keeper from the southern mountains. I know of a mountain area of about ten thousand square measures, and in that area there is a marvelous flat plain. The place is full of mysterious signs. You should take up residence there; I will help you accomplish this. I will release my dogs and have them run ahead or you will get lost."

Kūkai thought silently about this and proceeded. They stopped for a rest when they came to a large river on the boundaries of Kii Province. Here they

met a man who lived in the mountains. Upon being told the details of the place, he said, "South of here there is a flat, swampy plain. The mountains range on three sides and the entry way from the southwest is open. Myriad rivers flow to the east and terminate by converging into one. During the day there are strange clouds, and at night there are always mysterious lights." Upon further investigation, it turned out to be directly south of Ito-no-kōri in Kii Province.

The next day, he followed this mountain man, and they arrived at the swampy plain a short distance away. As he examined the place, he thought that this certainly was the spot where he should build a monastery.

The mountain man secretly said to Kūkai, "I am the king of this mountain, and I donate the land under my control to you in order to increase my power and blessings. I am accustomed to mountains and rivers and remain distant from the activities of men. Fortunately I have met a saint, much to my merit."

The next day they went to Ito-no-kōri and Kūkai thought, "When the Sacred King Who Turns the Wheel of the Buddhist Teaching (*tenrinjōō*; *cakravartin*) ascends the throne, he takes a river willow and offers it to the holy men. If, however, they do not grant him a single iron needle or a single blade of grass, then he is in error."

Therefore, in the middle of the sixth month, Kūkai submitted his request to the emperor for a place for meditation. He built one or two thatched huts. He had myriad things to do and did not have much time, but he managed to go up once a year. On one side of the path in the mountains there was a swamp of about ten square measures. It was the shrine of the mountain king, the Great August Deity Niu. Today it is called the palace of Amano.

The first time Kūkai ascended the mountain, he spent a night in the area of the shrine. He received an oracle saying, "I have been a follower of the way of the Shintō deities, and I have hoped for power and blessings for a long time. Now you have come to this place, much to my great fortune. In the past when I was a human being, the deity Kekunisuera-no-mikoto gave me about ten thousand square measures of land for houses. The boundaries are south to Nankai, north to Yamato River, east to Yamato Province, and west to the valley of Mount Ōjin. I wish to donate this to you for all eternity as an expression of my belief."

In addition, Kūkai was granted an official decree.

While they were clearing the trees in order to build a monastery, they found the three-pronged ritual implement that he had thrown from China hanging majestically from a tree. Kūkai was filled with joy. Then he realized that this was a place suitable for the Esoteric teaching, just as the mountain king, the owner of the land, had said.

At the spot where they were digging in the ground, they uncovered a jewelled sword from beneath the earth. An imperial decree ordered that it be examined, but there was a curse. Diviners did a reading of the curse and found out that the sword should be put into a copper tube and returned to its place. The

interpretation of this was that the non-Buddhist protector, the Great August Deity, regretted its loss.

Kūkai said to all of his disciples, "I think I will be leaving this world sometime during the third month of next year. To the great worthy Shinnen (804–891), I bequeath the Temple of the Diamond Peak, the construction of which is still not complete. Since, however, the efforts of this great worthy alone will not suffice, the great worthy Jitsue (785–847) should help him.

"Initially I thought that I might be able to live in this world for a hundred years, propagating the Esoteric Buddhist teachings and attracting ordinary people. Meditation masters are particularly possessed about this, but my own vow is sufficient. You should know that I gave no regard for my own life as I crossed ten thousand waves of the ocean and traveled over a thousand miles to seek the Buddha's teaching. The teaching of the way I have transmitted to you will protect and uphold this place. It will bring peace to the country and nourish the people."

On the fifteenth day of the third month of the year 835, Kūkai said, "I expect to enter the state of eternal meditation in the early morning of the twenty-first day. From now on I will not resort to human food. You should not shed tears of sadness, and do not wear mourning clothes. While I am in eternal meditation, I will be in the heaven of the future Buddha Maitreya, the compassionate one, in whose presence I shall serve. After more than five billion six hundred million years have passed, the compassionate one will descend to earth. At that time I will surely accompany Maitreya, and I will be able to see my old places. Do not let this Diamond Peak fall into neglect. Outwardly it appears that this place is the property of the mountain king Niu, but I have requested this imperial deity to entrust it to me. What no one knows, however, is that this is the ancient place of an old buddha. All the deities of the Diamond and the Matrix mandalas were assembled and enshrined here. To look at a site on this mountain is to know the majesty of its appearance. To hear its sounds is to hear explanations of the compassionate wrath of the deities. My future worth will be a million. Although people will not know my face in person, those who see an elder from one of these temples or who spend some time on this mountain will surely be able to surmise my intentions. When I see that my teaching is not doing well, I will mingle with the black-robed monks to promote my teaching. This is not a matter of my own attachments but is simply to propagate the teachings and that is all."

In the early morning hours of the twenty-first day of the third month of the year 835, Kūkai sat in the lotus position, formed the ritual hand gesture of the Great Sun Buddha (Mahāvairocana), and peacefully entered the state of eternal meditation.

For ten consecutive days services were held four times a day during which his disciples chanted the name of Maitreya. His entry into meditation simply meant that he had closed his eyes and did not speak. In all other respects he was like a living person. He was sixty-two years old at the time. Since he was

[still living] like an ordinary person, no funeral was performed and he was positioned in a dignified manner. According to ordinary custom, memorial services were carried out every week for seven weeks. When his disciples looked upon him, they saw that the color of his face had not faded, and that his hair and beard had grown long. Therefore they shaved him and took care of his clothing. They closed off the stone structure and people had to get permission to enter it. They asked a stone mason to build a tombstone on top of it to represent the five elements, and they placed a book of Sanskrit mantras in it. They also built a jewelled pagoda on top of the structure and enshrined some relics of the Buddha in it. These matters were all arranged by Abbot Shinnen.

Sometime around 852 during the reign of Emperor Montoku, Abbot Shinzei (800–860) petitioned the court to grant Kūkai the rank of high abbot. In 921, during the reign of Emperor Daigo, the court granted Kūkai the title Great Master and Propagator of the Teaching (Kōbō Daishi) in response to a request submitted by Abbot Kangen (853–915).