PAPERS COMMUNICATED

**8. *The Buddhist Ideal of the Attainment of Buddhahood
by the Land and Plants in its Relation to the Idea
that Japan is the Land of Kami, as seen
in the Noh Plays*¹⁾.**

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The Noh plays, being a product of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, reflect the artistic taste, moral ideas, as well as the religious confessions of the time. It was a period of relative peace after more than half a century of internecine strifes; the Samurai classes who had been engaged in civil wars played the leading part in the social life and became the patrons of the artistic movements of the period. The miseries of war times and the vicissitudes of fortune were still fresh in the memory of these aristocrats but they were none the less alive to the enjoyment of peace and its blessings. In this latter respect they imitated largely the refinement of the court nobles of Miyako, and together with it the religious beliefs and practices were inherited from the preceding ages. Thus the religious ideas expressed in the Noh plays largely expressed Buddhist conceptions, together with Buddhico-Shinto ones, being tinged with the melancholy tone reflecting the experiences of catastrophic changes. However, the new Buddhist movements dating from the thirteenth century find only scanty representation in these plays, a point to be discussed elsewhere.

There are two themes of Buddhist ideas most frequently represented in these plays: the salvation of the forlorn souls (亡靈得脱) and the "realization of Buddha-nature by the plants" (草木成佛), the mercy of Buddha and his saints working in all those cases. Our concern in this paper is the latter of these two themes, together with the idea of the "land" destined for the same consummation,—this latter being closely associated with the idea that this country, Nippon or Japan, is the "Land of Kami" (gods or spirits) and also of Buddhas.

Let us begin with a specimen. The play *Bashō* (芭蕉) places its scene at a lonesome hermitage, where the occupant hermit recites the holy text of the Lotus of Truth (法華經) every evening. Every time when the recitation begins a female figure approaches the hermitage and stays there until the end. The monk, having become aware of this dubious presence, asks who she is. She confesses that she is in fact not a human being but the spirit of Bashō, which, being a kind of the banana plant, is regarded as symbolic of frailty and evanescence, because its broad leaves withering in autumn look wretched and mournful, while its tiny fruits are unedible. Further she confesses that she

1) For a fuller exposition, see the Proceedings (Japanese edition), Vol. I, No. 2.

visits the place being attracted by the recitation, and is going, because of the truth therein expounded, to realize the Buddha-nature inherent in every being. This is so even in the grasses and trees, since they are nothing but manifestations of the same entity underlying all existences, only being differentiated by "rains, dews, frosts and snows." This idea is suggested by the "Parable of the Plants" (藥艸喩品), the fifth chapter of the Lotus, and is common to most other plays of similar motifs, amounting to the poetic and religious sentiment of the inherence of Buddha-nature and therefore of the sympathetic ties connecting all beings.

This sentiment is applied to various plants and animals, such as willow, iris, wisteria, butterfly, as the chief themes of the several plays, though the moods and surroundings are not the same. Before going to discuss what this does mean, a point to be noted is that the word "land" or country (國土) is nearly always associated with "grasses and trees" in telling their attainment of Buddhahood, and this is repeated many times even in casual references, i. e. in those plays with other themes than plants. The phrase amounts to saying that "the grasses and trees, the land, the mountains and rivers, all is destined to attain Buddhahood" (艸木國土山川悉皆成佛). What does this mean? Certainly not that Buddhism ignores the distinction between the organic and inorganic, between the sentient and insentient; nor Buddhism entertains a crude animistic idea that every single plant is endowed with an anima. Yet we have to note that the general easy acceptance of these ideas was possible on account of their natural kinship with the prevalent animistic conceptions handed down from the pre-Buddhist ages among the Japanese. It is also to be noted that there are certain aspects in the Jātaka tales which represent an adaptation of Buddhism to the crude ideas of the common people, and find a reflection in the Noh plays, though more idealized. However, this is not all but we have to see a deeper bearing of the idea under discussion.

