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## The Mountain as Mandala

### Kūkai's Founding of Mt. Kōya

This article considers the sociocultural significance of Kūkai's understanding of Mt. Kōya as a mandala. Locating the context for his formulation of this understanding in his efforts to found Mt. Kōya in the mid-Kōnin era (809–823), it seeks to elucidate its disclosive function. The interpretation is put forward that Kūkai's mandalic understanding of the mountains disclosed the possibility of a disembedded form of Buddhist life, one in which the human agent is understood to exist outside the social world of the Heian court and the divine cosmos on which it was believed to be grounded. Particular attention is paid to the sociopolitical effects of this disclosure, suggesting specifically that it contributed to the differentiation of religious authority from political power in Japan. To elucidate this process, Kūkai's founding of Mt. Kōya is situated in a genealogy of monks who founded mountain temples that operated relatively autonomously vis-à-vis the state. Kūkai's erstwhile collaborator, Saichō, is given special consideration.

KEYWORDS: Kūkai—disembedding—mandala—temple Buddhism—mountain temple

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IN A SERIES of letters to the prominent court noble Yoshimine no Yasuyo 良岑安世 (783–830) written between 818 and 819, Kūkai 空海 (774–835) explains his life on Mt. Kōya 高野, which he had just received from the court as the site for a temple complex dedicated to ascetic practice.<sup>1</sup> The first, a poem with a short preface, describes his life as blissful and carefree amid the beauty of the mountains. In the opening to the poem, he writes:

Like a lone cloud with no fixed abode,  
Always have I loved high peaks.  
Not knowing the sun of the human village,  
I gaze up at the moon as I lie under the green pines. (NKBT 71: 171)

Yasuyo, however, was not convinced of Kūkai's fulsome depiction of mountain life. While Yasuyo's letters are no longer extant, Kūkai opens his second letter, composed as a dialogue entitled "On the Fascination of Entering the Mountains" (*yama ni iru kyō* 入山興), with his own rendering of what must have been Yasuyo's question to him in the previous letter:

Teacher, with what intent do you enter deep into a place so cold [that is, Mt. Kōya]? The precipitous cliffs and steep slopes are entirely unsafe. Climbing it is painful and when you descend it is hard. And yet, you take the kami of the mountains and the spirits of the trees to be your home. (NKBT 71: 173)

In reply, Kūkai waxes poetic about the impermanence of life in the capital, describing the scattering of flower blossoms in the Shinsen 神泉 Imperial Gardens and the constant rush of its flowing waters. For this reason, Kūkai tells Yasuyo, to live in the capital is "without merit" (NKBT 71: 173).<sup>2</sup> He then goes on to extol the natural beauty of Mt. Kōya, depicting it as a constant source of solace and contentment. To conclude his reply, he advises Yasuyo to "shake off" (*tosō* 斗薮), or renounce, his attachments to life in the capital—the human village mentioned in the first letter—and enter "the village of the *dharmakāya*" (*hosshin sato* 法身里), a figure suggesting an understanding of Mt. Kōya as the communal realm of the Buddha's enlightenment (NKBT 71: 175). Kūkai's reply thus inverts Yasuyo's view of remote mountains as the enchanted world of mountain kami and tree spirits: it is so only for the unenlightened. For the true Buddhist seeker,

1. On the date and narrative coherence of the five letters, see NAKATANI (2006).

2. For a translation of Kūkai's letter, see RABINOVITCH and BRADSTOCK (2005, 86–88).

the one who has renounced life in the human village, Mt. Kōya is the very realm in which one encounters and identifies with the source of enlightenment. As such, it is, to put it in terms Kūkai uses elsewhere in his writings, a mandala.

This article attempts to clarify the sociocultural significance of Kūkai's understanding of the mountain landscape as a mandala. I locate the context for his formulation of this understanding specifically in his efforts to build a temple complex on Mt. Kōya in the mid-Kōnin 弘仁 era (810–824).<sup>3</sup> Kūkai, I show, conceived his temple complex as a three-dimensional mandala, or something like a karma mandala (*katsuma mandara* 羯磨曼荼羅). In contrast to the karma mandala he designed for the lecture hall of Tōji 東寺 in the Heian capital, however, the karma mandala of the temple complex extended outward into the natural environment surrounding it.<sup>4</sup> This mandalization of Mt. Kōya—the transformation of its natural landscape into a mandala—constitutes the focus of this article.

In locating Kūkai's mandalic understanding of the mountains in its practical context, I seek to elucidate what might be called its disclosive function, that is, how it rendered the ascetic life on the mountain intelligible and, indeed, even compelling. It was Kūkai's view, I show, that the extraordinary individual, by means of ascetic practice on the mountain, may attain union with the pervading presence of Mahāvairocana's enlightenment—a union that he construed as the matrix for the personal enlightenment of the practitioner and the universal enlightenment of all living beings, including the malevolent kami and spirits of the mountain. From a sociological point of view, such an understanding of human existence can be interpreted as a disembedding of the human agent from both the social world of the Heian court and the divine cosmos on which it was believed to be grounded.<sup>5</sup> Disembedded thus, the mountain ascetic lived as a liberated individual in an enlightened cosmos, one in which the enlightenment of Mahāvairocana eclipsed the unpredictable and potentially dangerous powers of the kami and other divine spirits.

I thus argue that Kūkai's mandalic understanding of the mountains disclosed the possibility of a disembedded form of Buddhist life. Without the disclosure of this possibility, Kūkai's founding of Mt. Kōya would not have made sense to either the court or the broader monastic community. The disclosive function of

3. I consider Kūkai's plans to found a temple complex on Mt. Kōya as “the founding of Mt. Kōya,” rather than the founding of Kongōbuji 金剛峯寺, the name that later came to be used to refer to Kūkai's temple complex, because Kūkai consistently referred to the complex of temple buildings he intended to build by the name of the site it is located, Kōya, meaning, literally, high plains. See, for example, his exposition for his 818 realm-binding rite below. Today, the name Kongōbuji refers not to the entire complex but to a single temple on the mountain.

4. On Kūkai's design of the karma mandala in the Tōji lecture hall, see BOGEL (2011).

5. See, for example, Charles TAYLOR (2007, 155) on the co-constitutive relation between social disembedding and cosmic disembedding.

Kūkai's mandalic understanding of the mountains therefore had concrete socio-political effects. Chief among them, I suggest, was a reconfiguration of power in Japanese society. In conceiving the mountain as a mandala, Kūkai effectively demarcated a sphere of religious authority that the imperial court itself could not reproduce by means of the traditional body of ritual practices it had at its disposal. Indeed, it was only the enlightened ascetic who could establish the mountain as mandala and hence efficaciously pacify the malevolent kami and spirits who were believed to dwell there. For the emperor to support Kūkai's project, then, he had to concede authority in the religious realm. Hence, I argue that Kūkai's understanding of the mountains contributed to the differentiation of religious authority from political power in Japan.

In arguing that Kūkai disclosed the possibility of a disembedded form of Buddhist life, I do not mean to suggest he invented it. His founding of Mt. Kōya in 816 is properly understood as a response to the establishment of the Tendai school on Mt. Hiei 比叡 by his erstwhile collaborator Saichō 最澄 (766–822). More specifically, I consider Saichō's efforts to found his temple complex on Mt. Hiei as the beginning of a new form of Buddhism, which I call “temple Buddhism,” and situate Kūkai's founding of Mt. Kōya as an extension and further articulation of this new form of Buddhism. To elucidate the origins and development of temple Buddhism, my discussion begins with a brief analysis of the religious character and socio-political function of the mountain temple in the eighth century.

