CHAPTER THREE

THE LIFE AND LEGEND OF KŌBŌ DAISHI (KŪKAI)

The name Ryūkō-in means "Temple of the Dragon Light." This is not the temple's original name, but one adopted in the sixteenth century when a monk observed a luminous dragon rising skyward from out of the temple pond. Prior to that event the temple was known simply as Chū-in, or "Middle Temple," a reference to its physical location at the center of the earliest residence halls of Kōyasan.[1]

We are now at Ryūkō-in, standing in a small chamber known as the *Kōbō Daishi go-nyūjō-no-ma*, or "Honorable Room of Kōbō Daishi's Entrance into Continuous Meditation."[2] The room is dimly lit, with no furnishing other than a single low table with bell, book, and incense bowl. The table faces a shrine alcove protected by closed lattice doors. On the shrine shelf sits a small dark figure enclosed in protective glass. The light is much too dim for us to make out any sculpted detail, but we know already that the figure is Miroku Bosatsu, the Buddha of the

Future.[3] Kōbō Daishi sat before this carving during his final hours, or so it is believed.

Two lamps hang in front of the shrine. The lamp at the right supports a flame that reportedly has burned without interruption since the time of Kōbō Daishi's departure, a stretch of more than eleven and a half centuries. The lamp's oil level is checked twice daily, once in the morning and once in the evening.

Death, or what most people would have called death, came to Kōbō Daishi at four a.m. on March 21, 835. The texts tell us that seven days earlier, on March 15, he had given a final message to his disciples and then retired to this room. Here he seated himself before Miroku Bosatsu. Outside the room, in the next apartment, his anxious disciples began to recite the Miroku mantra. Word spread to the lower villages that the Master, who had been ill for some time, was now certainly dying. Over the next several days hundreds climbed the mountain to stand vigil outside in the courtyard. Early in the morning of March 21 the watching disciples noted that the Master's eyes had closed, but beyond that there was no discernible change. He continued to sit firmly upright. Seven agonizing days passed with the Master's position unchanged. At that point it was agreed a memorial service should be held. After seven more days a second memorial service was held, and another service seven days after that. But no formal funeral ceremony was conducted, for in all respects the Master had the appearance of continuing his deep meditation.

On the forty-ninth day six of the disciples entered the room (or perhaps the burial cave at Okunoin; the sources are ambiguous) to prepare the body for interment. When they touched the body they discovered the skin was still warm and moist. They noted also that Odaishi-sama's hair and beard had continued to grow. They shaved his head and beard, then proceeded with preparations for a funeral ceremony, which was held on the fiftieth day, May 10, at four p.m. Later that evening (or perhaps earlier; again the sources are ambiguous) the disciples lifted the platform on which the Master sat, placed the platform on a litter, and solemnly carried the Master to his predetermined place of burial near the bank of the Tamagawa at the eastern end of the valley. Upon returning to the room at Chū-in they decided not to extinguish the lamp that was burning there, but to refill it with oil.

The chamber also is called the *Yōgō-no-ma*, or "Room of the Turning Shadow," because of occasional reports of Kōbō Daishi's shadowy appearances here. Such appearances seem to have been especially frequent in the eleventh century when large numbers of the aristocracy and nobility made pilgrimages to Kōyasan, many of them staying at this temple. At the moment, we have no sense of anything apparitional taking place, but we do have a fresh awareness of the importance of Kōbō Daishi's remarkable life. That awareness is a constant on the mountain.

From Ryūkō-in's front porch we again look out into the bright fall sunlight. Directly ahead of us here, observed through the branches of giant cedars, rises the massive vermillion and white form of the Great Stūpa. The Great Stūpa is the mountain's single most dramatic physical expression of Kōbō Daishi's religious vision. To the right of the Daitō is the low dark Miedō, where Kōbō Daishi's sacred portrait is enshrined (the Miedō too is a candidate for the physical location of Kōbō Daishi's Kōyasan residence). Several hundred meters to the left, hidden from us by a wall of trees, is the Dai Kōdō (Great Lecture Hall), another major "church" where Kōbō Daishi is enshrined.

In time we will visit all these places, but for now we will proceed with Kōbō Daishi's personal history. It is a life that visitors to Kōyasan cannot escape. Cherished details are recounted in brochures, in temple murals, in narrative scrolls, in cartoon books, in videos, in movies, in ceremonial parades, in sermons. Much of the life is fully documented history. Much is pious legend. Usually, little attempt is made to separate the factual from the legendary, for both are essential.[4]

THE EARLY YEARS

Kōbō Daishi was born to Lady Tamayori and Saeki Tagimi on the island of Shikoku in 774. The precise day of birth is unknown, but later tradition selects June 15 as probable, for on that day in 774 the sixth of the eight Shingon patriarchs, Amoghavajra, died in China. The matching of dates lends credence to the notion that Kōbō Daishi was Amoghavajra's reincarnation. As a small boy he was called Mao ("True Fish") and, as an endearment, Tōtomono ("Precious Child").[5] Since for most of his adult

life he was known by his ordination name, Kūkai, we will use that name in this review of the life.

The site of Kūkai's boyhood home is within the grounds of Zentsū-ji, an expansive Shingon temple located in Zentsūji city in northeastern Shikoku. Today Zentsū-ji is designated temple number seventy-five on the island's famed eighty-eight-temple pilgrimage, and is the largest and busiest temple on the circuit. Local faithful claim Kūkai himself founded Zentsū-ji in 807 shortly after his return from China, naming it in honor of his father (whose Buddhist name was Zentsū). The priests of Zentsū-ji refer to their temple as Japan's first Shingon institution.

At the center of Zentsū-ji's western court is a large hall built near the presumed site of the birth. This hall, known as the Miedō, or "Portrait Hall," enshrines a "self-portrait" said to have been painted by Kūkai as a keepsake for his parents prior to his voyage to China. The Miedō is a primary goal of pilgrims. Beneath its floor is a circular tunnel through which visitors walk in total darkness, moving past unseen paintings of sacred images until reaching an illuminated shrine directly beneath the birthplace. This shrine, described as a *Gokuraku Jōdo*, or Buddhist paradise, represents the light of deliverance that overcomes spiritual darkness. On the shrine altar sits a hidden Dainichi, the cosmic sun of the Shingon faith, surrounded by visible deities of both the Womb Realm and the Diamond Realm mandalas.

Not far from the Miedō is a small pond said to have been used by young Kūkai as a mirror when he painted the self-portrait. At the pond's center now stands a statue of Kūkai dressed as a pilgrim ascetic, a form known as *Shugyō Daishi*. Seated in front of the Shugyō Daishi is a small statue of Miroku, the Buddha of the Future, for whom Kūkai becomes a special harbinger. Stone images of Kūkai's parents are set on pedestals at either side of the pond—the father on the left, Lady Tamayori on the right. This couple had several other children, although the precise number is uncertain. We know definitely of a younger brother, Shinga (801–879), who became one of Kūkai's disciples. There also is evidence of a sister and at least one older brother.

Not much is known factually about Kūkai's childhood, but tradition proposes several events that convey his precocity in religious matters. At the age of three he is said to have fashioned a clay figure of the Buddha, then knelt before it while the Four Heavenly Kings, the *Shitennō*, surrounded him like protecting angels. These same Four Kings also stood guard over the youthful Shākyamuni.

A more audacious childhood event is said to have taken place on the highest of the three steep mountains that rise with increasing elevation behind Zentsū-ji. According to the story, at age seven Kūkai impulsively walked to the highest cliff edge, turned his face toward India, and cried out to the Buddha:

> *In order to save many people I make a vow to devote my life to the pursuit of Buddhahood! If I am not capable of fulfilling this vow, then I do not deserve my existence!*

With this challenge he cast himself over the precipice.

The event is featured in nearly all pictorial accounts of Kūkai's life. As the child plummets downward through space, his hands pressed together in *gasshō*, his eyes clenched in prayer, up from the bottom of the frame floats Shākyamuni (or in some cases the Bodhisattva Kannon). In the next instant the Buddha will catch the falling child and carry him to safety, preserving him for a life of service to the Dharma. A refinement of the story proposes that during their brief aerial embrace Shākyamuni preached to the child the key Shingon principle of *sokushin jōbutsu*, the attainment of Buddhahood with one's present body. The precipice described in the story is popularly known as the Shashin-ga-take, or Cliff of Jumping, and may be reached by climbing a well-marked trail. The temple at the foot of the mountain, number seventy-three on the Shikoku pilgrimage, is called Shusshaka-ji, "Temple of Shākyamuni's Appearance."[6]

When Kūkai was fifteen his maternal uncle, Atō Ōtari, a tutor to the emperor's eldest son, took him from the family home on Shikoku to Nagaoka-kyō, the improvised new national capital where the emperor recently had brought his court. There, under the uncle's direction, Kūkai intensified his study of Chinese language and literature. At eighteen he entered the national college in the old capital of Heijō-kyō (today's Nara), where in the company of other young men of good birth he studied the standard Confucian curriculum designed for future employees in the government bureaucracy, the career proposed by his family. By his own testimony Kūkai was a diligent student. Nevertheless, after as period

of schooling that may have been as long as two years or as short as a few months, he left Heijō-kyō.

Kūkai later described his departure as being precipitated by a Buddhist monk's showing him a scripture called *Kokūzō-gumonji-no-hō*.[7] "In that work," writes Kūkai, "it is stated that if one recites the mantra one million times according to the proper method, one will be able to memorize passages and understand the meaning of any scripture." Kūkai retreated to a mountaintop (Mt. Tairyū in Shikoku) and there performed the demanding *gumonji-hō* ritual. Each day the purification, the offerings, the incantation, the visualization, the sought-for fusion with the deity Kokūzō. Each day and each night for fifty or one hundred consecutive days, his mind, spirit, and body strained to make the infinite journey. The effort was rewarded. On one occasion Kokūzō's sword appeared to fly at him at the climax of his meditation. At Cape Muroto, on Shikoku's eastern shore, as he recited the mantra while facing the open sea, the star Venus, Buddhism's celestial image of Kokūzō Bodhisattva, rushed at him like an arrow and entered his mouth. "From that time on," he writes, "I despised fame and wealth and longed for a life in the midst of nature."[8]

At this period in Japan a young man who wished to pursue the Buddhist priesthood was expected to enter a government monastery, study the approved Buddhist curriculum there, and pass qualifying examinations administered by government-appointed monastic officials. Kūkai chose a different course. The general belief is that shortly after leaving college he became a lay monk (a *shidosō*) attached to an unaffiliated, outlaw mountain temple located in the mountainous area of Yoshino-Tenkawa just west of Kōyasan. There he embraced such practices as meditating in the wilderness for long stretches of time, punctuated by periods of wandering in rags through rural villages with a begging bowl. His parents had counted on his restoring the family's name and fortune. Instead young Kūkai seemed bent on a life of shameful eccentricity.