The fundamental point in this consideration is the idealistic structure of Buddhist conceptions, that the soul or soul-entity (*citta*, 心) underlies all existences and is a reflection of the Buddha-nature or Bodhi-soul (佛性, 菩提心), the individual soul being a partial or distorted reflection of the same, and the individual life the fruit of *karma* accumulated on account of the soul's alienation from the universal Buddha-soul,—*karma* being the principium individuationis, so to speak. Life manifests itself in two aspects, one being individuality and the other the stage of its manifestations. The environments of an individual life, including the fellow beings, the land and climate, the fauna and flora, are nothing else than the fruits (*vipāka*, 果報) of its karma. The world (*loka-dhātu*, 世界) in which one lives is not an imposed one but a product or reflection of its karma²⁾, which can be transformed through one's spiritual

2) See the article "Buddhism" in Seligman's Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. A remarkable similarity of idea is expressed by Schopenhauer, for which see his chief work "Die Welt," I, pp. 321, 415, 449-50. The first of these passages says: Aus ihm (Wille) ist nicht nur sein Handeln, sondern auch seine Welt; und wie er ist, so erscheint sein Handeln, so erscheint seine Welt.

attitude and moral action. Thus, when one realizes the Buddha-nature in himself more or less, the world he lives in is so much so transformed into a Buddha-land. Hence the saying: When a Buddha is present in the world, he realizes therein that the grasses and trees, the land itself, attain Buddhahood altogether with himself (一佛成道, 觀見法界, 艸木國土悉皆成佛). Similarly, for a demoniac being his world is 'demoniac, but when he is released from the vicious fruits of his karma, the stage of his life too becomes free from his demoniac nature.

Putting aside the doctrinal points of this idea, we see in quite a number of Noh plays the instances of these transfigurations, angelic or demoniac, poetically and graphically depicted. Above we have seen the instance of the Bashō, here we cite one of the instances of the transfiguration of the land, together with its hills and forests. That is the case of *Kasuga Ryūjin* (春日龍神), the Nāga King of Kasuga. The Kasuga hill in Nara is eminent in its angular apex with gentle slopes thickly wooded. Japanese Buddhists used to regard it as a copy of the Vulture Peak (Gr̥dhra-kūta, 靈鷲山) in India, where Buddha was believed to have delivered his last sermons, the Lotus of Truth (法華經), — the figure of the peak having been made known through pictures and paste reliefs representing the Paradise of Vulture Peak (靈山淨土). At the foot of the hill stands a Shinto sanctuary dedicated to four (or five) deities, each identified with a Buddhist deity³⁾. Now the Noh play puts its scene at the front of this Kasuga sanctuary, where a Buddhist monk prays for the safety of the sea routes of his intended journey to India, where his chief objective is to visit the Vulture Peak. A mysterious person meets him and persuades him to give up his idea of going over to India, because all the glories of the sacred spots there have been transferred to this country and the Kasuga hill is now a veritable Vulture Peak. The monk gives in, and the adviser, proving himself to be the Nāga King guarding the place, shows the mysteries of the hill; the whole is transfigured into the Vulture Peak, the scenes of Buddha's life are made visible there in the golden radiance of woods and waters, while the Nāga King and his hosts dance in glorifying the Paradise on earth.

Thus we discern in this play the following motifs: 1) a Buddha-land can be realized where a Buddha or genuine Buddhist lives; the land he lives in, together with its woods and waters, is transformed into a paradise in association with, or in consequence of, his realization of the Buddha-nature; 2) the Vulture Peak, the objective of ideal aspiration, has been transferred to this country, being made visible to the spiritually enlightened; 3) the genuine Buddhist religion, now no more living in India, is perpetuated in this land of the east, as told in the traditional legends concerning the propagation of the Law embodied in the Lotus scripture.