### *The Mountain Temple*

The formulation “mountain temple” is a modern interpretive category. While the term *yamadera* 山寺 (mountain temple) figures prominently in early historical sources such as the *Nihon ryōiki* (MIFUNE 2004, 46–50), my use of it is intended to translate the modern Japanese terms *sanrin jiin* 山林寺院 and *sangaku jiin* 山岳寺院. Following UEHARA Mahito's (1974) criticism of this category, I use it to designate not the location of a temple but rather its function. Whether located on top of a tall mountain or in the foothills, what distinguishes a mountain temple, according to my use of the term, is that it serves as a base for the practice of mountain asceticism (*sanrin shugyō* 山林修行). I define mountain temples as those temples that are dedicated to the practice of asceticism in the mountains.

HONGŌ Masatsugu (2005, 41–46) calls attention to the role mountain temples played in the formation of what he calls sectarian Buddhism (*kyōdan Bukkyō* 教団仏教) in the late Nara and early Heian periods. By sectarian Buddhism, Hongō means to describe a mode of Buddhist social organization in which temples are not governed by the *ritsuryō* 律令 code of the classical Japanese state, particularly its body of monastic regulations called the *sōniryō* 僧尼令. As a historical concept, it thus refers to the form of Buddhism that displaced the form of “state

Buddhism” (*kokka Bukkyō* 国家仏教) that prevailed in the sixth through eighth centuries, or the classical period of Japanese religious history. Stated positively, sectarian Buddhism represents the development of a form of Buddhism that places emphasis on what Hongō calls its practical function (*jissenteki na kinō* 実践的な機能): its ability to provide this-worldly benefits such as rainmaking and healing the sick.

Since its official transmission to Japan in the mid-sixth century, Buddhist practice had been highly regarded for being particularly efficacious for the purpose of healing the sick (GORAI 1986). It was not, however, considered to have special efficacy with respect to the kami and spirits of the land. Prior to the rise of sectarian Buddhism, the state relied primarily on kami worship for rainmaking and other this-worldly benefits that concerned the protection of the land and its agricultural cycle (HONGŌ 2005, 271). Contrary to the way state Buddhism of the classical period is often understood (HAYAMI 1986), the court did not seek the same kind of “magic” (*jujutsu* 呪術) from Buddhist ritual as it did from kami worship; Buddhist ritual was privileged in the sphere of healing, whereas kami worship prevailed in land protection. Thus, the *ritsuryō* state turned to the deities understood to be autochthonous to the land for help in its efforts to protect that land and its people. As the *ritsuryō* state developed during the reigns of Emperors Shōmu 聖武 (r. 724–749) and Kōken 孝謙 (r. 749–758; as Shōtoku 称徳, 766–770), Buddhist rituals—and the temples in which they were performed—were made to serve as spectacular displays of the universal religious authority of the emperor; they performed what Hongō calls an impressive function (*kankakuteki na kinō* 感覚的な機能). It is against this backdrop of the state’s use of temples as monuments to imperial power that mountain temples dedicated to the practical function of land protection began to emerge in the peripheries of Japan, particularly the Hokuriku region, in the early part of the eighth century (HONGŌ 2005, 136–172).

The practical task of land protection required efficacious intercession with the kami and spirits who were believed to rule the land (*jinushigami* 地主神). Since the vast majority of agricultural villages in Japan were situated in basins, it was the flat, fertile area of the basins that was understood to be the land rightfully occupied by humans, and the *jinushigami* were believed to control the surrounding mountains.<sup>6</sup> The *jinushigami* of the mountains were known to be vengeful and potentially destructive. If not properly worshiped, they exacted vengeance (*tatari* 祟) in the form of pestilence, drought, lightning storms, and other disruptions to the agricultural life of the village. Ōmononushi no kami 大物主神 of Ōmiwa 大神 Shrine is archetypical. The *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* describe

6. For an example of *jinushigami*, see the tale of Matachi, chieftain of the Yahazu lineage, in the *Hitachi fudoki* (BREEN and TEEUWEN 2010, 25).

Ōmononushi as a kami who dwells on Mt. Miwa 三輪, influences the harvest (ASTON 1972, 61, 154), particularly the supply of water for wet rice production (MORI 2003, 18), assumes the form of a snake (ASTON 1972, 158), and exacts vengeance when he feels he is not being properly worshiped (HELDT 2014, 83–84).<sup>7</sup> To pacify such vengeful kami (*tatarigami* 崇神), worship was required, and it was often the chieftain of the village who would serve as the high priest of kami worship.<sup>8</sup> At first, open-air sites of worship (*yashiro* 社) and later shrines were established at the boundary between the human and divine realm at the foot of the mountain (BREEN and TEEUWEN 2010, 25–26), and entry into the mountains was taboo.<sup>9</sup>

The institution of the mountain temple was grounded on an entirely different understanding of the relationship of human beings to the divine realm of spirits and kami—one in which extraordinary individuals who have gained insight into the truth of the Buddhist teachings have the power to transform vengeful kami into benevolent protector deities. On the basis of this understanding, ascetics broke the traditional taboo on trespassing the sacred domain of the kami and ventured into the mountains in pursuit of enlightenment. In doing so, they not only broke taboos but also reconfigured the very nature of power in Japan.

Under the *ritsuryō* state, it was the emperor at the national level and provincial officials (*kokushi* 国司) at the local level who were responsible for coordinating rites for interceding with vengeful kami (OKADA 2019, 234–235; OOMS 2009, 109; PIGGOTT 1997, 208; MILLER 1971). The Buddhist understanding that such kami could be pacified by means of the rituals performed by enlightened mountain ascetics thus challenged the fundamental premise of power in classical Japan. Imbued with religious authority, the enlightened ascetic was able to carve out a sphere of human life that was disembedded not only socially and cosmically but also politically.

The earliest mountain temples described in the sources were founded as “shrine temples” (*jingūji* 神宮寺 or *jinganji* 神願寺), or temples attached to pre-existing shrines. Such shrine temples, which first appear in the early eighth century, were founded as places for ascetic practice that led to both the personal enlightenment of the individual ascetic and the universal enlightenment of the

7. We will observe that the association of mountain kami with snakes and also water remained prominent in the Buddhist imagination of Japan’s sacred mountains.

8. For an example of *tatarigami*, see again the tale of Matachi (BREEN and TEEUWEN 2010, 25). The kami pacified by Matachi were also serpentine; the tale describes them as having the body of snakes with horns on their heads.