The most detailed information we have about Kūkai's behavior during the period is found in his first major literary production (probably completed when he was twenty-four), an intense, showy, semi-fictional *apologia* entitled *Sangō shīki*, or "Indications of the Goals of the Three Teachings."[9] Composed in Chinese, the *Sangō shīki* is the length of a short novel, which it somewhat resembles. In it Kūkai both explains and proclaims his sudden decision to reject Confucianism and embrace Buddhism. He also rejects Taoism, a third option. "Can anyone now break my determination? No, just as there is no one who can stop the wind" (*MW*, 102). The intended audience for the document seems to have included his family and teachers.

Kūkai's biographers generally agree that the central character of the *Sangō shīki*, an itinerant Buddhist monk named Kamei-kotsuji, is in good part a self-portrait. Like Kūkai, Kamei, whose name means "anonymous beggar," was born on Shikoku at a place famous for its camphor trees. The beggar is described as laughably haggard and unkempt, a man thoroughly despised by the citizens of the secular world. "If by chance he entered the market place, people showered him with pieces of tile and pebbles; if he passed a harbor, people cast horse's dung upon him." Such rejection makes it easier for Kamei to live a life aloof from the destructive appetites that the world celebrates. Even the problem of celibacy, a troubling matter for him, is resolved.[10] "Once he was attracted by a beautiful girl, Undō, and his determination was somewhat relaxed, but on meeting the nun Kobe he was encouraged and his loathing for the world was intensified" (*MW*, 121).

Kamei has one close friend with whom he shares his aspirations. He also has a spiritual sponsor. But intimacy with nature when isolated in the mountains is what he loves most:

> . . . brushing aside the snow to sleep, using his arms for a pillow. The blue sky was the ceiling of his hut and the clouds hanging over the mountains were his curtains; he did not need to worry about where he lived or where he slept. . . . [He was] quite satisfied with what was given him, like a bird that perches on a single branch, or like the one who subsisted on half a grain a day.[11]

In the primary discourse of the book Kamei becomes involved in a debate with two learned opponents. One is a self-assured Confucianist, the other a devotee of Taoism. The Confucianist recommends the career enjoyed by a government official, which includes a handsome wife, possessions, marvelous dinner parties that go on for days, and "a beautiful posthumous name." The Taoist demurs, pointing out that any happiness gained from wealth and position is evanescent, as "unstable as floating

clouds." A cure for this evanescence can be found in secret Taoist incantations and elixirs. "When you realize the Way and master this art, your aged body and gray hair will be rejuvenated and life prolonged." You will enjoy the eternal privileges of the gods (*MW*, 112, 118–20).

Kamei's rebuttal to both men is unequivocal. Confucianism is no more than a "dusty breeze of the secular world" and Taoism but "a petty seeking for longevity." The storm of impermanence overlooks no one. "No matter how much of the elixir of life one may drink, nor how deeply one may inhale the exquisite incense that recalls the departed soul, one cannot prolong one's life even for a second" (*MW*, 132). The only way to escape from the endless cycle of birth and death and rebirth is to pursue the Self beyond all individual selves, the grand Dharmakāya, the final unchanging Reality that waits for us. The *Sangō shīki* ends with these lines of poetry that declare Kamei's (and Kūkai's) liberation.

> Eternity, Bliss, the Self, and Purity are the summits on which
> we ultimately belong.
> I know the fetters that bind me in the triple world;
> Why should I not give up the thought of serving the court?
> (*MW*, 139)

Kūkai joined the Buddhist priesthood in two formal stages. The initial ceremony, the head shaving, took place at Makino'o-san-ji temple in the Izumi mountains not far from where the Kōyasan Express passes through. Kūkai may have been as young as twenty at this time, or as old as twenty-four. The general assumption is that his primary mentor, Abbot Gonzō of Daian-ji, presided. As part of the ceremony the name Mao was changed to Kūkai. *Kū* meant "sky." *Kai* meant "sea." Together the two *kanji* may have signified something like "the ocean of emptiness," a profound Buddhist concept. The character for *kū* probably was derived from Kokūzō, Kūkai's sponsoring Buddhist deity. Kokūzō's wisdom was as large as the sky—that is, was infinite.

Kūkai's final initiation into the priesthood, with its five additional precepts, likely occurred on April 7, 804, at famed Tōdai-ji monastery in Nara.[12] Just one month after this event he began his journey to China. The prospect of participating in this voyage may have prompted him to formalize his priestly credentials.

For a full decade Kūkai had been reading the massive body of Buddhist sūtras and commentaries that the repositories of the Nara temples made available to him. He had examined closely the teachings of all six Buddhist schools then active in Japan, but all seemed incomplete. Tradition tells us that at one point he secluded himself for twenty days in the Great Hall at Tōdai-ji, praying to its colossal bronze image of the Great Sun Buddha. "Show me the true teaching," he begged. Exhausted from praying, he slept, and in a dream met a man who told him of a scripture called the *Dainichi-kyō*, or "Great Sun Sūtra" (Sk. *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*). A full copy of this sūtra, the man said, could be found in the Eastern Pagoda of the Kume temple, just one day's journey south from Tōdai-ji. Kūkai went at once to Kume-dera where he noticed a suspicious irregularity in the central pillar of its Eastern Stūpa. Cutting open the spot he discovered the seven volumes of the *Dainichi-kyō*.

How the *Dainichi-kyō* found its way to Japan is explained by another legend. Zenmui (Sk. Subhākarasimha, 637–735), a famous Indian Buddhist missionary to China who translated the *Dainichi-kyō* into Chinese, is said to have journeyed to Japan in the hope of spreading esoteric Buddhism there. When he discovered the Japanese were not yet ready for such a difficult teaching, Zenmui built a stūpa, deposited a copy of the *Dainichi-kyō* in one of its pillars, and returned to China. His hope was that some future Japanese spiritual genius would develop a craving for the text and be led to its hiding place.[13]

Kūkai himself writes nothing about where or how he first obtained a copy of the *Dainichi-kyō*. But he did obtain a copy, and his response upon first reading it was to call it the "Source" he had been searching for. However, the text presented difficulties. "I started reading [the *Dainichi-kyō*] only to find that I was unable to understand it; I wished to visit China" (*MW*, 27). Most especially he wished to visit China's capital of Ch'ang-an, then the center of a flowering of Esoteric Buddhism. In Ch'ang-an he hoped to find an esoteric master who could give him the necessary oral instruction on the *Dainichi-kyō* and introduce him as well to other vital esoteric texts.

So Kūkai applied to Emperor Kammu for permission to study in China, very likely specifying the *Dainichi-kyō* as his primary object of interest. Permission was granted, and the length of time he would be abroad fixed at twenty years. Twenty years would give Kūkai adequate

time to absorb what the Chinese had to offer, with enough life expectancy left for him to return to Japan and pass on what he had learned. The Japanese government would finance the endeavor. That Kūkai was able to win such an appointment argues that he was by then recognized as a scholar of more than ordinary talent. Abbot Gonzō may have spoken in his behalf. Gonzō would have known better than anyone else Kūkai's mastery of Buddhist literature and skill with the Chinese language.[14] Perhaps Kūkai's uncle, as the crown prince's tutor, asked the prince to give support to the application. A third possibility is that Fujiwara Kadonomaro, the Japanese envoy who was to lead the mission to China, learned of Kūkai's linguistic abilities and desired his help. Additionally, Kūkai's special interest in *mikkyō* (Esoteric Buddhism) may have made him particularly attractive to the imperial court, for rumors were then circulating that certain esoteric Buddhist rituals carried a magical potency far greater than anything then practiced in Japan.

Another Buddhist priest-scholar also gained permission to join the journey to China. Saichō, then thirty-seven years old, was by far the most influential religious leader in Japan's new capital of Heian-kyō (Kyōto). Saichō did not plan to go to the Chinese interior capital of Ch'ang-an, however, but to the more coastal Mt. T'ien-t'ai, the primary center of Tendai Buddhism. There he hoped to study with some Chinese Buddhist scholars and obtain more accurate Tendai texts than those he presently possessed. Saichō would be in China for only a short time (eight and one-half months). His hope was that upon his return Tendai would be recognized as a distinct Buddhist sect and made the semiofficial Buddhist teaching of the imperial court.

Kūkai likely knew a good deal about Saichō. Saichō probably knew little or nothing about Kūkai, although the two may have met briefly while they were waiting to sail from Kyūshū. The two would not meet at sea or in China. In the years after China, however, their careers would come into strong conjunction and conflict.

In May 804 Kūkai's ship left Naniwa (today's Ōsaka) for a port in Kyūshū. Two months after that it sailed out into the East China Sea in the company of three other government ships. Kūkai's ship was designated ship number one, for it carried envoy Kadonomaro, the head of the Japanese mission to China. The rest of the ranking officials, along with Saichō,

were in the second ship. The third ship carried scribes, accountants, and secretaries. The fourth ship's passengers included translators, shipwrights, and dock hands.[15] This dividing up of skills suggests that those in command assumed the four vessels somehow would manage to sail together and reach their destination together, a highly erroneous assumption.

TO CHINA'S CH'ANG-AN AND HUI-KUO

In earlier times the fragile Japanese ships would have headed directly across the Straits of Tsushima to Korea, a distance of around two hundred kilometers, and then worked their way along the Korean coast until they reached China. But Korean hostility now mandated a direct sail to China across eight hundred kilometers of open sea. The Japanese captains knew little of the seasonal winds they would encounter, lacked adequate maps, and were without compasses. Of the eleven missions that sailed for China during the period only one returned home without loss to its crew or cargo.[16]

Kūkai's own particular mission met with about average success. During the first day out (July 9, 804) the four ships lost sight of one another. Ship number one, Kūkai's, was overtaken by a storm and blown far south of its intended landfall near the mouth of the Yangtze, finally reaching shore only after drifting for nearly a month. The second ship, the one carrying Saichō, also was caught in storms, and remained at sea some twenty days longer than Kūkai's. Quite fortuitously, it eventually landed at Ning-po, close to Saichō's ultimate destination. The third ship, badly damaged at sea, turned back to Japan for repair, only to be wrecked the following year. The fourth ship disappeared in the East China Sea with but one survivor to tell the tale.

