

University of Ceylon Review

Vol. XIV, Nos. 3 & 4.

July-October 1956

*The Introduction of Buddhism to Japan**

IT was with great pleasure that I have attended, on behalf of the Imperial Family and the Government of Japan, the celebrations marking the 2,500th anniversary of the passing away of the Lord Buddha which coincides with the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of Sri Lanka by Prince Vijaya.

With this pleasure fresh and full in my heart, I have the fortunate opportunity to come to your University today and have just been conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. It is indeed a signal honour to me.

As I take it, this great honour has been given, not only to myself, but also to the people of Japan at large, and therefore on behalf of all the people of Japan as well as myself, I should like to thank you sincerely for the most friendly sentiments expressed by you.

I have been told that Sri Lanka is a peaceful Buddhist country unparalleled in the world ; since my arrival, I have seen it with my own eyes and I have simply been overwhelmed.

In response to the warm reception and welcome extended to the Princess and to me by your people and particularly by your University, I should like to express my deep appreciation to you by speaking briefly on one of the aspects of the development of Buddhism in our country and its intimate relationship with the Imperial Family of Japan.

As you are already well aware, Buddhism spread eastward, through the preaching of King Asoka, to North India, Central Asia, China, Korea and then to Japan, the most easterly of Asian countries. It is said that Buddhism came to Japan in the middle of the 6th century, during the reign of Emperor Kinmei. This was because King Seimei of Kudara, one of the states then existing in Korea, said, "I am offering this to your country

*Convocation Address, University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, 22nd August 1956.

(Japan) since there is a password that Buddhism will flow and spread eastward," and presented the Imperial Court of Japan with a bronze image of the Buddha and sutras. This is recorded in the "Nihon Shoki" (Chronicles of Japan) which is one of our ancient classics. At that time, Japan happened to be in the last phase of the period of its Clan System, and there were increasingly fierce struggles for power going on among the great families of the country. Therefore, there soon arose two opposing factions among them, disputing whether the emperor should take to the new faith and make it a state religion. This issue involved questions of foreign policy and of succession to the Imperial Throne, and made the situation more and more complicated. The progressives led by the Soga Family insisted on the adoption of Buddhism while the conservatives like the Mononobes and Nakatomis opposed it from their standpoint of preserving the traditional faith of Japan.

The question of foreign policy which I have just mentioned was one concerning Korea. At that time, a number of Japanese nationals were settled down in Korea and, by the middle of the 5th century, were in a position to exercise military and political influence in the country of Mimana in south Korea. From the latter half of the 5th century, however, the neighbouring countries of Kudara and Shiragi attacked Mimana from the north and finally destroyed that country, and thus put an end to the Japanese influence in the Korean peninsula. A number of attempts were subsequently made by Japan to despatch expeditionary forces to Korea but all ended in failure. Having suffered a military setback, Japan had to stand against foreign powers by no other way than a resurgence of cultural influence. The situation existing in Japan at that time was somewhat similar to one immediately after the Second World War where "Cultural Nation" became a popular watchword and "men of culture" were better treated. Such were the international and internal conditions prevailing in Japan under which Buddhism was introduced.

It is true that the Clan System was then on its way to disintegration, but some of the great families still wielded strong powers so that even the Emperor could not reach a definitive decision on the adoption of Buddhism. Emperor Kinmei had therefore the bronze Buddha, presented by the King of Kudara, temporarily enshrined in the house of the Sogas, a prominent pro-Buddhist family. It happened just then that an epidemic swept the country, whereupon the anti-Buddhist Mononobes appealed to the Throne accusing that it was caused by the wrath of the native deities. An incident

ensued in which the Mononobes threw the Buddha's image into a moat in a place now known as Osaka and burnt down the temples built by the Sogas.

It was, however, highly opportune policy at that time to accept Buddhism as a national religion, because from the point of view of terminating the strifes among powerful families and of unifying the nation, it was only proper to adopt a universalistic religion by the State, replacing the faith of the clans which was closely linked with ancestor worship. The fact that the rivalry between the Sogas and the Mononobes eventually ended in the victory of the pro-Buddhist Sogas was, therefore, a historical inevitability and at the same time was a fortunate outcome for Japan.

Towards the end of the 6th century, a crown prince by name of Shōtoku, who was appointed regent under Empress Suiko, boldly struck out on the path cut by the Sogas and concentrated his efforts on the propagation of Buddhism. There was soon created a tendency among the clans to vie with one another in building temples dedicated to the Buddha. As a result, within less than a century since Buddhism came to her shores, Japan left behind her the period of the clumsy culture of "Ancient Mounds" and created what we call "The Asuka Culture," the first of its kind under the influence of Buddhism. The statues of the Buddha and his disciples as well as other creations of art of those days which are now preserved at the Horyūji Temple are partial evidence of the standard of culture attained during this particular period.