9. The taboo is implied by Matachi’s demarcation of the human realm as lying in the land below the mountain. The sense of taboo—or, at least, extreme danger—is also conveyed in numerous tales from the provincial gazetteers that tell of “raging” (*araburu* 荒) kami who kill travelers passing through mountain valleys and passes (KELSEY 1981, 229–230).

kami on the mountain. Numerous accounts of the founding of such shrine temples follow a common pattern: the kami of the shrine reveals to either a local elite or the ascetic himself—through an oracle, a dream, or a vision—that they are suffering in *samsāra* due to their bad karma. This bad karma is the cause of pestilence, drought, and other disruptions in the agricultural cycle. And so, the kami requests that a shrine temple be built deep in the mountain so that ascetic practitioners may teach them the Buddhist path and thereby liberate them from suffering. Once liberated, the kami are pacified and no longer create disturbances in the agricultural cycle.<sup>10</sup> As Kūkai's own account of the founding of a shrine temple suggests, the enlightenment of the mountain kami was predicated on the individual pursuit of enlightenment by the ascetic. Hence, in accounts of shrine temples, the enlightened ascetic is presented as the agent of enlightenment for the deluded kami on the mountain.

The activities of ascetics who founded shrine-temples were supported not by the imperial court but by local elites (KAWANE 1976, 275–277). This particular arrangement wherein the local elites offered material support and political endorsement of such activities marks the initial break in the traditional unity of religious authority and political power in classical Japan, at least at the local level. For most of Shōmu's reign and through the end of Shōtoku's, the court promoted this practice from afar, conferring “kami ranks” (*shinkai* 神階) to kami enshrined at shrine temples and designating households (*fuko* 封戸) to support them (HONGŌ 2005, 93–100). It did not, however, take a leading role in founding such mountain temples. Focusing attention instead on the construction of temples such as Tōdaiji and Saidaiji as monuments to imperial power, the state sought to strengthen the unity of religious authority and political power in the figure of the emperor.

The court's stance toward mountain temples took a decisive turn after the collapse of the Shōmu-Shōtoku regime. Upon acceding to the throne in 770, Emperor Kōnin 光仁 (r. 770–781) lifted the ban on mountain asceticism that had been put in place by Shōtoku (KT 2: 386). Two years later, he instituted a new system for the appointment of ten meditation masters (*jū zenji* 十禪師) to serve as healers at the imperial palace. In the edict announcing the system, he describes the meditation masters as “worthy of praise for their observance of the precepts” and “renowned for their healing of illness” (KT 2: 402). The main criterion for selection, he goes on to note, is that the monastic be “one who is pure in practice” (*shōgyō no mono* 清行者). Sources indicate that the monastics he appointed

10. See, for example, the account of the founding of Kehi Jingūji 氣比神宮寺 in 715 by Fujiwara no Muchimaro 藤原武智麻呂 (680–737) and also the account of the founding of Wakasahiko Jingūji 若狭比古神宮寺 by Yamato no Akamaro 和赤磨 in 717–724 (BAUER 2020, 35, 85). For a classic study of shrine temples and their role in protecting local agricultural communities, see TAMURA (1967, 190–206).

to this post were ascetics who trained at mountain temples.<sup>11</sup> Kōnin's ten meditation master system thus represents the bureaucratization of mountain asceticism and hence an attempt by the court to manage more systematically the practical function of monastic practice, though with respect only to healing.

Kōnin not only promoted what we might consider a practical turn in the monastic community, he also showed a willingness to concede religious authority to the figure of the monastic. In a 780 edict, he articulates his vision of mutual dependence between the emperor and monastic. He begins by proclaiming that the “Benevolent King,” as he reigns over his realm, should “always remain clear under the light of the Dharma,” while the “Children of the Buddha,” as they spread the Buddhist teachings, should “fan well the winds of wisdom” (KT 2: 456). In other words, whereas the monastic should teach the Dharma, the emperor should follow it. Yet, at the same time, Kōnin makes clear that he expects that, as a consequence of this relation of mutual dependence, “the human and the heavenly will correspond in unity, the harmony of the mysterious and the manifest will contribute to the safety of our state, and there will be no disruptions by the spirits and kami (*kijin* 鬼神)” (KT 2: 456); in other words, the monastic will perform the practical task of producing this-worldly effects that benefit the state.

Kōnin's son and successor, Emperor Kanmu 桓武 (r. 781–806), sought to cultivate the dimension of the practical function of Buddhism—the protection of the land and its people—that, up to that point, operated outside state control. In 786, Kanmu founded a temple called Bonshakuji 梵釈寺 in Ōmi 近江 Province to the southwest of Lake Biwa, an area associated with his Tenji 天智 line. Not far from the temple was Sūfukuji 崇福寺, a temple founded by Tenji in 668 but that had since fallen into disrepair. As Bonshakuji was under construction, Kanmu appears to have also renovated this temple. In 798, he designated it as one of ten official temples (*jūdaiji* 十大寺) (KT 25: 138). It was just three years earlier that the construction of Bonshakuji was completed. In a 795 edict announcing its completion, Kanmu describes the temple as a “meditation temple” and its location as a famed spot among mountains and waters (KT 6: 257). He explains, moreover, that he has appointed ten meditation masters of “pure practice” to reside at the temple.

Kanmu's 795 edict announcing the completion of Bonshakuji lays out his vision of the ideal relationship between the emperor and the monastic. The

11. Of the ten monks appointed to the post of meditation master, eight appear in other historical sources. Two, Kōtatsu 広達 and Eigyō 永興, appear in the *Nihon ryōiki*: Kōtatsu is depicted as an ascetic who practices on Kinpusen 金峯山 in Yoshino 吉野 (SNKT 30: 249) and Eigyō as a healer who lived in Kumano 熊野 in Kii 紀伊 Province (SNKT 30: 262). Moreover, we know from other historical sources that four monks—Shuyū 首勇, Shōjō 清浄, Hōgi 法義, and Kōshin 光信—were disciples of Gyōki from Kumedadera 久米田寺, a mountain temple in Izumi 和泉 Province (DNKM 3: 328). Among those monks about whom we have accounts, none resided at major official temples in the capital.



emperor, he declares, is “the king of the people” who promotes the “true teachings,” while the monastic is “the child of the Buddha” who communicates the essence of those teachings (KT 6: 257). Kanmu then goes on to argue that his support of the monastic—his “guiding of their virtue” and his “paying of homage” to them—does not undermine the customs of his nation (KT 6: 257). Buddhist temples should be revered, he suggests, because they universally distribute good karma throughout the realm and thus, ultimately, ensure the continuity of the imperial line itself. For this reason, Kanmu explains, he is able to promote the practice of the Buddhist path, while also fulfilling his ceremonial duties as emperor. “Let us,” he proclaims at the end of the edict, “peer into the mysterious and the manifest and reach out to sentient beings, gaze upon the cloud of compassion and leave behind the path of delusion, and look up to the sun of wisdom and set out on the road to awakening” (KT 6: 257). Not only does Kanmu here state his intention to promote Buddhist practice, he makes clear that everyone, himself included, should follow the Buddhist teachings and strive to attain awakening.

That Kanmu’s vision of a relation of mutual dependence between the monastic and the emperor was significantly shaped by monastic conceptions of imperial authority can be inferred from a petition to the throne submitted by a monk named Segyō 施曉 (d. 804) in 785. The petition opens by establishing a relation of “nondual,” mutual dependence between emperor and monastic:

The true principle is nondual. The emperor and the [Buddhist] path are one. Although the doctrines they espouse differ, the merit they lay down is the same. Therefore, that which preserves and protects the myriad countries is transformation by the Buddha [Dharma]; that which spreads and promotes the three jewels is none other than the virtue of the emperor. (KT 6: 312)

The role of the monastic, in other words, is to protect the nation by converting its people to Buddhism, which, it is implied, performs the practical function of promoting peace and security. The emperor fulfills his function of protecting the nation by supporting the monastic in this endeavor. Each “way” is dependent on the other. Without the monastic, the emperor could not fulfill his role, and vice versa.

