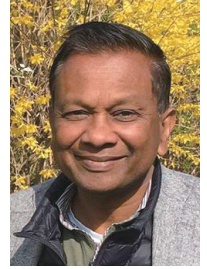


Buddhist Monk Bodhisena in Japan

By Mukesh Williams



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Some 1,200 years ago an Indian monk, Bodhisena, was pursuing his dream of finding Bodhisattva Manjushri. His search for the Bodhisattva led him to Japan where he realized his dream by meeting Japanese monk Gyoki, the Japanese reincarnation of Manjushri. This momentous meeting transformed Japanese thought and culture and established an eternal connection with India. It introduced Buddhist and Hindu worldviews into Japanese cultural and political life, enriching its civilizational heritage. Though much of Bodhisena's sojourn was forgotten in the religious infighting and raging epidemics in Japan, his contribution remains in the spread of Kegon Buddhism, the worship of Indian deities, the practice of tantric rituals, cultural ceremonies, the Sanskrit etymology of Japanese words, and the presence of old Buddhist temples around Japan. He left an indelible mark on the Japanese way of thinking and understanding of the cosmos.

Sources of Bodhisena's Life

Not much information is available on the life of Bodhisena in Japan and next to nothing in India. There are two surviving Japanese accounts that shed light on his life and work. The first is by his disciple Shuei, who wrote a biography under the title *Nan Tenjiku Baramon Sojo Hi* or "Stone Monument for Baramon Sojo from India". The second is a part of the temple's official record called *Todaiji Yoroku* or "The Digest Record of Todaiji Temple" in which *Daianji Bodai Denraiki* or "Introduction of Bodhi at Daianji Temple" introduces Bodhisena.

The Proselytizing Spirit of Ancient India

Before the advent of Western civilization, Japanese society was guided by values of Indian philosophy and culture. From the sixth century onwards, India had developed a rich spiritual and religious culture which included an understanding of the cosmos, the tapping of man's inner world and conducting of meditative practices to access knowledge from the outer and inner worlds. In an attempt to spread this knowledge, Indians travelled to East and Southeast Asian countries, from Myanmar and Vietnam to China and Japan. The early men who travelled by ships to Japan were Buddhist and Hindu monks well-versed in religious meditative practices and classical Sanskrit. They were treated as religious and spiritual elites in Japan, monks like Bodhidharma and Bodhisena. Their elitist positions in a

feudal society allowed their knowledge to spread at great speed. The religious iconography they brought to Japan spread through temples in Japanese society.

As the political and cultural relations of the Tang Dynasty with South and East Asia grew in the eighth century, maritime routes between Canton, Palembang, and Sumatra Champa port and Nusantara – islands in the Indian and Pacific Oceans – also developed. Travelling by ship in the eighth century was rather perilous. Yi Jing in his *Tales of the Hierarch Emperor Tang Taizong* (641 AD) reports that as the Silk Road began to grow in the second half of the seventh century, the maritime connection between India and China grew stronger.

On these routes, Bodhisena and other Buddhist monks travelled. On his journey to China in 733, Bodhisena met the priest Buttetsu, or Buddhasthira from Vietnam, and Dozen, or Daoxuan Buttetsu from Tang China. Buttetsu could set stories from Indian mythology to dancing tunes which became popular in Japan as *ronyugau*. The jovial priest told him that Manjushri had left China for Japan. Bodhisena would have been disappointed had he not fulfilled his dream of meeting Manjushri. If he had not been fired by this mission, he would have baulked at traveling the treacherous South China Sea on flimsy boats that often capsized.

It is believed that Bodhisena went to Mount Wutai to meet Manjushri who was said to reside there. He stayed at Chongfu-si in Fujian when he befriended Japanese priest Rikyo, who introduced him to the assistant of Nakatomi no Nashiro, the 10th *kentoshi*, the Japanese Mission to Tang China. The *kentoshi* was impressed by the erudition and vast learning of Bodhisena concerning the Buddhist sutras and invited him to Japan. Bodhisena invited both the priests to accompany him to Japan.

The Japanese priest Genbo and poet Kibi no Makibi were also travelling companions of Bodhisena on his journey to Japan and both were impressed by his knowledge of Buddhism and Sanskrit. Makibi was impressed by the Sanskrit system and used it to develop the Katakana syllabary later on. Genbo was impressed by Bodhisena's arguments about Buddhist philosophy and his persuasion to set up a Kegon school of Buddhism. Genbo was close to the emperor, having saved his mother. The emperor had given a substantial land grant and eight personal servants to Genbo. When Genbo got into trouble with the wife of Lord Fujiwara no Hirotsugu, the emperor sided with Genbo and banished Hirotsugu to faraway Dazai-fu Kyushu Province as a vice governor.