These themes are represented in a number of plays in various combinations and in different connections. Moreover, in some of these the idea of a land transfigured into a paradise is developed to the belief

3) See: Anesaki, *Buddhist Art*, Plt. XXVIII.

that this country is the land where the Buddhist ideal is to be consummated. Several factors worked in the formation of this belief, in which the Lotus played the leading part. This scripture opens with the scene on the Vulture Peak, where Buddha sits in meditation in the midst of his followers, then he emits a ray from his brow which illuminates the eighteen thousands of worlds in the east. The close of the scripture again points to the east, because the Great Being Samantabhadra (普賢) comes from the east to the assembly and then goes back to the east, promising to perpetuate the religion for ever⁴⁾.

This specified preference of the east in the Lotus joined with other circumstances in forming a train of legends that the propagation of the genuine Buddhist truth should always be eastward. Whether associated with this belief or apart from it, this country was called Nippon (or the like), the land where the "Sun Originates," probably dating from the time of Prince Shōtoku, the founder of Buddhist culture in Japan, early in the seventh century. In the course of the following centuries, particularly since the eleventh, a belief evolved itself that the final abode of the Buddhism of the "latter days" (末法) should be this country, the Buddha-land in the sense as stated above. The idealization of the Kasuga hill, and of several other sacred spots, was an aspect of the glorification of the whole country. The "attainment of Buddhahood by the land" (國土成佛) meant, in this way, that the whole country was or should be a Buddha-land where the genuine religion was living and its people were destined to realize the fundamental Buddha-nature⁵⁾.

This was the idealistic or doctrinal basis of the idea under consideration, and it was supported by the indigenous belief in the genii or spirits of the sacred spots or scenic sites. Indeed, the patriotic sense of the Japanese people was to a large extent a product of the love for beauty of nature combined with the sense of awe and mystery, which was called forth by the features of the land rich in scenic varieties, volcanic peaks and gentle slopes, waterfalls and rapids, inlets and promontories. Nearly every scenic spot was regarded since unknown antiquities as the abode of a spirit or deity; at some of those places shrines were erected being dedicated to the deities, but some were indicated only by tiny symbols, and even without any designation in some others. Absence of ostentatious show always characterized cult and worship in the indigenous religion, yet the sense of awe or reverence was no less remarkable.

Now, since Buddhism was introduced into Japan, it founded a series of its own places of worship in gorgeous temple buildings, but it not only left the ancient sacred spots unmolested, but adapted itself to the traditional cult by sanctifying those sacred spots according to Buddhist ideas. Moreover, the Buddhist missionaries started new sanctuaries in the old style, on the peaks, in the forests, by the lake-sides, which had remained still unexplored though being regarded as sacred.

4) See: S. B. E., XXI, pp. 7 and 431.

5) Comp.: Anesaki's paper on Prince Shōtoku, P. I. A., XVI, p. 436.

Thus arose the so-called "Double Aspect" (兩部) Shinto worship, in which the original spirits or deities were sanctioned by Buddhism and interpreted in its ways.

This combination of the original sacred places and Buddhist conceptions proceeded in the course of centuries, and we see in a number of Noh plays the glorification of those spots in a combination of religious piety and poetic imagination. One of the instances of this motif is *Kuse-no-to* (九世戸), which means the "Port of the Nine Generations." Ama-no-Hashidate, in Tango, is a long slender sand-bar stretching between a bay and the open sea, nearly connecting a peninsula with the mainland; it was believed to be the flight by which the nine generations of deities descended to this country. Buddhism adopted the spot by dedicating it to Manjuśri, because of an imagined likeness of the Hashidate with the natural rock bridge which was believed to connect his paradise with the human world,—with an additional note that the Japanese gods had induced Manjuśri to find his abode at Hashidate.