Kūkai's own account of the passage to China speaks of "seething waves" that "clashed against the Milky Way" and of the terrors of being driven off course.[17] Tradition relates that he prayed to the Buddha to quell the storm, and immediately the merciful Kannon Bodhisattva appeared over the waves, mildly gesturing the wind and ocean to calm. A painted representation of this Kannon, now in the possession of Kōyasan's Ryūkō-in, is one of the masterpieces of twelfth-century Japanese art. Another

account says that the saving deity was the Nyoirin Kannon and that Kūkai captured its image by scratching on a piece of wood with his fingernails.[18]

When Kūkai's ship finally drifted ashore in China's Fukien province, the arrival was treated with great suspicion, for the provincial governor had never before encountered a Japanese delegation.[19] An elegant letter written by Kūkai to the governor, however, gained envoy Kadonomaro and his party a proper reception. With a second letter Kūkai obtained permission to proceed independently on the long journey to the inland capital, Ch'ang-an. Ch'ang-an, the eastern terminus of the Silk Road, was then the most cosmopolitan, as well as the most populous, city in the world, the crown jewel of T'ang civilization.[20]

Kūkai was fully equipped to appreciate Ch'ang-an's dazzling richness, but from the start his overriding interest was in its status as a center of Buddhist study and religious practice. For decades now the Chinese imperial court had supported a large sūtra translating and copying institution, with as many as one thousand specialists employed at one time. The city also was a bazaar of religious diversity, with ninety-one Buddhist temples of various persuasions, sixteen Taoist temples, at least three "foreign" churches (Nestorian Christian, Zoroastrian, and Manichaean). There was an active representation of the new Islamic religion, and very possibly a Jewish synagogue.[21] In addition, the city was China's greatest Confucianist center.

The most dynamic religious ideology by far was Esoteric Buddhism, first introduced to China early in the eighth century and now spreading widely and fashionably among members of the court. For Kūkai this was holy ground. Ch'ang-an had been the favorite residence of Shingon patriarch Zenmui. Zenmui's disciple I'hsing (J. Ichigyō; 683–727), author of an essential commentary on the *Dainichi-kyō*, also had lived and died in Ch'ang-an. The Indian Brahmin Vajrabodhi (J. Kongōchi; 671–741), eminent translator and ritualist, and Shingon's Fifth Patriarch, had lived here. Here too had resided Amoghavajra (Ch. Pu-k'ung; J. Fukūkongō; 705–74), who in middle life had returned to southern Asia to gather and bring back five hundred volumes of Sanskrit texts. Amoghavajra had instructed three Chinese emperors in the esoteric faith, initiated scores of court officials, and built at Mount Wu-t'ai China's single most famous Buddhist temple. When he died, on June 15, 774, the T'ang emperor

declared three days of mourning for his court. It was this Amoghavajra, the official Sixth Shingon Patriarch, whose death date later became the agreed-upon birth date for Kōbō Daishi.

These were the dead. Many eminent masters were still living, foremost among them Amoghavajra's successor, a Chinese priest named Hui-kuo (J. Keika; 746–805). Like Amoghavajra, Hui-kuo had been a powerful influence on the court and a magnet for disciples from China and elsewhere. Unfortunately, by the time Kūkai was able to arrange a meeting with him, after five months in the capital, Hui-kuo was terminally ill. In fact he already had made his formal last testament to his followers.

The first meeting between the two took place in May 805. Here is Kūkai's account as expressed in a later report to the Japanese emperor:

> I called on the abbot [at Ch'ing-lung Temple] in the company of five or six monks from the Hsi-ming Temple. As soon as he saw me he smiled with pleasure and joyfully said, "I knew that you would come! I have waited for such a long time. What pleasure it gives me to look upon you today at last! My life is drawing to an end, and until you came there was no one to whom I could transmit the teachings. Go without delay to the altar of *abhisheka* with incense and a flower." I returned to the temple where I had been staying and got the things which were necessary for the ceremony. (*MW*, 147)

By early June, having prepared the necessary offerings and ritual instruments, Kūkai returned to Hui-kuo for the administration of the *abhisheka* (J. *kanjō*). As a key part of the ritual Kūkai, while blindfolded, was required to throw a flower onto the sacred Taizō-kai (Womb Realm) mandala. It was this mandala that had been described in the *Dainichi-kyō*. Kūkai's flower fell directly on the image of Dainichi Nyorai, the mandala's central figure. "It is wonderful," remarked the admiring Hui-kuo. Kūkai was then instructed in other rituals and meditations relating to this mandala of compassion.

By July Kūkai was ready to be initiated into the second of the two Esoteric companion mandalas, the Kongō-kai (Diamond Realm) mandala, whose central figure was Dainichi as the Buddha of Imperishable

Wisdom. Again Kūkai was blindfolded and instructed to throw the flower. To Hui-kuo's expressed amazement the flower once more fell upon Dainichi Nyorai.

In August, in the climactic initiation ritual, Kūkai was admitted to the *denpō-kanjō*, the ceremony designed to consecrate him for the Transmission of the Dharma. A third time he was blindfolded and a third time the flower fell upon Dainichi. Hui-kuo bestowed on him an epithet that conveyed this thrice-proven link with the Great Sun Buddha: *Henjō kongō*. Thus, Kūkai became an inheritor and master of Esoteric Buddhism.[22]

In demonstration of his gratitude Kūkai gave a dinner for five hundred priests, including some who directly served the T'ang emperor. More feverish training and study followed, for Hui-kuo's health continued to worsen. Artists were summoned to produce copies of the complex mandalas. More than twenty scribes were set to copying the basic Esoteric scriptures and their commentaries. The essential ceremonial instruments were collected.

With death but a few days away, Hui-ku gave Kūkai a final instruction (here as recorded by Kūkai):

> When you arrived I feared I did not have enough time left to teach you everything, but now I have completed teaching you, and the work of copying the sūtras and making the images has also been finished. Hasten back to your country, offer these things to the court, and spread the teachings throughout your country to increase the happiness of the people. . . . In that way you will return thanks to the Buddha and to your teacher. That is also the way to show your devotion to your country and to your family. My disciple I-ming will carry on the teachings here. Your task is to transmit them to the Eastern Land. Do your best! Do your best! (*MW*, 149)

Hui-kuo's death came just seven months after his first meeting with Kūkai. "Once he saw me, he loved me like a son," Hui-kuo had said of his own master. Toward Kūkai he seems to have expressed a similar love. "I conferred on him mystic rituals and mudrās of both mandalas," Hui-kuo remarked. "He received them in Chinese as well as in Sanskrit without fault, just as water is poured from one jar to another."[23] Kūkai tells us that immediately after his teacher's death he went into the temple to meditate. There in the still sanctuary, with a full winter moon shining outside, the spirit of Hui-kuo appeared and spoke to him: "You and I have long been pledged to propagate the Esoteric Buddhist teachings. If I am reborn in Japan, this time I shall be your disciple" (*MW*, 149). When Hui-kuo's disciples gathered to decide who should compose an account of the master's life and write a formal epigraph for his monument, they selected Kūkai, a foreigner whom they had known for only a few months. "With heavy hearts we bury a jewel," Kūkai wrote. "With stricken souls we burn a magic herb. We close the doors of death forever."[24]

Stories abound concerning Kūkai's remarkable popularity in Ch'ang-an.[25] Upon giving Kūkai a string of prayer beads as a farewell gift, the eyes of the Chinese emperor reportedly fill with tears: "My intention was that you should stay here and be my teacher. But I hear your [newly enthroned] Emperor Heizei is anxiously awaiting your return, so I shall not urge you to stay."[26] The Chinese emperor also is reported to have asked Kūkai to inscribe the reception hall at the imperial palace, and to have awarded him the title of Master of the Five Skills in Calligraphy upon seeing the result.[27] Adoring Chinese are described as clinging to Kūkai's sleeve as he prepared to depart for Japan, begging him to remain with them.[28]

An especially cherished legend says that immediately before sailing (in the late summer of 806) Kūkai stood on the Chinese shore, looked in the direction of Japan, and hurled skyward a three-pronged *vajra* (J. *sanko*). As the golden instrument disappeared from view Kūkai prayed, "Go before me [to my native land] and find the appropriate place for Esoteric Buddhism."[29]

CONQUEST OF THE JAPANESE CAPITAL

Tradition tells of another great storm on the return voyage, with Kūkai again saving the ship and its passengers through intercessory prayers. On this occasion his appeal was addressed to the previously mentioned image of the "Wave-Cutting" Fudō Myō-ō that he had carved in China from a

piece of wood given him by Hui-kuo. As Kūkai prayed, an apparition of the angry deity was observed walking out among the waves, hacking them down with a sword.

Soon after landing on the southern Japanese island of Kyūshū (in October 806) Kūkai sent a report of his China experience to the newly installed Emperor Heizei. This famous "memorial" opens with a brief self-introduction followed immediately by an account of his meeting with Hui-kuo. Kūkai knew his unexpected early return to Japan was in violation of instructions, but what he brought back with him surely would amaze and delight the Emperor.

> This master [Hui-kuo] granted me the privilege of receiving the Esoteric Buddhist precepts and permitted me to enter the altar of *abhisheka*. Three times I was bathed in the *abhisheka* in order to receive the mantras and once to inherit the mastership. . . . I was fortunate enough, thanks to the compassion of the great master . . . to learn the great twofold Dharma [the Womb and the Diamond Realms] and the yogic practices which use various sacred objects of concentration. This Dharma is the gist of the Buddhas and the quickest path by which to attain enlightenment. This teaching is as useful to the nation as walls are to a city, and as fertile soil is to the people. . . . In India the Tripitaka Master Subhākarasimha [that is, Zenmui] renounced his throne in order to practice it; in China the Emperor Hsüan-tsung forgot the savor of other things in the excess of his appreciation and admiration for it. . . . The Exoteric teachings were overwhelmed and paralyzed by [the Esoteric teachings], being as imperfect as a pearl of which one half is missing. (*MW*, 141)

Following this declaration of success Kūkai acknowledges the seriousness of his failure to meet the terms of his commission to China.

> Though I, Kūkai, may deserve to be punished by death because I did not arrive [at the appointed time], yet I am secretly delighted with my good luck that I am alive and that I have imported the Dharma that is difficult to obtain. I can hardly bear the feelings of fear and joy which alternate in my heart. (*MW*, 142)

As interpreted by Professor Hakeda, Kūkai's expression of anxiety is not mere epistolary convention. He had reason to tremble.[30]

Following the introductory portion of the "Memorial" ("Memorial Presenting a List of Newly Imported Sūtras and Other Items"), Kūkai launches into an itemization of the material he had obtained. Of newly translated sūtras he names one hundred forty-two separate documents; of works in Sanskrit, forty-two titles; of treatises and commentaries, thirty-two works. Of Buddhist icons he lists five mandalas and five portraits; of ritual instruments, eighteen items; of relics from India and elsewhere, thirteen items (including eighty grains of Shākyamuni's remains). And so on. Along with these lists Kūkai provides a running history of Esoteric Buddhism, an account of his own experience in China, and a commentary on the significance of the items obtained. Nearly every item is deemed either important or essential. The documents in Sanskrit, for example, contain sacred sounds (*shingon*) that are valid only when spoken in that tongue. The mandalas are vital because the deeper elements of the secret teaching cannot be expressed in writing. The various *vajra* are precious "gates" through which one may approach the Buddha's wisdom (*MW*, 145, 146).

Kūkai's unabashed claim is that he has returned from China with the keys to individual enlightenment and to the peace and happiness of the nation. The emperor and court need only extend an invitation and he will rush to Heian-kyō with his treasures. But weeks pass without a reply. Then months. The best evidence suggests that it was three years before Kūkai was summoned to the Japanese capital.