The three priests met the government officials in Dazai-fu. When they reached Nara, Bodhisena had a momentous meeting with monk Gyoki. All three priests received *jifuku* or financial support from the Imperial Court.

Bodhisena's Journey from India to Japan

High caste Hindus believed that leaving one's country was *samudrolanghana* or violating the ocean, and led to the loss of *varna*. It was *kalapani* or travelling over black waters and ultimately exile. It would undermine their social respectability, pollute their caste and compromise their food habits. The journeys of Buddhist monks showed the different trajectories Buddhism took in spreading in Asia. Indian monks were travelling to China and other parts of East Asia on proselytizing missions. Japan was communicating with India through Chinese monks and later directly with India. Bodhisena's journey led him through India, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and finally to Japan, creating a maritime history of the spread of Buddhist and Hindu ideas. When he left Madurai, he knew that he could never return to his homeland. These connections between Buddhism and Japanese royalty are impossible to miss. Bodhisena was a beneficiary of this connection.

Birth & Travels of Bodhisena

Bodhisena was born in Madurai in 704 in an ancient Brahmin clan of the Barachi or Pindola Bharadvaja. At an early age he left Madurai for Chang'an and then went to Mount Wutai to meet the incarnation of Manjushri. At the request of Japanese scholars and diplomats, Bodhisena came to Japan hoping to meet the reincarnation of Manjushri. He was warmly welcomed by the royal family of Emperor Shomu. He was given the title of Baramon Sojo or "Brahmin archbishop", the chief of the Buddhist ecclesiastical order of Japan. He always recited the *Buddhavatamsaka Sutra*. He knew tantric rituals which he taught to other monks.

As we know, he came from a Brahmin family and converted to Buddhism early in life. The missionary zeal of Buddhism made it spread amongst commoners and elites quickly. But prominent families found it hard to send their children to an austere monastic life. Bodhisena would have faced opposition from his family to join the Buddhist order. Buddhism itself was on the decline by the eighth century. Bodhisena must have been truly convinced to join the Buddhist order even at the cost of being an outcast.

He lived his life through teaching Sanskrit and the doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism called *Gandavyuta* at three different monasteries. On April 9, 752, he was the chief *doshi* or leader of ceremonies for Kaigan-kuyo, or the making of the eyes of the Buddhist statue of Rushana-butsu in Todaiji Temple. The ceremony was attended by 10,000 priests and 4,000 dancers with the emperor and his retinue of high officials and priests in attendance. But his influence on Japanese culture went far beyond one ritual. Even today he is remembered through the wooden *daruma* dolls which are used by children to realize their desires by painting the dolls' eyes.

Connected to three temples in Nara (Todaiji, Daiinji and Ryosenji), Bodhisena spent the second half of his life in Japan teaching Sanskrit and developing Kegon Buddhism.

The World of Bodhisena

The early eighth century, both in India and Japan, was a world of religious intolerance and schism. Both in India and Japan, Buddhism was seen as a new religion whose egalitarian philosophy was seen as a threat to the dominant religions of the time, namely Hinduism and Shintoism. The Brahmin ruling classes of South India persecuted the Jains and Buddhists, while in Japan the royal patronage accorded to Buddhism incensed the Shinto ecclesiastical order as they saw their power whittled away. Bodhisena left a world of religious persecution to enter a world of religious intrigue. His world was the world of Vedic Brahmins. The Hindu gods Shiva and Vishnu were the reigning deities of the Pandaya kingdom. The Pandayas converted to Saivism which became the dominant creed of Tamil Nadu. Buddhism revolted against the Vedic sacrifices and Brahmin domination. It began to spread like wildfire. It had great appeal amongst the masses as it emphasized personal ethics as a way of life. The Brahmins viewed the popularity of Buddhism with alarm and mounted an attack on it. They tried to undermine its intellectual strength by calling it immature, unintelligent and claiming that it lacked the ability to evaluate the worth of other religions.

When Bodhisena came to Japan he found himself in a political storm. It involved powerful Shinto priests,



The Great Buddha of Todaiji Temple



Todaiji Temple in Nara

Buddhist monks and political elites fighting for political influence with Emperor Shomu. The emperor's rule was a series of disasters. There were earthquakes, famines, epidemics and economic crises in his kingdom. He felt he had lost the favor of the gods and the Buddha himself. To create good fortune, he asked the populace, clergy and the powerful Fujiwara clan to build a great temple, Todaiji, in Nara. Everyone contributed towards the building of the temple, from stones and wood to design and finances. The emperor had other plans apart from appeasing the Buddha. He wanted to shift the political power from Shinto priests to Buddhist monks. In this political cauldron Bodhisena was brought in to save Japan and strengthen the power of Buddhism and implicitly of the royal elites who espoused its tenets.