Segyō then goes on to identify renunciation and the practice of mountain asceticism as the basis for the monastic’s ability to edify and transform others in the Buddhist path:

The *śramaṇa* disciples of Śākyamuni are travelers in the three realms. They leave their country and leave their families and so are without parents and without family. They sit in the mountain forests and seek the way; they steal away under the pines and practice meditation. (KT 6: 313)

To borrow a Buddhist distinction that would have been familiar to Segyō, practices such as renunciation and mountain asceticism that are oriented toward benefiting the individual (*jiri* 自利) are the foundation for the production of benefits for others (*rita* 利他). Segyō articulates precisely this idea in the next line: “Even though their intention is to turn away from the world and transcend defilements, they do not forget to protect the nation and bring benefits to its people” (KT 6: 313).

Segyō’s petition appears to have been well received by the court. It was only a year after receiving Segyō’s petition that Kanmu founded Bonshakuji. Segyō himself, subsequent to his petition, went on to ascend the ranks of the *sōgō* 僧綱. In 793, he was appointed preceptor (*risshi* 律師) (DNBZ 65: 6), and, in 797, he was promoted to minor prelate (*shosōzu* 少僧都) (KT 3: 9). During this time, it is possible that Segyō even resided at Bonshakuji, as suggested by a legend that first appears in the *Honchō kōsō den* (DNBZ 63: 43).

Just over a decade after completing the construction of Bonshakuji, Kanmu’s court would go on to look favorably upon the petition of another mountain ascetic. This time, however, the petition would seek to establish even greater autonomy for the monastic. In 806, just months before Kanmu’s death, Saichō submitted a petition signed by members of the *sōgō* in which he requested Kanmu to grant two annual ordinands to his Tendai school and each of the six Nara schools and, moreover, to give each school the authority to determine the course of instruction (*jugō* 授業) for their allotted ordinands (DDZ 1: 293). Kanmu accepted, noting that fostering competition among the schools would enhance Buddhism’s fundamental practical function of “serving the imperial throne, protecting [the nation] from calamities, and nourishing fortune” (DDZ 1: 295). Saichō hence achieved autonomy for the monastic community on the premise that it would enhance the practical function of the Buddhist establishment. Kūkai’s Shingon school, too, would later benefit from Saichō’s petition. In 835, just three months before Kūkai’s death, the court granted three annual ordinands to the Shingon school, thus establishing the system of eight schools (*hasshū* 八宗) that was to characterize the Buddhist establishment of Japan’s medieval period.

While HONGŌ (2005) and YOSHIDA (2006, 157) have suggested the term “sectarian” to describe the medieval system of Japanese Buddhism, this term in English can be misleading for it implies that the eight schools of the medieval Buddhist establishment did not share a common body of doctrine and ritual. More fundamentally than the “sectarian” independence of each school, what characterizes this system, as Hongō’s analysis makes clear, is its relative autonomy vis-à-vis the state. To call attention to this sociological feature, I propose to term Japan’s medieval Buddhist establishment “temple Buddhism.” In contrast to state Buddhism of the classical period, temple Buddhism established a relation of mutual dependence with the state and hence represents an early step toward

the differentiation of religion from politics in premodern Japan. The section that follows considers Saichō's founding of a temple complex on Mt. Hiei as a major catalyst for the formation of temple Buddhism.<sup>12</sup>

### *Saichō's Founding of a Temple Complex on Mt. Hiei*

As TAKEUCHI Kōzen (2006, 500–507) has shown, Kūkai did not turn his attention to propagating the esoteric teachings and establishing his own school of esoteric Buddhism on Mt. Kōya until after he parted ways with Saichō in the early part of 814. Kūkai's collaborative relationship with Saichō can be traced back to 809, when Saichō requested copies of esoteric texts from Kūkai and sent one of his disciples to study under him. Kūkai proved to be a trusted source for knowledge of and initiation into the esoteric teachings and their practices. In 812, Saichō even suggested that since both Tendai and esoteric Buddhism are, in essence, identical, Kūkai and he should collaborate in establishing their teachings in Japan (GRONER 2000, 81). Later that year, Kūkai granted Saichō's request to receive a series of initiations into the esoteric teachings. This would mark the height of their collaborative friendship. In the eleventh month of 813, Saichō requested the loan of the *Liqushi jing*, a commentary on the *Liqu jing*, an esoteric sutra that Saichō had brought back from China. In reply, Kūkai declined Saichō's request and harshly rebuked him for attempting to receive an esoteric transmission via writing. There are varying views on when Kūkai sent the letter and even whether the letter is authentic (GRONER 2000, 84–85). Whatever the case may be, it is clear, based on Saichō's extant letters, that exchange between Saichō and Kūkai began to slow significantly by early 814. Their very last exchange appears to have been in the second month of 816. It was only seven months later that Kūkai submitted his petition requesting Mt. Kōya as a site for his temple complex.

Saichō founded his mountain temple, Hieizanji 比叡山寺, in 788, long before he knew Kūkai. The temple, which he would later rename Hieizan Enryakuji 比叡山延曆寺, began as a simple base for ascetic practice. In 785, Saichō abandoned the life of an official monk and went into retreat on Mt. Hiei. In a prayer statement (*ganmon* 願文) he composed that year, he explains his decision, stating that he had renounced life in the social world in order to purify his six faculties

12. I borrow this formulation from Stephen COVELL (2005, 4), who proposes the term as an alternative to standard terms to describe the overall form of Buddhism practiced by those schools of Japanese Buddhism that were established before 1600: “established Buddhism” (*kisei Bukkyō* 既成仏教) and “traditional Buddhism” (*dentō Bukkyō* 伝統仏教). Covell is concerned with how that form of Buddhism is lived today. The term, however, is useful for thinking about the formation of the first examples of the main schools of what Covell calls temple Buddhism in the early ninth century. Building on Hongō's concept of sectarian Buddhism, the term can be used to refer to a form of Buddhism in which the temples, rather than the state, have the authority to govern the monastic community.

(the five senses plus consciousness), realize the absolute, attain wisdom, and lead all beings to enlightenment (GRONER 2000, 29). Like Segyō, Saichō thus understood the pursuit of wisdom that leads to personal enlightenment, or self-benefit, as the condition for benefiting others. In 797, after twelve years of ascetic practice on Mt. Hiei, Saichō garnered the attention of the imperial court and was appointed as one of ten meditation masters to serve at the palace (*naigubu* 内供奉) (GRONER 2000, 31). It was after this appointment that his career took off.