One biographer proposes that Kūkai's status at this time, in the eyes of the court at least, was essentially that of a criminal. Another commentator suggests that it was the emperor's (and the court's) relationship with Saichō, the Tendai priest who traveled to China with Kūkai, that kept Kūkai at a distance. Emperor Kammu had instructed Saichō to "perfect [his] understanding of Tendai and all the other schools, and come back [from China] to establish the best form of Buddhism for this country."[31] Saichō had returned, as planned, after less than a year, bringing with him

some 460 volumes of sacred texts of various schools, including Tendai, Pure Land, Zen, and Precept. While in China Saichō also had sought out an esoteric master and furthered his knowledge of esoteric ritual and doctrine. Additionally, he had received esoteric initiations into the Diamond Realm and Womb Realm mandalas, just as Kūkai had (although the exact nature of the rituals is unclear). Only the final *denpō-kanjō* ("consecration for the Transmission of the Dharma") had been omitted. The emperor and court promptly awarded Saichō's Tendai School status as an independent Buddhist teaching with its headquarters on Mt. Hiei, just a short distance to the northeast of Heian-kyō. Additionally, they recognized Esoteric Buddhism as being an integral part of the Tendai curriculum. In fact, Kammu was so satisfied with Saichō's mastery of the glamorous new esoteric faith that he directed him to perform an esoteric initiation for the leading clergy of the nation's major temples (*MW*, 36–37). Thus, while Kūkai was still in China receiving instructions from Hui-kuo, Saichō already was launching the esoteric revolution in Japan.[32]

Historians are uncertain how Kūkai occupied himself during his three years of virtual exile. There is some evidence that he spent a good part of the period in remote Kyūshū, living at Dazaifu's Kanzeon-ji temple.[33] Some accounts have him visiting the capital briefly, in 807, to submit through an intermediary the sūtras and commentaries he had brought from China. Another story has him re-visiting Kume-dera, the temple where he first found the baffling *Dainichi-kyō*. Kūkai is described as preaching to the monks there, telling them of the wisdom he had gained in China. Some enthusiasts compare this sermon with Shākyamuni's inaugural sermon in the deer park at Isipatana. Several accounts have Kūkai staying for a time (perhaps as much as two years) at Makino'o-san-ji in Izumi Province, the temple where he was tonsured. Many stories describe him traveling extensively about the land, performing miracles, founding temples, and depositing at various sites sacred objects brought back from China.

If Kūkai did in fact visit Kume-dera or Makino'o-san-ji, then he almost certainly would have been reunited with Gonzō, his early mentor, who was still a major figure in the Buddhist circles of Nara. One can imagine Gonzō's excitement upon learning of Kūkai's discoveries. In return Kūkai would have learned from Gonzō that the Nara circle was watching Saichō's rise in Heian-kyō with trepidation, for Saichō was

openly declaring his newly established Tendai sect to be superior to all six of the Nara schools, condemning them as too theoretical and narrow. Kūkai also would have learned that Saichō was working to harmonize Tendai beliefs with the newly acquired Esoteric thought. Such information could only have caused Kūkai anguish.

On the plus side, Kūkai's long exile provided him with invaluable time for reflection and preparation. Hui-kuo may have been a profound teacher and unifier, but unlike his predecessors in the Esoteric patriarchal succession he had left nothing in writing. Thus, it fell to Kūkai to fully systematize the doctrine and practice that would become known as Shingon. When the call finally came from the capital, Kūkai was ready.

Around the middle of 809 Kūkai received an order from the imperial court to take up residence at Takaosan-ji in the mountains just beyond the northwestern suburbs of the capital. Kūkai must have been delighted. The landscape surrounding the temple was beautiful. The imperial palace was only ten kilometers from the front gate. And Takaosan-ji already had a little of the esoteric flavor, for it was here that Saichō had performed the *abhisheka* ritual at the direction of Emperor Kammu.

What brought Kūkai this assignment is not entirely clear. His uncle Atō Ōtari would not have been of any help, for Atō's former royal pupil, Prince Iyo, recently had been placed in prison under suspicion of rebellion and forced to commit suicide. Atō himself had fled to Shikoku. Another imperial event may have assisted Kūkai, however. Emperor Heizei, after only three years on the throne, had abdicated in favor of his twenty-four-year-old younger brother, Saga. Saga was an artistically talented young man whose greatest passions were Chinese classical literature, T'ang poetry, and Chinese calligraphy. He was so accomplished in the last of these that Chinese envoys were said to raise his handwritten documents to their brows and beg permission to carry samples back to China.[34] Kūkai also was becoming known as an accomplished calligrapher, poet, and literary theorist. Thus Saga, upon learning of Kūkai's interests and abilities, may have sought to bring him into the cultural orbit of the capital.

Still more intriguing is the possibility that Saichō was instrumental in the invitation. Saichō certainly would have desired to see the rare but essential esoteric materials said to be in Kūkai's possession, and to learn

something of Kūkai's special training under Hui-kuo. Perhaps he wished to use Kūkai's advanced knowledge of Esoteric Buddhism to further expand those elements in Tendai.

In any event, Kūkai was now in the environs of the capital, and soon was responding to Emperor Saga's requests for poems and for samples of calligraphy in various styles, both in Chinese and in Sanskrit. Some of the calligraphic skills Kūkai had mastered in China were now being introduced to Japan for the first time, and Saga became Kūkai's eager pupil. Kūkai composed letters for the young emperor and even made him four writing brushes using methods learned in China (one brush for writing the square style, one for the semi-cursive style, one for the cursive, one for copying). He may also have manufactured Chinese-style ink sticks for Saga's use. These were not dilettantish matters, for in Japan, as in China, calligraphy was regarded as the most spiritually and intellectually profound of the arts. No other art so fully tested and manifested one's essential character.[35]

Being close to Emperor Saga meant that Kūkai had an opportunity to attract other men of power and learning. In this setting his personal charm and political astuteness began to be rewarded. Within the year the court appointed Kūkai administrative director of Nara's massive Tōdai-ji temple, national home of the Great Sun Buddha and acknowledged center of the Japanese Buddhist universe. At Tōdai-ji was the one ritual platform where the nation's priests could be ordained. The appointment likely was urged by the heads of the Nara temples, who already were seeing in Kūkai someone close to the emperor whom they could trust, in contrast to the combative Saichō. Kūkai held the post for three years, during which time he continued to develop his influence among the Nara clergy.

In his second year at Takaosan-ji Kūkai submitted a formal memorial to Emperor Saga requesting permission to initiate some of his followers in the mantra recitations documented in the texts he had brought back from China.

> [These rituals] enable a king to vanquish the seven calamities, to maintain the four seasons in harmony, to protect the nation and family, and to give comfort to himself and others. . . .

> Though I have received the transmission from my master, I have been unable to perform [the rituals prescribed in these sūtras]. For the good of the state I sincerely desire to initiate my disciples and, beginning on the first day of next month, to perform the rituals at the Takaosanji until the dharma takes visible effect. Also, I wish that throughout this period I might not have to leave my residence and that I might suffer no interruption. I may be an insignificant and inferior man, but this thought and this wish move my heart. (*MW*, 41)

Saga acceded to the request, fully understanding that Kūkai was giving to his own personal religious mission precedence over the cultural-social employment the emperor habitually required of him. During one of Kūkai's subsequent absences for meditation in the mountains Saga sent him a wistful poem together with some warm clothes.

> This quiet monk has lived on the peak in the clouds
> For a long time.
> Here far from you, I think of the deep mountain still cold
> Even though it is Spring.
> The pines and cedars are keeping silent.
> How long have you been breathing the mist and fog?
> No recent news has come from your abode of meditation.
> The flowers are blooming and the willows are relaxing
> Here at [Heian-kyō] in the Spring.
> O Bodhisattva, do not reject this small present
> And help the giver troubled with worldly concerns.[36]

In accordance with custom, Kūkai composed in reply a poem with a rhythm and diction modeled on Saga's.[37] The bond between Kūkai and Saga seems to have been quite genuine, even intense. Today no other Japanese emperor is held in such esteem at Kōyasan.

Contact between Kūkai and Saichō began shortly after Kūkai's arrival at Takaosan-ji. Shingon historians suggest pointedly that it was Saichō who first sought out the younger Kūkai, presumably in recognition of Kūkai's greater knowledge of Esoteric theory and practice. Tendai

historians sometimes insist the initiative went the other way. Whatever the case, contact between the two seems at the beginning to have been entirely cordial and free of ceremonial hesitation over seniority or precedence. Quite clearly, the conscientious Saichō, acknowledging his incomplete grasp of Esoteric thought, regarded access to Kūkai to be a personal blessing. "Although I have undertaken the long journey to China," he wrote to a patron, "willingly risking my life for the sake of the Dharma, I am still deficient in the way of [*Shingon-dō*]. The Master Kūkai fortunately was able to study this after reaching Ch'ang-an."[38]

Over the next several years Saichō requested the loan of some thirty sūtras and sūtra commentaries that Kūkai had brought from China. The solicitations were made humbly, in a spirit of mutual purpose, and Kūkai responded graciously. Saichō also began sending some of his better disciples to take instruction in Esoteric thought from Kūkai.

Although Saichō had received in China the introductory initiations into the Diamond Realm and Womb Realm mandalas, he had been unable to obtain copies of the mandalas themselves. Nor had he received anything more than rudimentary instruction in their ceremonial use. Therefore, near the close of 812 Saichō asked Kūkai to conduct for him the intermediate initiations into both mandalas. This Kūkai did, at first for a small group of four that included Saichō, then for a much larger group of initiates, among them several chief priests from the Nara sects, members of the nobility, some of Saichō's own disciples, and Saichō himself. In Kūkai's own written record of the initiations Saichō's name heads the list of recipients.

Saichō next requested that Kūkai initiate him into the *denpō-kanjō*, the consecration for the Transmission of the Dharma. This, the highest initiation ceremony, would qualify Saichō as a full master of Esoteric Buddhism. But the ceremony was not performed. The usual telling of the incident has Kūkai writing somewhat arrogantly to Saichō that to become eligible for such a transmission Saichō would need to enter into three years of study—that is, Saichō would need to become Kūkai's pupil for three years. Another reading of the available documents suggests that Kūkai simply was telling Saichō how long it would take to master fully the complex rituals associated with Shingon, three years being the length of time Kūkai himself had taken.[39] Although Saichō did not receive the *denpō-kanjō* transmission, he continued to send his own disciples to

Kūkai at Takaosan-ji. In the spring of 813 Kūkai conducted the *denpō-kanjō* for some of these men.