Crown Prince Shōtoku was resolved to adhere to Buddhism, which teaches: "Concord is the foundation of life" and: "All human beings are equal regardless of clan or class, and whether they be high or low, rich or poor, men or women, and young or old. For through the teachings of the Dharma all may attain blessings of the Buddha." This spirit of Crown Prince Shōtoku is incorporated in the rules of seventeen articles which are said to be the oldest constitution of our country. Article One thereof reads: "Prize concord, and make it a rule to avoid contention." Article Two: "Deeply revere the Three Treasures. They are the final resort of all beings and the supreme object of faith for all peoples. No age or no man should fail to cherish this truth. Few are utterly vicious, but everyone will see the truth if duly instructed. Could any wickedness be corrected without having resort to the Three Treasures?" These Articles set forth clearly the spirit of peace of Buddhism as the foundation of the moral principles of the nation.

It happened just at this time that the Clan System crumbled to pieces and the emperor began to assume the over-all power to rule the whole country on the one hand, and on the other, Buddhism passed gradually but openly from the hands of one private family to the Imperial Court.

In the middle of the 7th century, Japan witnessed a great national reform called "The Reformation of Taika," which resulted in the assumption by the emperors of an over-all ruling power of Japan. For the first time a centralized authoritarian state was established in Japan. This Reformation, which was carried out by overthrowing the Soga Family, had Confucianism as its guiding principles so that Buddhism suffered a temporary eclipse. However, from the reign of Emperor Temmu, who ascended the Throne following the great civil war called "The Jinshin War," Buddhism began to flourish once more. This is clear from the Imperial Edict issued by Emperor Temmu requiring every household of the country to install a family sanctuary following the example of the court chapel erected within the palace compound. Even today, such a sanctuary exists in many a house throughout the country and the Buddha is worshipped by lighting candles, burning incense, offering food and flowers, and sometimes by chanting sutras, so that Buddhism is the veritable pillar of home life. This is one of the characteristics of the indigenous Japanese Buddhism bound up with ancestor worship, and its origin dates back to the Imperial Edict of Emperor Temmu, which I have just mentioned.

In the following 8th century, Buddhism made further big strides during the reign of Emperor Shomu. Among the works undertaken by the Emperor, there is one which is world-famous even today. That is, as many of you may know, the casting of the giant bronze statue of the Buddha at the Todaiji Temple in Nara. This indeed took as many as ten years to complete while the construction of the temple required forty years, and countless number of people came from all over the country to take part in the work. The height of the seated image is about 51 feet and the length of one of the palms, about 5 and a half feet. The original Temple housing the Great Buddha is said to have measured 290 feet wide at the front and 156 feet in height, and was the largest wooden building in the world at the time. This Temple was later destroyed by a fire and therefore the temple which you will see at present when you visit Japan is the one reconstructed later. Such gigantic construction works attest, of course, to the depth of the Emperor's faith. At the same time, they might have been intended to make a great demonstration on the part of Japan, which was then trying to establish a cultural state, against the neighbouring China

under the Tang dynasty, which then boasted the highest standard of civilization in the Orient. During the period between the 7th and the 9th centuries, envoys were often sent from Japan to the court of Tang and many Japanese priests went for studies to China while Chinese priests came over to Japan in great numbers, and a profound influence was exerted on our country by the Tang Buddhism. As I see it, it is not difficult to detect in the construction of this great temple fervent aspirations of the Japanese people to catch up with the Tang civilization as fast as possible.

In passing, I would like to touch upon the deeds of Empress Komyo who is said to have exercised an unseen gentle yet strong influence on Emperor Shomu's faith. Her most famous work was social relief; she founded the "Hiden-in" or asylum for orphans and the sick, and dispensaries called "Seyaku-in." There even is a legend that the Empress sucked pus from the body of a leper who, in fact, was the Aksobhya Buddha in disguise. I think such a legend tells how profoundly impressed were the people of that time by the gracious and merciful heart of the Empress.

I have tried to describe to you the chequered but rapid progress of Buddhism in Japan within only two centuries after it reached the country. Naturally, friction is apt to arise between a nationalistic faith like ancestor worship and a universalistic belief like Buddhism which preaches peace and truth. Buddhism and Japan's indigenous cult have continued up to the present time to repeat conflict and compromise, contention and conciliation. But today I am afraid I have no time to go into the details thereof.

In conclusion, I would like to make a few comments about the doctrine of the "Middle Road." Down in the 14th century, there was Emperor Hanazono who made extensive studies in Buddhism covering such sects as Tendai, Shingon, Zen and Nembutsu. In his own work entitled "Memoires on Learning," he says: "There are two ills that we must beware; one is a pretender to great erudition, who lacks both spirit and stamina; the other is a deeply spiritual man, wanting in accurate and practical knowledge. The avoidance of these two ills is the "Great Middle Road." This reminds us of the very early teachings of the Lord Buddha who said, "Do not go into the two extremes. The Middle Road is the true way of Buddhism." I am firmly convinced that this tenet of the Middle Road is really the supreme guide for us even at this time of the 20th century.

I thank you for your kind attention.

*His Imperial Highness,
The Prince Mikasa*