Even before his trip to the Tang in 803, Saichō appears to have been intent on establishing his temple complex on Mt. Hiei as a base for the study of Chinese Tiantai. According to Saichō's biography, the *Eizan Daishi den* (DDZ 5: 12), in the fourth month of 802, one night after delivering a lecture on the *Lotus Sūtra* at Takaosanji, Saichō discussed with his benefactor, Wake no Hiroyo 和気広世 (d.u.), how they might go about transmitting the Tiantai teachings in Japan. They arrived at the decision to submit a petition to Kanmu and his court requesting that two students be sent to study Tiantai in Tang China. In the petition, which is cited in the *Eizan Daishi den* (DDZ 5: 12), Saichō argues that Hossō and Sanron are "tip-of-the-branch schools" (*shimatsu shū* 枝末宗) since they only study *śāstras*, the tips of the branches of the Buddha's teachings, and neglect its roots (*hon* 本), the sutras. By contrast, he argues, the Tendai school, since it was based on the teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra*, represents the original root of the Buddhist teachings. Already, as Paul GRONER (2000, 38) has noted in his study of this text, we observe Saichō's sectarian intention to establish the Tendai school in Japan.

After returning from the Tang in 805, Saichō's reputation at court only grew, and he was able to take advantage of his reputation to further advance his plans to establish his temple complex as a base for the Tendai teachings. In the first month of 806, he composed his petition proposing the allotment of annual ordinals to his Tendai school and each of the six schools based out of temples in Nara. We have already considered the implications of this petition for the formation of a more autonomous system of Buddhism that centers on the temple institution and noted that the court's acceptance of the autonomy of this system was predicated on its practical function, that is, its ability to produce this-worldly benefits for the state. That the state recognized the practical function of Saichō's temple complex on Mt. Hiei is indicated by the fact that in the same year he submitted his petition, the court awarded the kami of Mt. Hiei ten households, the revenue from which would be allocated to the Hiei shrines (KT 27: 4). As we observed above, the awarding of kami households was a strategy the court developed to promote shrine temples. It thus suggests that Saichō's mountain temple was a kind of temple complex that, like shrine temples before it, was concerned with the practical task of pacifying the vengeful *jinushigami* of the mountain. As we shall see, Saichō restructured the shrines on Mt. Hiei as tutelary shrines (*chinjusha* 鎮守社) dedicated to the protection of the temple. Rather

than a temple attached to a shrine, the shrines of Mt. Hiei were reformulated as shrines attached to temples; they were made to serve, in other words, a subordinate role in relation to the temple complex. In this sense, as Mark TEEUWEN and Fabio RAMBELLI (2003, 14) have suggested, Saichō's temple complex on Mt. Hiei is properly understood as a "temple-shrine complex," rather than a shrine temple in the strict sense of the term.

It was not until 810, four years after Saichō's petition, that the court honored its promise of allotting two annual ordinands to Saichō's Tendai school. With renewed support from the court for his mountain temple, Saichō turned his attention to its expansion and further development. In liturgical texts he composed for rites performed during the Kōnin era (809–823), Saichō expresses his concern for the pacification of the kami and spirits of the mountain. An early example is an 812 prayer statement he composed for a rite in which he formally dedicated his practice of the *Lotus* to the Hiei kami and other spirits on the mountain. In the opening to the prayer statement, Saichō invokes a vast assembly of Buddhist divinities, from Brahmā and Śakra to Mother Hāritī and various Dragon Kings, as well as deities indigenous to the country of Japan, from the "the Kami of Heaven and Earth (*tenjin jigi* 天神地祇)" to "the Eight Great Luminous Kami (*myōjin* 明神)" (DDZ 5: 242). He then submits his prayer that "the mountain kings (*sannō* 山王) of Hiei" and "the spirits and kami (*kijin*) who unfurl [their presence] in response [to offerings]" on the numerous peaks and waterways of Mt. Hiei will "forever transcend the suffering of the path of karma and enhance the light of their power (*ikō* 威光)" (DDZ 5: 242).<sup>13</sup>

This passage marks the first instance of "mountain king," a term that would be used to designate the distinct form of kami-buddha syncretism that took shape on Mt. Hiei over the course of the medieval period. Saichō would later use the term in an exposition (*keibyaku* 敬白), or opening address, for an 818 prayer statement he composed for an imperially sponsored assembly for the recitation of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Therein, the term figures as part of a series of terms describing the manifold deities indigenous to "the Great Nation of Japan":

Kings of Heavenly Kami and Subjects of Heavenly Kami, Kings of Earthly Kami and Subjects of Earthly Kami, Kings of Spirits and Subjects of Spirits, Kings of the Mountain and Subjects of the Mountain, Kings of the Rivers and Subjects of the Rivers, Kings of the Ocean and Subjects of the Ocean, Kings of the Forest and Subjects of the Forest, Kings of the Fields and Subjects of the Fields....  
(DDZ 1: 534)

13. Yeonjoo PARK (2020) discusses the development of the mountain deity Sannō on Mt. Hiei in her contribution to this special issue.

This broader context of the term suggests that the designation “king” describes certain spirits or kami of particular natural features (mountains, rivers, oceans, fields, and forests) who preside over that natural feature and its denizens, or subjects, as would a king. In the Buddhist tradition, we find a similar connotation of the term “king” in the label “dragon king” (*ryūō* 龍王), which refers to a kind of protector deity who, as we shall see below, pacifies other unenlightened and unruly dragons who dwell in ponds and lakes on mountains. The term “mountain king” can thus be understood as a Buddhist analog to the Shinto concept of a *jinushigami*. If so, it would imply the kami Ōyamakui 大山咋 who is identified in the *Kojiki* as the kami who dwells on Mt. Hiei (HELDT 2014, 40).

As both the 812 and 818 expositions indicate, Saichō’s strategy for interceding with the mountain kings centered on the practice of the *Lotus Sūtra*. By means of this practice, Saichō, as he states in his 812 prayer, aimed to “enhance the light of the power” of the spirits and kami of Mt. Hiei. In this context, the notion of enhancing the light of the kami’s power implies transforming them into “luminous kami,” or *myōjin*; that is, kami whose actions have been illuminated by the enlightening knowledge of the Dharma. Once thus converted, such kami would serve as more reliable protectors of the temple complex. Hence, after submitting his primary prayer, Saichō adds that he prays that the kami and spirits of the mountain “eternally protect this place of practice” (DDZ 5: 241).

Like the founders of shrine temples before him, Saichō conceived of the local kami and spirits on the mountain to be suffering in *samsāra*. On this premise, he reasoned that, like all sentient beings, their destructive behavior was caused by delusion, which, in turn, could be remedied by instruction in the Dharma, particularly the *Lotus Sūtra*. Thus, to conclude his series of prayers, he affirms that recitation of the sūtra will help the kami and spirits of the mountain realize their “seeds of buddhahood” (*busshu* 仏種); in other words, it helps them to become enlightened.

It is by enlightening the mountain kami—by enhancing, as he suggests, the light of their divine power—that Saichō attempts to carry out the practical function of protecting the nation of Japan. In subsequent sections of the prayer statement, he goes on to explain the contribution that he intends “his founding of the Lotus school” to make both to the imperial family and “the nation of Japan” as such (DDZ 5: 243). He first asserts that recitation of the *Lotus* will guide the ancestral spirits of the imperial family as well as high ministers and officials of the court to rebirth in the pure land and, even, to attainment of the “unsurpassed fruit” of enlightenment. He then avers that “the merit” (*kudoku* 功德) derived from his practice of the *Lotus* will “eternally protect the nation of Japan” (DDZ 5: 243). “Merit,” as he indicates in the subsequent stanza, refers explicitly to the power of the practice of the *Lotus* to destroy bad karma, instill the *bodhi*-mind, cultivate the cause of the “perfect” practice of the Tendai school, and guide

living beings to future buddhahood (*jōbutsu* 成仏) (DDZ 5: 243). Saichō's aim is thus nothing less than the universal enlightenment of all living beings. In the conclusion to the prayer statement, however, he returns to his central purpose: enlightenment of "the good kami and kings who protect the temple complex."