The differences between Saichō and Kūkai were now in the open. It was Saichō's belief that Tendai and Shingon were in full harmony and stood on an equal footing with one another. "The Esoteric teachings and those of Tendai permeate each other and share common ancestors," he wrote to Kūkai. "There is no distinction between the teachings of One Vehicle [the Tendai] and those of Shingon." To a disciple of his who was then studying with Kūkai, Saichō wrote: "With regard to the One Vehicle of the *Lotus* or the One Vehicle of Shingon, how can anyone claim that one is superior and the other inferior?"[40] But just such a claim lay at the heart of Kūkai's own belief and mission. Kūkai granted that there was a harmony between Esoteric teaching and Tendai teaching (and with virtually all other religious teachings as well), but this harmony he believed to be of a hierarchical order. Shingon, the True Word, because it was manifested directly by Dainichi Buddha, was the only ultimately true and comprehensive teaching, and could be transmitted only through a private communication from master to pupil. All other teachings, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, were *exo*-teric in nature and fell away in a descending order of adequacy down to the most primitive religious awareness. In a ten-leveled system Kūkai placed Tendai near the top among Japanese religious traditions, but for him to grant to Tendai a status equal to Shingon would have been to violate all he had inherited from his master, Hui-kuo.

Predictably, in late 813, when Kūkai received a request from Saichō for the loan of the *Rishushaku-kyō*, an esoteric commentary by Amoghavajra on the *Rishu-kyō* sūtra, Kūkai refused the request. He wrote back that the text in question (which discussed the essential but easily misunderstood principle of *sokushin jōbutsu*: "attaining buddhahood in this very body") could not be studied properly without the traditional oral teaching. Saichō's independent approach, Kūkai explained, was one that would lead inevitably to a corruption of the Esoteric teachings:

> If the reception and the transmission of the teachings are not made properly, how will it be possible for future generations to discern what is correct and what is not? . . . . [The] transmission of the arcane meaning of Esoteric Buddhism does not depend

> on written words. The transmission is direct, from mind to mind. Words are only paste and pebbles: if one relies solely on them, then the Ultimate is lost.[41]

Some readers of this famous letter have concluded that Kūkai was demanding that the senior Saichō become his disciple. The text is "violent in tone, unlike an ordinary letter of Daishi," remarks Professor Yamamoto.[42] But the question of discipleship (or even of deference) may not have been the primary issue. Kūkai seems to be asserting, plausibly, that if Saichō truly wishes to embrace the vision of Shingon, then he will have to accept both the fact of Shingon's primacy and the principle of private, face-to-face transmission.

Saichō, understandably, could not grant that Shingon transcended Tendai. Thus, the period of close cooperation between the two men ended. Kūkai continued to receive Saichō's disciples for instruction, but over a period of time even that arrangement soured. In 816 Saichō's closest follower, Taihan (778–858?), defected fully to Kūkai. When Saichō sent the young man a forlorn appeal to rejoin him on Mt. Hiei, Kūkai answered on Taihan's behalf, explaining that Taihan's preference for remaining at Takaosan-ji was not a matter of choosing one master over another. Taihan simply had accepted the primacy of Shingon and its direct transmission "from mind to mind."

The older priest's feelings were deeply hurt. Taihan had been both Saichō's personal favorite and his designated successor. And Taihan wasn't the only defector. Other young scholars were leaving the cold and isolation of Mt. Hiei to study Shingon with the charismatic Kūkai. Even worse, some were joining the Hosso sect in Nara. In the years between 807 and 817 only six of Saichō's twenty government-sponsored trainees chose to return to Mt. Hiei after their ordinations in Nara.[43] Saichō appeared to be losing the battle for the minds of his own disciples.

In this emergency Saichō proposed a number of organizational changes, the most revolutionary of which was a request to the court that it grant Mt. Hiei the power to perform its own ordinations. With such an arrangement Saichō could keep his followers away from hostile Nara. When the Nara clergy learned of the proposal their opposition was vigorous and bitter. The court, not wishing to involve itself in the dispute, denied Saichō's request. All the same, there were many in the capital who admired Saichō and believed Saichō's temple on Mt. Hiei was Heian-kyō's primary spiritual protector. To these people Nara's opposition seemed petty and arrogant.

Just seven days after Saichō's death, in 822 at age fifty-six, the court changed its mind and granted Mt. Hiei the requested ordination platform, an act that in effect made Tendai the nation's first autonomous Buddhist sect. Subsequently, the vast Mt. Hiei complex, blessed with both a strategic location and a succession of vigorous leaders, greatly strengthened its influence. In 866, just forty-four years after his death, Saichō became the first Japanese priest to be awarded by the court the posthumous title of Daishi (Dengyō Daishi).

Along with his activities as ritualist, teacher, administrator, and belle-lettrist, Kūkai produced during his years at Takaosan-ji a series of treatises that conveyed the heart of his religious thinking. Two of these productions were especially important doctrinally. The first, *Benkenmitsu nikyō ron* ("The Difference between Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism"; c. 814), sometimes described as a "religious manifesto," is an instructional guide presented partly in the form of questions and answers. Among its primary assertions is that Shākyamuni's public sermons, although superficially exoteric in nature (a concession to his spiritually ill-prepared audience), contain hints of a second, secret discourse. This second discourse, which appears less disguised in the major esoteric sūtras, corresponds directly with the communication that the Central Buddha carries on continuously with his own reflected selves in the great mandala. That is, it expresses the ultimate state of enlightenment.

Question: How is this possible, given that we have been taught that Dainichi, the Central Buddha, the Dharmakāya, is "formless and imageless . . . beyond verbalization and conceptualization" (*MW*, 154)? Surely, mere men and women are not capable of hearing and understanding what can be received by the highly evolved Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Devas of the great mandala.

Answer: Agreed, the Dharmakāya's voice cannot be heard by us at this moment, but that is because our illusions conceal from us our own true natures. Within each of us is a Buddha-seed, the true self, and this true self is present in the mandala. By means of practicing the prescribed *shingon* (Sk. *mantra*) we can attain this true self. Intrinsic to Kūkai's argument is his perception that the primal "language" of ultimate reality—

that is, of the Dharma Buddha—is communicated by nature in its varied phenomenal manifestations. In short, phenomenal nature, as perceived by the enlightened mind, *is* the Dharma Buddha.[44]

The second work, *Sokushin jōbutsu gi* ("Attaining Enlightenment in This Very Existence"; c. 820), builds upon the first. Here Kūkai explains how a devotee trained in the "three mysteries" of body, speech, and mind can, without abandoning his or her present body, achieve the same meditation (*samādhi*) that is realized by the Central Buddha. That is, a person can become a Buddha without proceeding any farther in the seemingly endless cycle of birth and death.[45] Nirvāna, Enlightenment, Buddhahood, aren't conditions one achieves in death. They are achieved in life—ideally, in one's present life. Death, being illusory, makes no contribution at all.

There is a well-known story set during this period that dramatizes in miraculous fashion Kūkai's *sokushin jōbutsu* doctrine. It seems that in 813 Emperor Saga asked the head priests of Japan's various Buddhist sects to come to his quarters in the palace and there present the basic doctrines of their individual faiths. At the symposium each priest in turn explained to the emperor that while becoming a Buddha was the eventual hope of the members of his sect, the actual attainment of this goal would require a nearly infinite stretch of lifetimes. When his turn came Kūkai spoke of a shorter path, one that could be completed within a single life. "If one maintains the mind of the Buddha while searching for the Buddha's wisdom, then one can become a Buddha in this very existence."

The other priests, though respectful of Kūkai, were unanimously skeptical. In response Kūkai turned his body toward the south and began to meditate while reciting a mantra and performing the appropriate hand positions. Within moments his body took on the form of the Great Sun Buddha with divine light streaming outward in all directions. Illustrations of this famous transfiguration show the astonished emperor and audience of priests bowing down in reverence before the glare.[46]

Kūkai's years at Takaosan-ji represented a period of remarkable achievement, but he had not found at this location the optimal atmosphere either for teaching or for meditation. Callers were constantly at the gate, often carrying messages of request from court nobles and from the

emperor. The thunder of sectarian politics, especially the struggle between Heian-kyō and Nara ecclesiastics, was a constant distraction. Kūkai desired a more profound sequestration both for himself and for the proper training of his disciples.

In the late spring of 816, the year following Taihan's defection from Mt. Hiei to Takaosan-ji, Kūkai submitted an intensely felt formal request to Emperor Saga. He began by observing that in India and in China mountains had long been the locales favored by students of meditation, for it was in such places that the Buddhas were most prone to preach and manifest themselves. Those who meditate in the mountains, he told the emperor, "are treasures of the nation . . . are like bridges for the people." But in today's Japan, despite an apparent flowering of Buddhism, these bridges were largely missing. The "teaching of meditation has not been transmitted, nor has a suitable place been allocated for the practice of meditation." Kūkai then made the request he had been pondering since his return from China.

> When young, I, Kūkai, often walked through mountainous areas and crossed many rivers. There is a quiet place called Kōya located two days' walk to the west from a point that is one day's walk south from Yoshino. I estimate the area to be south of Ito-no-kōri in Kinokuni. High peaks surround Kōya in all four directions; no human tracks, still less trails, are to be seen there. I should like to clear the wilderness in order to build a monastery there for the practice of meditation, for the benefit of the nation and of those who desire to discipline themselves. . . . The rise or fall of the Dharma, indeed, depends on the mind of the emperor. Whether the object is small or large, I dare not make it mine until I have been granted your permission. I earnestly wish that the empty land be granted me so that I may fulfill my humble desire. (*MW*, 47)

Permission came quickly. The letter of request to the Emperor is dated June 19, 816. The court's affirmative reply to Kūkai is dated July 8. Kūkai was then forty-three years old.

THE FOUNDING OF KŌYASAN

The following spring (of 817) Kūkai sent two disciples southward to survey the high mountain valley of Kōyasan. One of these disciples was Jichie, whom he already had appointed master of Takaosan-ji. The other disciple was Taihan, Saichō's former favorite. To these two Kūkai would entrust much of the responsibility for constructing the first buildings at Kōyasan.

On November 16 of the succeeding year Kūkai himself climbed the mountain to see what progress had been made. Likely no more than a few huts had been built at this point, but it was essential to formulate careful plans for future construction. Kōyasan was to be designed so that it represented a mandala both physically and spiritually.

In early May of the next year (819), at the height of spring on the mountain, Kūkai conducted a ceremony formally consecrating Kōyasan to its spiritual purposes. He began with an invocation to all sacred beings, starting with the Buddhas, then the divinities of the two mandalas, then the heavenly and earthly gods of Japan, then, finally, the demons who presided over the five elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and space. Every sentient as well as every non-sentient being, he said, had the capacity to become a Buddha, and it was the law of the Dharma that this should come about. "The Buddha nature and the reason of things pervade the world. They are not different. Oneself and other things are equal." He then related how Dainichi Buddha, in consideration of the meaning of this equality, had by his great compassion transmitted the previously hidden Esoteric wisdom to humankind, first passing it to Kongōsatta (Sk. Vajrasattva), and thence down the patriarchal line to Hui-kuo and to himself. Kōyasan would be a place for the teaching and propagation of this revealed Esoteric wisdom.