Bodhisena's life was one of coincidences, in that he often found himself in the right places at the right time. But he also had amazing skills as a religious practitioner. He could recite the *Buddha-vatamsaka Sutra*, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* or Kegon-kyo, and knew the occult Indian and Chinese Buddhism which had some magical properties. Hinduism has tantric practices to control others and fulfil desires, and Bodhisena could have known tantric rituals. He taught his skills to many Buddhist monks in Japan. Through Bodhisena the impact of Hinduism on Japanese Buddhism has been profound. Hajime Nakamura (1912-1999) believes that the Mahayana Buddhism of Japan has more Hindu influence than the Mahayana Buddhism practiced in other parts of the world.

Bodhisena became connected to Todaiji Temple in Nara through the monk Gyoki. Being close to the emperor, it acquired great power and political importance. The temple acquired national significance as prayers for national peace and prosperity were conducted from there. It gradually became the center for the study of Buddhist doctrine and training of monks. The construction of the temple and the subsequent ceremonies were so expressive that the Japanese economy went bust. Being connected to Todaiji, Bodhisena played a central role in proselytizing Buddhist dharma and Indian culture in Japan. The book *Todaiji* (Kyogakubu, 1973) explains that Todaiji was constructed as the grand temple of Buddhism in Japan through an imperial decree on March 24, 741. It was based on the philosophy of the *Konkomyosaisyō Sutra*. Its purpose was not to relieve the suffering of a person or clan but to establish the independent character of Japan against China and protect the country from calamities. The eye-opening ceremony was conducted to animate the spirit of the Buddha into the statue. This ceremony was never done before in Japan and conducted for the first time by monk Bodhisena. The ceremony was accompanied by songs, poetry recitals and ethnic dances from Japan, Korea, China and Cambodia. The ceremony was attended by the emperor and his retinue of 10,000 priests, high-ranking diplomats and lay people. By late afternoon the ceremony was over. It marked the return of Buddhism to the East.

Bodhisattva Manjushri & Bodhisena

In his twenties, Bodhisena felt a communion with Bodhisattva Manjushri, who passed away 1,000 years ago. In the Buddhist canon

Manjushri is the repository of wisdom and the closest disciple of Gautama Buddha. Within no time Bodhisena became obsessed with the thought of finding the reincarnation of Manjushri. Some followers of Buddhism told him that Manjushri resided on Mount Wutai in China, the home of Bodhisattva Manjushri in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Mount Wutai is one of the most sacred mountains in China and known as the place where Manjushri resided. Between 720-730, Bodhisena boarded a ship for Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty. Chang'an in the eighth century was one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, like Constantinople and Baghdad. Over a million foreigners – Persians, Europeans and Indians – lived there and helped create wealth and prosperity in the city.

When Bodhisena reached China he was told that the reincarnation of Manjushri lived in Japan. Bodhisena's mission would have been aborted, and he would have died in obscurity, but for a stroke of good luck. In 730 he met the 10th *kentoshi*, the Japanese Mission to Tang China, Jihei Nobohito Hironari. The *kentoshi* was a devout Buddhist and became fascinated by the erudition of Bodhisena. He invited Bodhisena to travel with him and his delegation to Japan.

Reincarnation Ideas

The eight century in Asia was a time when new ideas about reincarnation were being readily accepted. This led to a belief in elevating certain individuals to the status of a reincarnated being. It had a tremendous impact on shifting Buddhist lineage and cosmology first from India to China and then from China to Japan. Bodhisena endorsed this shift by identifying Gyoki as the reincarnation of Manjushri whom he had met at Eagle Peak in India. The religious, political and maritime conditions were right for Bodhisena to come to Japan and create a powerful impact on its cultural and political life.

The *Gyoki Bosatsuden* and *Nihon Ryoiki* refer to the popularity of ideas connected with the emergence of bodhisattva in Japan. This became connected with the rise of the Manjushri cult in Japan which shifted the center of the Buddhist world from China to Japan. The belief that Manjushri will appear in human form before his devotees was confirmed by the *Manusri Parinirvana Sutra*. It is in this context that we must understand the momentous meeting of Bodhisena and Gyoki.