Saichō thus conceived of his temple complex on Mt. Hiei as a place for a kind of Buddhist practice that has the power to pacify local kami and spirits and thereby protect the entire nation of Japan. This particular function of the temple complex is enframed by a specific understanding of the natural world of Mt. Hiei as a realm teeming with beings whose potential for enlightenment—and thus pacification—is waiting to be unlocked by the Dharma of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Throughout his 812 prayer statement, Saichō portrays all living beings, including the mountain kings and other spirits and kami on the mountain, as intrinsically endowed with seeds for buddhahood, or something like buddha-nature (*bussō* 仏性), and presents recitation of the *Lotus* on behalf of these beings as an efficacious technique for cultivating and realizing that buddha-potential. Saichō thus recognized the power of the kami and spirits of the mountain but he did not succumb to their enchantment, as it were. Instead, he insisted that, from the perspective of the teachings of the *Lotus*, even such deluded spirits have the potential for enlightenment. Hence, for Saichō, rather than an enchanted realm, the world of Mt. Hiei was fundamentally enlightened or "enlighten-able." Once their potential for enlightenment is realized, the kami of Mt. Hiei transform into benevolent protector kami who support the monastic pursuit of enlightenment on the mountain. Insofar as the world of Mt. Hiei is thus "enlighten-able" and enlightening, we can say that it constituted, for Tendai monks on the mountain, a potential matrix of enlightenment.

From a historical materialist point of view, Saichō's Tendai Buddhist understanding of Mt. Hiei can easily be explained as a post-facto rationalization, or legitimation, of his efforts to promote the status and power of his mountain temple complex. Certainly, it is true that his presentation of his practice of the *Lotus* on Mt. Hiei and its power to harness the forces of the mountains for the benefit of the state would have appealed to elites at court. Yet, to emphasize only its political effects is to overlook the extent to which Saichō's founding of Mt. Hiei was predicated on and informed by his Buddhist understanding of the mountain environment.

As Kūkai's exchange with Yasuyo suggests, powerful figures at court understood the mountains as the inhospitable abode of dangerous kami and spirits. Against this backdrop, in order for ascetic practice on the mountain to make sense, Saichō, like mountain ascetics before him, had to conceive of the mountains entirely differently. In other words, he needed to disembody himself from the enchanted cosmos of kami and spirits on which court society was believed to be grounded. As we have observed, Saichō did so by embracing the Buddhist

view that all beings have the potential for enlightenment. This view was based on the Mahāyāna notion that the bodhisattva attains wisdom for the purpose of saving all beings. Thus, Saichō understood Buddhist practice on the mountain as the most effective technique for attaining wisdom that leads to universal enlightenment of all beings, including even malevolent spirits and kami. To borrow a technical term from the phenomenological tradition, it was this particular Mahāyāna understanding of human existence in the world that formed the “background” for Saichō’s founding of his temple complex on Mt. Hiei.<sup>14</sup> Kūkai’s understanding of the mountain landscape as a mandala is properly understood as a variation of this same basic background understanding, the genealogy of which can be traced all the way back to the early eighth century with the founding of shrine temples in the provinces.<sup>15</sup>

### *Shōdō’s Founding of a Shrine Temple on Mt. Fudaraku*

In his analysis of Kūkai’s efforts to propagate the esoteric teaching after parting ways with Saichō in early 814, TAKEUCHI (2006, 500–707) calls attention to two documents in particular. The first is the *Kan’ensho* in which Kūkai requests lay and ordained to copy *mikkyō* 密教 scriptures for the purpose of spreading the esoteric doctrine (*himitsu hōmon* 秘密法門) (TKZ 7: 91–95).<sup>16</sup> The second is Kūkai’s memorial of 816 to the throne requesting permission to build a temple complex on Mt. Kōya. Takeuchi overlooks, however, what was perhaps the first major work Kūkai composed after his relationship with Saichō began to deteriorate: his epitaph for the monk Shōdō, “Śramaṇa Shōdō who Polished his Dark Gem [of Awakening] by Traversing Mountains and Waters: An Epitaph with Preface” composed in the eighth month of 814.<sup>17</sup> As we shall see, Kūkai’s account

14. For a discussion of “background” in the Mahāyāna Buddhist context, see DREYFUS (2017).

15. In a recent article, I offer analysis of the Buddhist understanding of the natural world—or what I call the Buddhist cosmic imaginary—shared by Saichō and Kūkai (BUSHELLE 2018).

16. As TAKEUCHI (2006, 510) notes, Kūkai formulates a rhetoric of the superiority of the esoteric teachings in this text in a manner that resembles his later work, the *Ben kenmitsu nikyō ron*.

17. For an English translation of the original text, see GRAPARD (1978). Kūkai’s epitaph appears to have indeed been inscribed in stone, probably during his own lifetime. It is likely that the stone slab was first erected as a monument at the Chūgūshi Futarasan 中宮祠二荒山 Shrine on Mt. Nikkō 日光. In 1705, due to significant damage caused by years of wind and rain, the stone monument was renovated. Kūkai’s epitaph was reinscribed on a copper plate, which was then affixed over a new stone slab. In the Meiji era, in accordance with the Meiji government’s order to separate the kami and buddhas (*shinbutsu bunri* 神仏分離), the copper plate was moved to Chūzenji 中禪寺, a nearby Buddhist temple. The stone monument remained at Chūgūshi, where it still stands today. Over the slab, a new copper plate that reads “Numinous Peak of the Twin Raging Peaks” (*ryōhō futarasan* 靈峯二荒山) has been affixed. Over the course of the twentieth century, the copper plate inscription of Kūkai’s epitaph has been moved several times. It is currently stored at the Treasure Hall of Rinnōji 輪王寺 in Nikkō City (SUDA 1980).



of Shōdō's founding of a shrine temple on Mt. Fudaraku 補陀洛 sheds important light on the ascetic ideal that inspired his own efforts to found an institutional base for the practice of the esoteric teachings on Mt. Kōya.

Kūkai never met Shōdō in person but was asked to compose the epitaph by a mutual friend, Professor I (I *hakushi* 伊博士), as he explains in his postscript to the work (NKBT 71: 191). Nor had he ever traveled to Mt. Nikkō. It is likely that Kūkai, once he accepted the request, received extensive notes and accounts from Shōdō of his own life from Professor I, and it is on the basis of these notes that he composed his biographical portrait (SUDA 1980, 25).

In the opening to the preface, Kūkai depicts mountains as the abodes of "extraordinary individuals" (*ijin* 異人), citing the mythical mountains of Mt. Sumeru and Mt. Gṛdhrakūṭa in India as examples. According to tradition, located on the peak of the former is Tuṣita Heaven, the abode of Maitreya, and on the peak of the latter, the site where Śākyamuni entered into his final nirvana. "Extraordinary individual" here thus refers to the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the Buddhist traditions who have attained, or are guaranteed to attain, enlightenment. The bodhisattvas who reside on the mountains are not alone, for the waterways of mountains, Kūkai tells us, are the dwelling places of "numinous beings" (*ryōbutsu* 靈物), particularly dragons. As an example, Kūkai refers to Anavatapta, a mythical lake north of the Himalayas understood to be the source of four great rivers in Jambudvīpa and believed to be controlled by a bodhisattva who transformed into a *nāga*, or dragon, in order to bring enlightenment to the dragons who dwelled in the lake (ODA 2005, 28). Hence, to open his epitaph, Kūkai establishes that mountains are places where bodhisattvas not only attain personal enlightenment for themselves but bring enlightenment to the numinous beings, particularly dragons, who dwell on the mountain.