> May the divinities thereby be pleased and may the divinities protect. . . . May bad demons go out of the boundary of Kōyasan that extends 7[*ri*] in the four cardinal points, the intermediate directions and the upper and the lower regions. All the good gods and demons that give advantage to Esoteric Buddhism, please stay here as you like. [I ask the support of] the noble spirits of the emperors and empresses since the foundation of the State of Japan as well as all the gods of heaven and earth. I would like to entreat that all the souls of the deceased persons may protect this sanctuary and thereby let my wish be fulfilled.[47]

The full consecration ceremony covered seven days and seven nights.

The location Kūkai had selected for his remote monastery was ideal. A rim of low, heavily timbered peaks circled the small valley, protecting it from the full force of mountain storms. Most of the valley floor was either level or gently sloping, ideal for the construction of monastery halls. The needed timber was immediately at hand. A stream fed by hillside springs ran the length of the valley. In all seasons water would be plentiful. "Many distant places were investigated," Kūkai said, "until at last this place was found out to be most becoming."[48]

Legend adds some colorful details to the founding of Kōyasan. One story tells of the assistance of the hunter god Kariba-myōjin and his two dogs, Shiro and Kuro.[49] The suggested time of Kūkai's encounter with the hunter god varies. Perhaps it occurred just prior to his sending the letter to Emperor Saga requesting permission to build a monastery on Kōyasan. Or it may have occurred some years before that, shortly after his return from China. In all versions Kūkai is traveling alone. As he journeys westward from Yoshino he encounters a tall man dressed in a blue hunting suit and armed with a bow. With the hunter are two dogs, one white and one black. Kūkai informs the hunter that he has been searching throughout the nation for a spiritual site suitable for meditation and the study of the Dharma. Does the hunter know of such a place?

"Mount Kōya is in the province of Ki-no-kuni," the hunter answers, pointing in that direction. "You should look there. It contains a high valley protected by surrounding mountains. For many ages this valley has been a sacred place. In the daytime a purple cloud overhangs the valley, and at night a mysterious light appears. If you wish to see Mt. Kōya, please take my two dogs with you as companions, for they know the way." With that the hunter disappears.[50]

By nightfall Kūkai and the dogs reach the south bank of the Kinokawa River, at a spot that later becomes the location of Jison-in, the temple that would serve as the primary river entry port to Kōyasan. In

the morning, with the dogs still in the lead, Kūkai enters the mountain. As he is crossing the ridge above the village of Amano a royal lady appears before him dressed in a gown of blue with a golden ornament in her hair. She introduces herself as Niutsuhime-no-mikoto, the guardian deity of the surrounding mountain domain. The hunter god is her son (some versions say her husband). The goddess's primary shrine is just down the hill in Amano village.[51]

"You have permission to enter my domain," she tells Kūkai. "If you should choose to build your monastery on Mt. Kōya, my son and I will remain close by to protect the flame of the Exalted Law. We will keep our vigil until the coming of Miroku Bosatsu."[52]

Kūkai climbs farther, and just as he and the dogs reach the clouds that are hiding the highest ridge they pass through an opening in the forest and enter a beautiful valley. The valley's horizon is formed by eight peaks, like the eight petals of a sacred lotus blossom.[53]

An equally famous legend attaches to a visit Kūkai made to Kōyasan in May 819. As the workmen are felling trees to create a clearing, Kūkai walks among them trying to decide on the precise location for the monastery. The hour grows late. The sun falls below the western ridge, throwing the forest into twilight darkness. At that point Kūkai notices a bright light shining among some trees a short distance from where he is standing. Walking closer he observes a single glowing object in the crown of a three-needle pine. This object is the golden three-pronged *vajra*, or *sanko*, he had thrown skyward from China some twelve years earlier. Kūkai immediately instructs the workmen to leave the tree uncut. Henceforward it becomes known as the *Sanko-no-matsu*, or Pine Tree of the Sanko. The first monastery residence hall will be built on the north side of this pine.

A second sacred object also is found at the site of the future monastery. While digging up a stump a workman unearths a sword with an inscription only Kūkai has the skill to read. "In this place," says the inscription, "Kashō entered into eternal meditation [Nirvāna]." Kashō (Sk. Kāshyapa) is the historical Buddha who immediately preceded India's Shākyamuni. Kūkai orders that a copper container be made for the sword, and then, after performing a ground-purifying ceremony, has it returned to the earth. To the present day—or so it is supposed—the sword remains buried at the spot where it was found, beneath the Great Stūpa.[54]

Kūkai named his remote mountain monastery Kongōbu-ji, "*Vajra* Peak Temple." The *vajra* (J. *kongō*), often translated as "diamond," represents among other things the brilliantly hard, indestructible essence of the Dharma. Thus, we have a diamond monastery at the center of a lotus formed by eight surrounding mountains: *the-diamond-in-the-lotus.*

SERVANT TO EMPEROR AND NATION

Kūkai spent a good portion of 818 and 819 supervising construction at Kōyasan, but progress was slow. Work could not be sustained through the winter months, and, since the new temple was without government sponsorship, needed money and supplies had to be obtained by making special appeals, frequently to clans in the Kii area. Meanwhile, the primary locale for training his disciples continued to be Takaosan-ji.

An equal priority with the training of monks in the Shingon faith was Kūkai's obligation to serve the emperor and the state. The two goals were intimately related. Buddhism had been embraced by the imperial court in the seventh century precisely because it promised to bring great benefit to the nation. Now in the ninth century Kūkai was offering Shingon Esoteric Buddhism as the latest and perhaps ultimate fulfillment of this pledge. A nation that lived in harmony with the Great Sun Buddha would enjoy peace and prosperity in full measure. If special emergencies arose, remedial esoteric rituals could be employed to set things right.

Thus, when an epidemic disease began to sweep the nation in 818 Emperor Saga turned to Kūkai. In response Kūkai assigned to the emperor the task of transcribing the *Heart Sutra* (*Hannya-shingyō*) while he himself presented a series of lectures on the merits of the text. Faced with this team effort the epidemic soon abated. A later account of Kūkai's intervention describes the roads of Japan as filled with men and women and children whom he had "raised from the dead."[55]

Another well-known story of Kūkai's performances as ritualist to the nation tells of a drought that threatened the area of the capital in 824. For three months no rain had fallen and fears of a general rice crop

failure and subsequent famine were growing. The imperial court's traditional practice on such occasions had been to instruct the monks and nuns of the affected provinces to chant sūtras for five days in the hope of inducing rain, but this time Emperor Junna (Saga's successor) directly solicited Kūkai's help. Kūkai immediately set up an altar beside the pond in the garden at the Imperial Palace and performed a rain-inducing rite. Almost before he had finished, a steady rain began to fall, first upon the garden itself and then outward across the parched land. For three days and three nights the rain continued—one day and one night of rain for each month of the drought. In later centuries this rainfall became known as "Kōbō's rain."[56] The location of the miracle, the Shinsen-en garden near Kyōto's Nijō Castle, is a popular tourist site today.

Kūkai's job as an imperial wonder worker was a busy one. Shortly before his death he wrote that four successive emperors had appealed to him on fifty-one different occasions to prepare an altar and conduct special prayers for the benefit of the nation.[57]

There also are numerous accounts of Kūkai's practical contributions to Japanese society quite apart from his employment of esoteric ritual. The claim is made that he was the first to teach the Japanese the use of coal and petroleum and that he first discovered and publicized the health benefits of hot springs. He is said to have added to the nation's knowledge in the fields of astronomy, physics, pharmaceuticals, and metallurgy.[58] He evidently also was a skilled civil engineer. The most famous and best-documented demonstration of his engineering prowess was the rebuilding in 821 of the Mannō-no-ike, a large reservoir near his birthplace in Sanuki province of Shikoku. This reservoir, already a century old at the time, had deteriorated and finally collapsed, thereby making it virtually impossible for the rice farmers in the area to produce their primary subsistence crop. After several directors had failed to remedy the problem, the local governor wrote to the capital requesting that Kūkai be assigned to the project. The demoralized Shikoku workforce, the governor said, would not fail to respond to the leadership of a man so admired and loved. Thus Kūkai, in one of the busiest years of his life, went to Shikoku with one novice and four acolytes, set up a fire altar on an island in the pond, and spent the following summer months supervising the redesign and reconstruction of a reservoir twenty kilometers in circumference. The task was accomplished with such skill that

the Mannō-no-ike operates today as one of the nation's oldest and largest irrigation reservoirs.[59]

Most of Kūkai's administrative work involved Buddhist temples. In addition to the three years as head of Tōdai-ji (in Nara) he held directorships at Atago-ji (near the capital), at Daian-ji (also a great Nara temple), at Murō-ji (west of Nara), and at Kōfuku-ji (along the route to Kōyasan). His most significant directorship was at Tō-ji temple in the capital. This assignment came in 823.

One of Emperor Kammu's strategies in founding the new capital of Heian-kyō was to free imperial authority from the influence of the powerful Buddhist temples of Nara. Kammu wished to retain the spiritual protection of the Buddhist faith, however, and for this reason encouraged the growth of Saichō's Tendai temple on Mount Hiei, which was positioned to guard the capital from the dangerous northeast direction. Within the capital city itself Kammu cautiously authorized the building of two temples to guard the city's imposing main southern entrance, the Rashōmon Gate. East of the gate was Tō-ji ("East Temple"). To the west was Sai-ji ("West Temple").

In 796, two years after the founding of the capital, construction supervisors were appointed for these east and west temples, but progress was exceedingly slow. As a consequence, in January 823, while he was still at Takaosan-ji, Kūkai received a message from Emperor Saga appointing him general director of Tō-ji. Saga was preparing to go into retirement in a few months and apparently wanted Tō-ji's lagging construction speeded up. He may also have seen in the appointment a final gift he could give to his friend. Kūkai would now have within the capital itself a temple that was ideally suited to become the headquarters of the new Shingon sect.

Kūkai immediately moved from Takaosan-ji to Tō-ji, and in a few months' time submitted to the newly enthroned Emperor Junna (r. 823–833) an outline of a course of study for students of Shingon. Emperor Junna approved the proposal, using for the first time in an official document the term *Shingon-shū* (Shingon Sect). Junna agreed that Kūkai would be permitted to keep as many as fifty monks at Tō-ji and, even more significant, to use Tō-ji exclusively for the teaching of the Shingon faith. Such exclusivity was revolutionary, for up to this time all government-sponsored temples had been open to monks of all schools. The

official name given to Tō-ji was Kyō-ō-gokuku-ji—literally, "Temple of the Authorized Doctrine for the Protection of the Country."