Bodhisena's Meeting with Gyoki in Nara

The *Gyoki Bosatsuden* tells the story of the encounter between the two monks, one Indian and the other Japanese. When Bodhisena saw Gyoki from a distance he recognized him as the reincarnation of Bodhisattva Manjushri: "I have ventured from Kapilavastu to meet the Bodhisattva Manjushri who resides in Japan." This implies that a cosmological shift took place in the presence of Bodhisattva Manjushri from Mount Wutai to Nara. The bodhisattva left the Five-terraced Chinese Mountain to spread the Buddhist dharma in Japan. The *Gyoki Bosatsuden* confirms this conclusion by saying that

Bodhisattva Gyoki “was an incarnation of the Bodhisattva Manjushri who resided in the Qingliang mountains. In order to spread the dharma to the masses below, Gyoki left his lotus seat and entered his mother’s womb.” The story of reincarnation was now perfect.

Interestingly, the purity of the Wutai cult of Tang Buddhism, claiming Bodhisattva Manjushri and Buddha’s presence in China, was verified by the sutras. The legend of *Seiryōji shaka nyorai zo* and *Gyoki Bosatsuden* further confirmed the new place of the Bodhisattva Manjushri and the Buddha in Japan. In other words, it meant that Manjushri came to Heian Japan as Gyoki. Through this reincarnation theory the center of Buddhist cosmology and power shifted from China to Japan.

Gyoki brought Bodhisena to the emperor explaining the significance of the Indian monk’s arrival in Japan. The beleaguered emperor felt good fortune arriving at last in the form of Bodhisena and gave him important positions and a monastic home in Dhanji Temple. The significance of Bodhisena’s royal recognition should not be lost on us. The monks were deeply involved in the politics of the time. A high-ranking monk from India, proficient in Sanskrit, the Vedas and the Buddhist Sutras gave legitimacy to the power of the emperor who was the supreme protector of Buddhism. Bodhisena’s elevation in the Buddhist order cut into the religious power enjoyed by Shinto priests who saw emergent Buddhism not only as new and foreign but a plot to politically marginalize them. To quite an extent their fears were justified. The emperor felt that Buddhist practice was the only way to save his kingdom from multiple disasters ranging from the smallpox epidemic to famine.

The smallpox epidemic ravaged the country for only two years (735-737) but it wreaked havoc, wiping out one-third of the population. As most of the farming communities ran away in fear, there was very little crop cultivation and famine spread. The ruling class was not exempt from these calamities. The emperor survived the epidemic, but four of his elite ministers who belonged to the powerful Fujiwara clan perished. In his sagacity the emperor appointed a rival clan to break the stranglehold of the Fujiwara clan on his power. The emperor gave more power to Buddhist priests, including Bodhisena.

Bodhisena possessed the ability to impress others by his vast knowledge of the Buddhist canon, his linguistic mastery of Sanskrit, and his grasp of tantric rituals to perform magic and *beej* mantras to generate good fortune. His serious attitude, self-discipline and tenacity of purpose gave him a position of singular importance in Emperor Shomu’s court to transform Japan.

Photo: Author



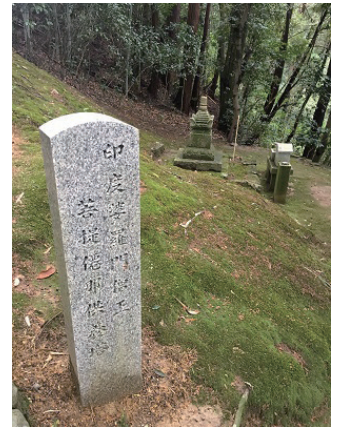
The Memorial Tower for Bodhisena in serenity, Daianji Temple, Nara

Photo: Author



The Guidepost indicating the Memorial Tower for Bodhisena

Photo: Author



The Memorial Tower for Bodhisena, Daianji Temple, Nara

Bodhisena Death & Influence

Bodhisena passed away on Feb. 25, 760, at the age of 57 and was buried at Mount Ryosenji in Nara. It is said that after he passed away he was found with his palms joined together and facing the west. A Japanese stupa in marble in Ryosenji Temple marks his death with Japanese characters and Siddham script. It is perhaps a part of the Sanskrit studies he initiated in Nara during his time.

Conclusion

Bodhisena led a truly cosmopolitan life traversing the globe and settling down in Japan, changing its philosophy, and influencing its linguistic heritage and religious iconography. He gave validity to Buddhist dharma and the emperor as its supreme protector in Japan, introduced Sanskrit in temples, and classical music and dance in Japanese courts, and shifted the cosmic center of Buddhism from India and China to Japan. It is believed that he introduced Hindu esoteric and tantric practices like the opening-of-the-eyes ceremony, initiated children’s games like *daruma* and *karuta*, and demonstrated the magical properties of phenomena through tantric rituals. His name may be unfamiliar to many today, but the impact of his work is still felt by the Japanese in the script they use, the divinities they worship and the games they play.

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