Throughout his career, Kūkai showed a consistent interest in the power of Buddhist practice to pacify the dragons who were believed to dwell in mountain waters and to influence thereby the causal forces that make the rain fall. As we shall see below, in his 816 petition to the throne requesting permission to use Mt. Kōya as a site for his temple complex, Kūkai similarly associates dragons with the waterways of the mountains and emphasizes the efficacy of mountain ascetic practice in pacifying and controlling those dragons. He not only advocates for such practice, he was also a skilled practitioner of it. A much celebrated event in Kūkai's life came in 824 when he is said to have made rain fall by offering prayers to the dragon king Zennyō Ryūō 善女龍王, who was believed to live in the "Dragon Cave" (*ryūketsu* 龍穴) on Mt. Murō 室生 (FOWLER 1997, 154–157). Later in Kūkai's epitaph, we learn that Shōdō too earned considerable recognition from the court for his efficacious performance of rainmaking rites. This opening passage thus forecasts this important event in Shōdō's career.

The Buddhist tradition constitutes only one important context for understanding Kūkai's association of mountains with water, and water with dragons, or serpentine beings. As noted in the previous section, the kami tradition in early Japan understood mountain kami as vengeful beings who control the waterways that made agriculture possible and manifest themselves as snakes to humans who lived in the agricultural communities below. In portraying mountain ascetics as bodhisattvas who bring enlightenment to the numinous dragons of the mountain, Kūkai thus presents ascetic practice on the mountain as a solution to the practical problem of how to pacify the kami and spirits of the mountain and thereby control patterns of precipitation and rainfall.<sup>18</sup>

Like mountain ascetics before him, Kūkai stresses that the efficacy of Buddhist practice to bring rainfall to agricultural communities is derived from the pursuit of enlightenment. In the next section of his epitaph, he describes the practice of mystically yoking (*myōe* 冥会) one's mind (*shin* 心) with the phenomenal world (*kyō* 境) as the technique by which the ascetic attains enlightenment, or, as he puts it, "the virtuous power of the path" (*dōtoku* 道徳) (NKBT 71: 183).

After setting up the Buddhist framework for his epitaph, Kūkai offers an extended account of Shōdō's life. The first section describes his renunciation. From the age of seven to twenty:

He felt shackled by the productive work of the four occupations [scholar, farmer, artisan, and merchant] and hungered for the extinction of karma [by means of meditation on] the three truths. He detested the hustle and bustle of villages and towns and revered the purity of forests and springs.

(NKBT 71: 183)

Kūkai thus makes clear that Shōdō's motivation in renouncing life in society was to attain enlightenment. Shōdō, in his account, intends to pursue a way of life that is disciplined and scholarly, studying and practicing abstruse Buddhist teachings, such as the Tendai doctrine of the three truths (*santai* 三諦).

The main section of Kūkai's biographical portrait recounts Shōdō's ascent of Mt. Nantai, to which Kūkai refers as Mt. Fudaraku. Fudaraku is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word, Potalaka, the mythical mountain in South India that is depicted in the *Flower Garland Sūtra* (T 279, 10.366c3–4, where it is transliterated as Fudaraka 補怛洛迦) as the abode of Avalokiteśvara. Shōdō, Kūkai tells us later in the epitaph, was a devotee of Avalokiteśvara (NKBT 71: 189); it is therefore likely that the name Potalaka suggests Shōdō's own understanding of the mountain, rather than that of Kūkai. Based on Shōdō's devotion to Avalokiteśvara and the above description of his practice of the three truths, we can infer,

18. On the social and political importance of rainmaking rites for esoteric Buddhist monks in the Heian period, see RUPPERT (2002).

as KOBAYASHI Sōjin (2009, 51–52) has suggested, that Shōdō was steeped in the Kegon and Tiantai (that is, pre-Saichō Tendai) traditions. He does not seem to have been interested in, or even aware of, Kūkai's explicitly esoteric formulation of the Buddhist tradition. This will be important to keep in mind when we attempt to disentangle Kūkai's interpretation of Shōdō from the man himself.<sup>19</sup>

The history of the name of Mt. Fudaraku is complicated but important for considering Shōdō's intention in climbing the mountain. KANNO Tomikazu (2003) has convincingly argued that the original name of the pair of mountains known today as Mt. Nikkō was either Futara or Futaara 二荒 (probably Futara first, then simplified to Futara); the current name Nikkō was subsequently derived from the Chinese-based reading of the characters for Futara and then assigned new characters to represent the sound. Evidence in support of this interpretation comes from archaeological excavations on the peak of Mt. Nikkō that suggest that the site was an object of religious devotion since at least the Kofun period (ca. 250–538). Based on this evidence, it seems likely that the mountain had the religiously inflected name of Futara prior to Shōdō's ascent. The name "Futara" is particularly evocative for the purposes of our analysis. Based on the grammatical structure of the name, Kanno infers that it must have been derived from the compound "Futa-arayama," meaning "twin raging mountains," referring to the male-female pair of mountains that make up Mt. Nikkō, Mt. Nantai 男体 ("Male Body Mountain"), and Mt. Nyohō 女峰 ("Female Peak Mountain"). A "raging mountain" (*arayama* 荒山) literally means a mountain wherein raging kami dwell (KANNO 2003, 4). The term is thus associated with fear of the raging kami believed to dwell in remote mountains. We can understand, then, the transformation of the name by means of homophony from "Futara," twin raging (mountains), to "Fudaraku" (Mt. Potalaka) as symbolic of Shōdō's intention to domesticate and harness the raging power of the kami and spirits of the mountain by resituating them in the enlightened realm of Avalokiteśvara.

In describing Mt. Fudaraku, Kūkai portrays the mountain as being equal in its awe-inspiring power to the enlightened mountain abodes of bodhisattvas mentioned in the opening to the preface: awesome peaks tower high in the heavens and thunder rolls through the belly of the mountain at regular intervals. If Kanno is right that its original name was Futara, then we glimpse here the feeling of awe that must have been accorded to the mountain well before Shōdō's

19. On the religious and historical dimensions of Mt. Potalaka, see LÄÄNEMETS (2006, 304–311). Based on his analysis of the depiction of this mountain in the *Flower Garland Sūtra*, Läänemets makes the intriguing argument that the mountain may have referred to an actual place and that place was the site of a mixed Hindu-Buddhist mountain cult that worshiped Avalokiteśvara as a Buddhist transformation of a local mountain deity. If so, Shōdō's practice on Mt. Fudaraku, which similarly is concerned with the worship of Avalokiteśvara as a Buddhist transformation of local mountain deities, would then parallel the origins of the Avalokiteśvara cult in the Indian Buddhist tradition.