At the time of Kūkai's takeover a Golden Hall (Kondō) already stood on Tō-ji's spacious grounds. He soon began work on a Lecture Hall (Kōdō) which he equipped internally with a large raised platform (*shumidan*). On this platform Kūkai placed in mandala formation twenty-one remarkable sculptures that today are world famous.[60]

Kūkai also initiated at Tō-ji a 187-foot, five-tiered pagoda, a daring technical undertaking. An old document states that in the initial construction between three and five hundred workers were required to haul a single central pillar from the mountain forests of nearby Higashi-yama.[61] Today the Tō-ji pagoda, a reconstruction dating from 1643, is both a National Treasure and Japan's tallest surviving pagoda. Its romantic silhouette observed at dusk remains Kyōto's signature image.

In 828, while continuing to expand both Tō-ji and Kōyasan, Kūkai launched one of the most innovative experiments in Japanese educational history, the Shugei-shuchi-in (literally, "synthesis providing seeds of wisdom"), a comprehensive school of arts and sciences he located a short distance to the east of Tō-ji.[62] Three aspects of the school are especially notable. First, Kūkai held that a proper setting was vital to productive learning, and so the school was placed in a pastoral area with flowing water and forest walks. Second, he installed a uniquely inclusive curriculum. Up to that time (as Kūkai made clear in his inaugural document) monastery students training for the priesthood studied only Buddhist texts while the national school students training for government service studied only non-Buddhist texts. Believing any curricular narrowness to be inhibiting to enlightenment, Kūkai designed a curriculum that included Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, law, logic, diplomacy, music, horsemanship, calligraphy, mathematics, grammar, medicine, art, philosophy, and astronomy. The aim was to address all the formulated knowledge of the day.

The third feature may have been the most truly innovative. Kūkai's school made no class distinctions when admitting students. Japan's national college admitted only the nobility. The private schools run by aristocratic families similarly excluded commoner children. Shugei-shuchi-in admitted children from all social classes, and most particularly the children of the poor. Tuition was free. Those who had long distances

to travel were housed at no cost. Both students and teachers received free meals. Kūkai admonished his instructors to approach each student in a compassionate and evenhanded manner, never being influenced by whether a student was from an elite or an ordinary family. "'The beings in the triple world are my children,' announced the Buddha. And there is a beautiful saying of Confucius that 'all within the four seas are brothers.' Do honor to these teachings!" (*MW*, 57–58).

Arguably, only Kūkai could have succeeded in establishing such a school, or in sustaining it. Within a decade after Kūkai's death Shugei-shuchi-in was closed and its land sold to buy rice fields to support the training of priests. However, much of the spirit of Shugei-shuchi-in survives today in a Shingon college, also named Shugei-shuchi-in, that abuts the Tō-ji temple grounds. The spirit of Shugei-shuchi-in also survives in large measure at Kōyasan University and at the other schools on the mountain.

A number of well-known legends attach to Kūkai's residence at Tō-ji. Some are commonplace and trivial, such as the story that he magically straightened the great pagoda when it began to lean during construction. Some others have considerable significance. Among the latter is the legend that shortly after receiving Tō-ji from Emperor Saga Kūkai walked to nearby Mount Fushimi with an offering for the powerful rice god Inari. At the summit of the mountain Inari appeared, took the offering directly from Kūkai's hand, and said, "Together, you and I, we will protect this people."[63] From that moment forward the rice god became Tō-ji's most powerful native protector. Another version of this story has earlier incarnations of Kūkai and Inari meeting in India while attending a lecture by Shākyamuni. At that time Kūkai said to Inari, "Some day I will be born in an eastern land and will spread Buddhism there, and you will come and be the protective deity of the secret teachings." And so centuries later Inari appeared at the South Gate of Tō-ji in fulfillment of the prophecy.[64] Such stories argued that the new Shingon faith, although an importation from China and India, was not antithetical to the native gods. In fact, the native gods eagerly welcomed the opportunity to become Shingon's defenders and collaborators.[65]

A more extravagant and still better known legend concerning Kūkai's directorship of Tō-ji has him involved in a death struggle with the head priest of rival Sai-ji (West Temple). The full details of the

encounter are found in the popular fourteenth-century war chronicle *The Taiheiki.*[66] It seems that Sai-ji's chief priest, a master magician named Shubin, had grown embittered at what he judged to be the emperor's open preference for Kūkai. So to punish the emperor Shubin secretly captured all the dragon gods of the universe and shut them up in a water jar. With the dragons imprisoned, not a drop of rain fell during the crucial months preceding Japan's rice planting. Called to deal with the crisis, Kūkai began praying for rain, and during his prayers discovered Shubin's plot. Although unable to undo Shubin's powerful magic, Kūkai did succeed in locating one dragon that Shubin had overlooked. That dragon, whose name was Zennyo-ryū-ō ("Good-Natured Dragon Queen"), Kūkai persuaded to come to Japan. Upon Zennyo-ryū-ō's arrival a great rain fell, the rice crop was saved, and Kūkai gained still more favor with the emperor.

Shubin's response to this turn of events was to shut himself up in the West Temple, make a three-cornered altar facing north, and summon one of the Five Bright Kings (Godai-myō-ō) from the Diamond Realm Mandala. This warrior king Shubin instructed to launch a series of arrows at Kūkai. Kūkai, secretly learning of the threat, summoned his own Bright King from the Womb Realm Mandala. So as Shubin's arrows flew over the Rashōmon Gate and began their deadly descent on Tō-ji, Kūkai's arrows rose to intercept them, dropping each one harmlessly to the earth. Realizing that Shubin would be unable to detect the failure of the arrow attack, Kūkai sent out a rumor that one of the arrows had produced a fatal wound. On hearing the sad news all Heian-kyō entered mourning. The gleeful Shubin at once began to dismantle his altar, but in that moment his magic rebounded against him. First he was struck blind. Then his nose began to gush blood. In another instant he lay dead. Subsequently, Shubin's West Temple fell into ruin, while Kūkai's East Temple grew in power and beauty. Visitors to Kyōto today will find no trace of West Temple, nor, for that matter, of the Rashōmon Gate. Tō-ji, by contrast, is one of Japan's largest and most active Buddhist temples, especially on the twenty-first day of each month, the day that memorializes Kōbō Daishi's entrance into his final meditation. On that day visitors by the tens of thousands flood through its gates to pray to Odaishi-sama and the healing Buddha, and to shop among the flea market stalls that fill the grounds.

KŪKAI'S THEORY OF THE TEN STAGES

In his earlier treatises Kūkai had been preoccupied with setting Shingon Esoteric beliefs off against the rival Buddhist schools of thinking, with particular emphasis on the contrast between esoteric and exoteric teachings. Gradually, however, he came to present Shingon more as a final stage of religious development toward which all the other faiths, including the non-Buddhist ones, were evolving. The issue now was less one of truth or falsity and more one of how far the religious mind had progressed. All earnest religious activity was to be regarded affirmatively as a manifestation of Dainichi Buddha. All ultimately served the Great Sun Buddha's compassionate desire that sentient beings attain enlightenment. This unifying theme formed the central argument of the most ambitious of Kūkai's approximately fifty religious treatises, a massive synthesis of religious thought called *Jūjū-shin-ron* ("The Ten Stages of the Development of the Mind").

The occasion of its composition was a directive issued in 830 by Emperor Junna for each of the recognized Buddhist schools to present a summary of their essential beliefs. The timing of this directive was appropriate, for Japanese Buddhism was then threatening to fracture. The six Nara schools were still viewed as a single religious cooperative, their dividing differences being largely pedantic and abstract, but the two new faiths of the capital, Tendai and Shingon, appeared to be seeking separate identities. Or at least this was true of Saichō's Tendai. Kūkai's emphasis seems to have been more integrative and less sectarian.[67] Perhaps Emperor Junna hoped the exercise would reveal an underlying harmony of belief that would reduce the potential for future disorder.

Kūkai's response to the Emperor's instruction, *The Ten Stages*, was a long and comprehensive discourse that in effect offered a schematic summation of the evolution of human religious perception.[68] In the First Stage, he argued, man was totally dominated by instinctive appetite and consequently was without ethical perceptions. Even at this primitive level, however, there was potential for growth because of the presence of the innate Buddha-mind. In Stage Two the ethical mind awakened and man discovered within himself a spontaneous desire to control his passions, perform charities, and live a human rather than a bestial life. This stage Kūkai equated with the ethical vision of Confucianism. In Stage Three,

prompted by a perception of the mutability of things, man experienced a child-like hope of rebirth in the eternal peace of heaven, but the motivation was totally selfish. This stage Kūkai associated with Taoism and certain egoistic Buddhist and Indian groups that employed asceticism, good works, prayer, and magical formulas for personal gain only. In Stage Four the mind freed itself from egoistic thinking, but still accepted as real such components of the ego as perception, will, and consciousness.

In Stage Five the mind entirely overcame the ignorance that made it subject to the lures of the world. The chains of *karma* were broken and the cycle of perpetual rebirth ended. All the same, this fifth mind was inclined to grow complacent and rest, giving little thought to the torment of those who still lived in bondage. Not until Stage Six did the mind awaken to an unconditional compassion for others. Now the believer sought the salvation of all sentient beings, a sentiment that corresponded to Miroku's meditation in the Tushita Heaven and marked the transition from southern Hīnayāna ("Small Vehicle") Buddhism to northern Mahāyāna ("Large Vehicle") Buddhism. This stage Kūkai perceived in the teaching of Nara's Hossō sect. In Stage Seven the mind achieved the realization that all objects within the consciousness, including consciousness itself, were "unborn" and "void." Observer and object, birth and death, being and nonbeing, were recognized as without distinction or content. The teaching of the Sanron school of Nara expressed this level of perception.

The mind of Stage Eight recognized that matter and mind, the world of illusion, the world of enlightenment, and all other possible worlds were contained within a single thought within a single mind, but did not understand that even this knowledge could be transcended. Kūkai equated Stage Eight with the meditation of Kannon Bosatsu and the teachings of Saichō's Tendai sect. The mind of Stage Nine experienced the ultimate abandonment of a self-nature. This mind saw that there were no barriers anywhere, that all things interpenetrated all other things, that the eternal truth was everywhere present. All phenomena were empty, and because of this emptiness were unified and harmonious. This was the meditation of Fugen Bosatsu and corresponded to the teachings of Nara's Kegon sect. This ninth mind, however, did not yet fully experience the mystery of the Buddha-mind. That is, it did not know itself to be the mystical and transcendent mind of the *Dharmakāya*, the All-Encompassing Central Buddha, Dainichi.

The Tenth and final Stage, conveyed by Shingon doctrine, was beyond verbal description, but the means to it could be acted upon.[69] The means were the adoption of the three continuous secret actions of the cosmic Dainichi: the esoteric mudrā (secret of the body), the esoteric mantra (secret of speech), and the esoteric visualization (secret of mind). Through meditation sustained by these three mysteries the practitioner came to recognize that his or her own body-mind was identical with the Dharma-Body-Mind, with Dainichi. *Samsāra* (the phenomenal world of cyclical death and rebirth) and *Nirvāna* were experienced now, in the present, as one and the same. Wisdom and Compassion were experienced as one and the same. The Secret Treasury was opened. One discovered one's true identity, and lived in that identity. None of the earlier stages needed to be despised, for each had been a necessary preparation. All early stages were contained within the final stage, just as all later stages were implicit in the first. From the very beginning the practitioner had been in full union with the Central Buddha, although oblivious to this fact.