Another is the instance of *Shira-hige* (白鬚), the "White-bearded." The scene is put at a white sand-beach on the side of the lake Biwa, behind which soar the steep slopes of the Hira mountain range ending in the Hiei peaks. The Hiei was the greatest Buddhist centre since the end of the eighth century and one of its heights was believed to represent the Vulture Peak. Now, the Buddha Sākyamuni once went around the whole world in the air for finding out a place where his religion could solidly be established in future. He found this lake-side and hill-range to be the place, and approached a white-bearded man angling there. The old man was the genius of the spot dwelling there since a remote past and insisted on his monopoly over the whole district. Then another Buddha appeared in the air coming from the east and reproached the old man, because this Buddha himself had ever been in possession of the place even before the angler. The White-bearded yielded and dedicated the place to the two Buddhas. Since then the district has become the fountain-head of the religion in Japan, and the White-bearded stays there as its tutelary genius; the Shinto sanctuary dedicated to him stands even today on the beach commanding the charming views of the lake-side.

These and similar plays show how Buddhism has adopted the indigenous cult into its own arena, adapting itself at the same time to the national genius and patriotic sense of the people. The bearing of the Double Aspect Shinto can be understood, when we see how many thousands of those sacred spots with their traditional cults and scenic associations have been embraced into Buddhist conception. The Noh plays represent only a small fraction of the combinations suited to the artistic performance in which the beauty of the spots well-known to the audience can easily be imagined into the play on the stage.

This Buddhist encroachment upon the native cult has, however, been reacted by the national spirit, culminating in the glorification of the whole country that the final abode of Buddhism is to be in this "Land of Kami or Gods," which is, therefore, the "Land of Buddhas"

or Buddha-land, as stated above. The "Land where the Sun Originates" is the original home of the national gods as well as of the Buddhist deities and saints. This has definitely become a Buddhist faith and is represented in a number of Noh plays glorifying the scenic spots sanctified according to the Buddhico-Shinto ideas.

All above has been stated on the basis of the faith centering in the Lotus scripture which played the leading part in Japanese Buddhism from its early days to the time of the Noh plays. There was another branch of Buddhism known as Shingon⁶⁾, which, being an entirely sacramental religion, played a vital part in the perfection of the Noh performance, music and dance, decorations and stage arrangements. No less important in the formation of the Noh plays was the Shingon conception of the world. It conceives the whole world as the embodiment of the "Three Mysteries" (三密), the body, speech, and thought, of the Buddha Mahā-Vairochana (大日), the Great Illuminator, with whom the Sun-goddess, the supreme deity of Shinto, is often identified. In fact the title of the country, *Dai Nippon-goku*⁷⁾, is sometimes interpreted to mean the "Original Abode of the Great Illuminator," as shown in the Noh play *Saka-hoko*. Thus the idea that the final abode of Buddhism is in this country is reaffirmed by its being the original home of the Great Buddha.

Another important point of the Shingon doctrine is the correlation between the two aspects of the world, therefore of the Buddha's life, the Indestructible (金剛) and the Womb-store (胎藏). Beside the application of this two-aspect conception to the relationship between the Buddhist and Shinto pantheons, it is freely used for sanctifying the scenic spots, particularly the prominent peaks. The Noh plays representing this motif sing of the sublimity of those peaks and idealize them as the embodiments of the two aspects of Buddha, most frequently identifying those two adjacent ones with them,—the Indestructible being male and the Womb-store female.

Though somewhat different in the manner of idealization, the motifs in the plays of this category amount to the same as in the former group, i. e. to a combination of religious piety and poetic imagination centered in the idea that the Buddha-land can be realized everywhere. This idea applied to Japan glorifies the country as the home of the Kami as well as of Buddha, because it is the land inhabited by genuine Buddhists.

6) Cf. Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion*, pp. 123-134; *Buddhist Art*, pp. 31-46.

7) *Dai Nippon-goku* (or *Nihon-goku*) 大日本國, the "Great Japan-land," interpreted to mean *Dainichi no Hongoku*.