Shortly after submitting *The Ten Stages of the Development of Mind* to the emperor, Kūkai repeated the argument in a shorter, more accessible version entitled *The Precious Key to the Secret Treasury* (*Hizō hōyaku*). This treatise again made clear that Kūkai accepted the validity of the approaches of the other Buddhist schools, regarding them as essential stages in the growth of the religious mind.[70] It also reasserted that the "secret treasury" of Shingon offered the ultimate practice.

Kūkai's *Ten Stages* and *Precious Key to the Secret Treasury* have long been regarded as brilliant achievements. Several recent Buddhist scholars, among them Kōyasan's Miyasaka Yushō, have emphasized that the two works are developmental in spirit, despite their structural comprehensiveness. Thus, the celebrated Japanese Buddhist innovators who came after Kūkai—such as Dōgen (Sōtō Zen), Hōnen (Pure Land), and Shinran (True Essence Pure Land)—may be understood to have elaborated elements already present in Kūkai's early formulation.[71]

THE "DEATH" OF KŪKAI

In 829, at age fifty-six, Kūkai was appointed director of Daian-ji, the monastery in Yamato where his early mentor Gonzō had been head priest. In the same year he was given full authority to make Takaosan-ji (renamed Jingō Kokūzō Shingon-ji, or, more informally, Jingō-ji) into an exclusively Shingon temple. He soon began adding new buildings there. Meanwhile construction at both Tō-ji and Kōyasan continued, along with a steady production of new statues, paintings, and mandalas. Shingon was attracting student monks in ever increasing numbers. Kūkai's energy and opportunities seemed boundless. Then in May 831 he became ill.

The illness clearly was serious, for it soon prompted him to request permission to resign from all official duties. He wished to go immediately to Kōyasan, he said, where he could nurse himself and, as his strength permitted, assist in the various unfinished projects on the mountain. Emperor Junna refused to accept Kūkai's resignation, arguing that Esoteric Buddhism had only just begun in the nation, that Kūkai was indispensable to a further understanding of its secret teaching. The emperor's advice was that Kūkai should lighten his load of work, but remain in the capital.[72]

So for the rest of the year Kūkai continued on at Tō-ji. From time to time he may have slipped away to a secluded hermitage in the Higashiyama hills, which supposedly he established at about this time. On the hermitage site today is the massive Shingon temple Sennyū-ji, burial place of many members of the imperial family. In the summer of the following year, 832, Kūkai finally left Tō-ji for Kōyasan. He would reside on the mountain more or less permanently for the remaining years of his life. Clearly, it was where he had chosen to die.

On August 22, 832, Kūkai conducted at Kōyasan the Offering Ceremony of Ten Thousand Lights and Flowers, a ritual that subsequently became a permanent part of the ceremonial program of the mountain. The next year he assigned the management of Jingō-ji (the former Takaosan-ji) to his disciple Shinzei (800–860) and deposited there some sacred scriptures he had copied. In the same year he selected disciple Jichie (786–847) to serve as head of Tō-ji. His younger brother, Shinga (801–879), he appointed to several positions, among them the director-

ship of the sūtra repository at Tō-ji. Shinzen, his nephew, he groomed to take over the management of Kōyasan.[73]

In December 834 Kūkai received from the new emperor, Nimmyō (one of Saga's sons), permission to build a Shingon chapel, to be called Shingon-in, within the compound of Hiean-kyō's imperial palace. So in the winter of 834–835 he made one last trip to the capital to inaugurate at Shingon-in a week-long ritual (January 8–14) known as the *Go-shi-chinichi-no-mishuhō* ("Imperial Rite of the Second Seven Days of the New Year"). This complex and lavish ritual, modeled after a ceremony performed at the imperial palace in China, represented the most efficacious of all esoteric devotions for the furtherance of the security of the royal family and the nation. It was a final fulfillment of Hui-kuo's directive to Kūkai that he should do all he could to bring contentment to the Japanese people.[74]

Early in 835 Kūkai solicited and received from Emperor Nimmyō state sponsorship for the training of three monks each year at Kōyasan. One of these monks would specialize in the *Dainichi-kyō* ("The Great Sun Buddha Sūtra"), another in the *Kongō-cho-kyō* ("The Diamond-Peak Sūtra"), and the third in Shingon *shōmyō* (sūtra chanting). With this sponsorship the court officially affirmed its recognition of Kongōbu-ji as a government supported and protected monastery.

According to Shingon tradition, while in the capital the previous year (in May 834) Kūkai gathered his disciples around him and said, "My life will not last much longer. Live harmoniously and preserve with care the teaching of the Buddha. I am returning to [Kōyasan] to remain there forever" (*MW*, 59). It is at about this time that his close disciple Prince Shinnyo, third son of former Emperor Heizei, is believed to have painted his portrait.

In September 834 Kūkai selected his burial place at the eastern end of Kōyasan where the stream Tamagawa flows out of a small side valley formed by three mountains. Kūkai thought this area to be the most beautiful at Kōyasan and the most conducive to meditation. Disciple Shinzei tells the end of the story:

> From the first month [of 835], he drank no water. Someone advised him to take certain herbs as the human body is readily

subject to decay, and a celestial cook came day after day and offered him nectar, but he declined even these, saying that he had no use for human food.

At midnight on the twenty-first day of the third month, Master Kūkai, lying on his right side, breathed his last. One or two of his disciples knew that he had been suffering from a carbuncle. In accordance with his will, Kūkai, clad in robes, was interred on the Eastern Peak. He was sixty-two years of age. (*MW*, 59–60)

Word of the event was carried immediately to the capital, and on March 25 Emperor Nimmyō sent a message back to Kōyasan:

I can hardly believe that the master of Shingon, the foremost teacher of Esoteric Buddhism, on whose protection the state depended, and to whose prayers animals and plants owed their prosperity, has passed away. Alas! Because of the great distance, the mournful report has arrived here too late; I regret that I cannot send my representative in time for the cremation. (*MW*, 60)

The emperor's assumption that Kūkai had been cremated was reasonable, for that Indian custom had been widely adopted by Japan's Buddhist priests. Shinzei, however, says explicitly that Kūkai's body was interred.

Other and later accounts of Kūkai's death offer further information concerning what transpired both before and after the event. We are told that starting about March 11 Kūkai recited continuously the mantra of Miroku: *Om maitareiya sowaka.* "*Om,* Lord of Compassion, hail to thee!" On March 15 he gathered his Kōyasan disciples about himself and delivered a final testament. "At first I thought I should live till I was a hundred years old and convert all the people, but now that you are all grown up there is no need for my life to be prolonged." After predicting the day of his death, he explained that there was no cause for grief, for his spirit would survive. It would come to visit his disciples daily and watch over their work.[75] "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."[76]

At the hour of the Tiger (4:00 a.m.) on the twenty-first day of the third month of the third year of Jōwa (835), while seated in the lotus position in his residence at Chū-in, he made the wisdom-fist *mudrā* of Dainichi Nyorai (or perhaps the *kongō-gasshō*) and closed his eyes. A great stillness came over his form. This was Kūkai's *nyūjo*, his entry into a profound final meditation.[77] After forty-nine days (some sources suggest seven days) his disciples carried him in an upright seated position to the burial place just beyond the Tamagawa stream. Many paintings have been made of this journey. In most, Kūkai is shown being carried ceremoniously in an elegant closed palanquin, although sometimes the side screen is open. In at least one painting the journey is made in darkness, with torches casting shafts of light up the trunks of the massive trees. In another illustration Kūkai is carried on an open litter, almost as if he were on a spring outing.

At the burial site his seated form was placed in a grotto. His disciples then closed up the small chamber with stones and built a modest stone monument, symbol of Dainichi, over it.[78] Later, a wooden mausoleum hall was placed over the monument.

Approximately six months after Kūkai's death his old friend Emperor Saga, now twelve years in retirement, composed a poem in Kūkai's memory.

This high priest saw Light with the purity and clarity of ice.
Now his boat again has passed across the ocean.

. . . . . .

Your wisdom, to whom did you transfer it before ascending to the peak of clouds?
I cling pitifully to your wonderful writings and letters.
In Kōyasan the sound of the temple gong is heard, but there is no one to translate the palm-leaf sūtras in that house of incense.
In the evening of the year the forest of meditation is leafless and chilled.
In the wintry sky a white moon shines on a tomb.
My bridge to you is cut off forever.
Where does your soul now guard our people?[79]

About a year after Kūkai's entombment one of his disciples, Jichie, sent a message about the master's passing to Ch'ing-lung Temple in Ch'ang-an, where Kūkai had received instruction from Hui-kuo. "We feel in our hearts as if we had swallowed fire," Jichie wrote, "and our tears gush forth like fountains. Being unable to die, we are guarding the place where he passed away" (*MW*, 6).

During the ensuing years this watchful bereavement gave way to a generally held belief that Kūkai had not died, at least not in any familiar sense. Instead, he had entered into a profound meditation for the benefit of humankind and all living creatures. This sustained *samādhi* presumably would continue until Miroku Bosatsu, the future Buddha, arrived upon the earth. Meanwhile, Kūkai's spirit was thought capable of going abroad in the nation, providing spiritual aid and a shadowy companionship to all who called upon him.

Today at Kōyasan, on October 4 of each year, a ceremony is held in the Golden Hall to pay tribute to Emperor Saga. Although Saga granted Kūkai's request to build a monastery on Kōyasan, Saga himself never visited there—unless one wishes to give credence to a story that during Saga's funeral in Heian-kyō in 842 the coffin containing the emperor's body disappeared for a brief period, flying off southward to Kōya mountain. There in the forest glen beside the Tamagawa Kūkai is said to have interrupted his meditation, come forward from his tomb, and performed the proper Shingon funeral obsequies over his imperial friend.[80]

CHAPTER FOUR

TWELVE CENTURIES ON THE MOUNTAIN

ABBOT KANGEN VISITS THE TOMB (835–921)

For the task of carrying on the management and continuing construction at Kōyasan Kūkai had selected his thirty-year-old nephew Shinzen (804–891; also known as Shinnen). Under Shinzen's direction the primary architectural feature of the Garan courtyard, the massive Daitō, was completed, along with a number of other buildings, including a hall devoted to the veneration of Kūkai. Shinzen also oversaw the development of a program in Dharma transmission for student monks. This program, called the *denpō-e*, was a practical enactment of Kūkai's wish that the mountain be devoted above all else to meditation and religious education. In 883, toward the end of his life, Shinzen submitted a formal statement to Emperor Yōzei in which he called Kōyasan a true paradise of the Buddhas, an echo of Kūkai's original petition to Emperor