“opening” of it. In Kūkai’s depiction, the natural world of the mountain is raw and undomesticated. No one had ever, he stresses, ascended the mountain. Shōdō, however, is no ordinary individual. Admiring Siddhartha’s six years of ascetic practice before he became the Buddha, Shōdō, who grew up near the mountain, became determined to climb it (NKBT 71: 183).

In the fourth month of 767, he attempted his first ascent. The snow, however, was still deep, and mist and fog clouded his view. When it began to thunder, he gave up. Fourteen years later, in 781, Shōdō once again attempted the climb but failed. It was not until his third attempt in the third month of the next year that he succeeded. In preparation for this third attempt, Kūkai tells us, Shōdō copied sutras and drew images of the Buddha “for the sake of the kami.” Then, for seven days at the base of the mountain prior to the ascent, he used these sutras and images to worship the Buddha (NKBT 71: 185). Shōdō’s preparation for the third ascent suggests that he viewed the mountain as an abode for numinous presences, including especially kami, who needed to be appeased. He is clearly apprehensive about his ascent; he does not know what powerful beings await him on the mountains, and so he girds himself with Buddhist images and scripture on the conviction that they have the power to buffer him from these potentially malevolent forces.

After his seven days of worship and sutra recitation, Shōdō addresses the kami, vowing to them that if he should ascend the peak he will offer up to them the sutras and images he himself personally copied. His purpose in doing so, he states, is to “exalt their divine power and transfer blessings to all living beings” (NKBT 71: 185). Kūkai thus makes clear that Shōdō intended his ascent to have a collective benefit. “To exalt their divine power” (*shin’i* 神威) in the context of the preface, suggests the transformation of the numinous beings of the mountain into benevolent protector deities. Pacification of the vengeful kami on the mountains would have been regarded as beneficial by people living in the villages at its base in particular, for it was widely believed that mountain kami descended to the plains in spring to give life to the rice paddies (in the form of water) and returned to the mountains in autumn after the harvest (MIYAKE 2005, 46).

Pacification of these mountain kami was, at the same time, crucial to the success of Shōdō’s own ascent. Without their protection, the natural forces of the mountain environment could easily render his climb impossible. For this reason, Shōdō follows up his vow with a prayer requesting not only the “good kami” (*zenshin* 善神) but also a full range of numinous beings—from the “poisonous dragon” (*dokuryū* 毒竜) to the “charm of the mountain” (*sanbi* 山魅)—to assist him in his climb. By addressing these deities and promising them offerings of the Dharma, Shōdō aims to harness their power for the purpose of his ascent. Benefiting those who live below at the base of the mountain is one consequence of this ascent, but it is not its fundamental purpose. After uttering his prayer to the

kami, Shōdō explains his primary aim in climbing the mountain, stating that “If I do not ascend the peak of the mountain, then neither will I attain *bodhi*” (NKBT 71: 185). It is thus Shōdō's own individual intention to attain *bodhi* that, in Kūkai's account at least, motivated his climb. Benefiting others is portrayed as a kind of by-product of this individualistic aim.

Shōdō's supplications to the kami, we are told, had their intended effect. He climbed to the peak of Mt. Nantai in three days. Standing atop the mountain, he experienced a kind of ecstasy. “Overwhelmed with joy, I [Shōdō] felt as though I were in a dream. . . . At once delighted, at once moved, I found it difficult to maintain the spirit of my mind” (NKBT 71: 185). Gazing out from the peak of Mt. Nantai, Shōdō is transfixed. A lake to the south, in particular, captures his attention. Its surface reflects the diverse plants and jagged rock on the side of the mountains surrounding it. Kūkai describes the clear surface of the lake: “The mirror of the lake is without such a thing as an ‘I’; / Of the myriad forms, who could escape it?” (NKBT 71: 187). He then turns the narrator's gaze to Shōdō. Looking at both the mountain and the water as two reflections in a mirror, he felt something “suddenly cut to the core” of his being. He never grew tired of gazing in all four directions. After clouds came and obscured the view, he decided that he would build his temporary hermitage at this site and perform for the kami the offerings he promised them.

Kūkai's depiction of this pivotal scene in the narrative can be understood as an illustration of the theme introduced in the opening to the preface: the fusion of self with the world. His illustration hinges on the symbolism of the water and its mirror-like surface. At the end of the opening to the preface, just after his elaboration of the importance of merging the self with the world, he frames his introduction of Shōdō by comparing him to Śākyamuni and Mañjuśrī, characterizing them as enlightened teachers who derived the virtue of benevolence from the mountain and that of wisdom from its waters (NKBT 71: 183). The association of benevolence with the mountains and wisdom with water is based on an oft-cited line from the *Analects* (KBTK 1: 142). Kūkai here, of course, gives it a Buddhist reinterpretation. These virtues are presented as inherent in the natural world. By drawing on them, the Buddhist teacher “polishes his/her mirror on the stand” and, in doing this, becomes better able to peer into “the water of the faculties” (*kisui* 機水) of living beings and respond appropriately (NKBT 71: 183). Shōdō, Kūkai tells us, is just such a Buddhist teacher. Hence, at the end of the opening to the preface, Kūkai portrays Shōdō as a paradigm of the enlightened Buddhist who, by aligning with the virtue inherent in the natural forces on the mountains, enhances his insight into the capacities of living beings and thereby augments his own ability to teach and save others. Buddhist practice in the mountains—the pursuit of the rare and exceptional individual, or “extraordinary person”—contributes to the individual's ability to save others, and it does so

precisely through skillful interaction with elements of nature. This brief section at the end of the opening to the preface, with its many references to water as a metaphor for wisdom, thus foreshadows Shōdō's vision of the infinite reflection of all forms in the world on the surface of the mirror-like lake. More specifically, since it explicitly endorses the merging of self and world as the means by which one acquires wisdom and virtue, we can read Shōdō's vision of the mirror-like lake as an experience of union with the natural environment of the mountains.

Kūkai notes that Shōdō made his offerings on the peak of Mt. Nantai in the form of a twenty-one day repentance rite (*reisan* 礼懺). KOBAYASHI (2009, 64–70) has given careful consideration to the specific kind of repentance rite Shōdō might have performed on the top of Mt. Nantai. For our purposes, however, one feature of the rite stands out in particular; namely, that Shōdō performed it as an offering to the kami. This peculiar context suggests that Shōdō performed the rite on behalf of the kami to repent for their sins. Moreover, since he explicitly stated in the vow he took at the base of the mountain “to exalt the divine power” of the kami, we can understand this act of repentance on their behalf as his way of fulfilling this vow. In analyzing his vow above, we interpreted the expression “to exalt the divine power” of the kami to mean specifically to pacify them so that they would offer Shōdō assistance and protection on his climb. What this, in turn, would mean can be inferred from the description of the first failed attempt: fair weather, clear skies, and no thunder. The logic of Shōdō's repentance rite for the kami thus resembles the pattern we discerned above in early accounts of the founding of shrine temples. The kami of Mt. Nikkō are suffering in *samsāra* because of their lack of understanding of the Dharma, and they express their suffering in the form of thunder and other extreme weather patterns. Therefore, the mountain ascetic, in order to climb the mountain, must save the kami from *samsāra* by preaching the Dharma to them.

Upon completing his twenty-one-day repentance rite, Shōdō descended the mountain. It was not until two years later, in the third month of 784, that he ascended the mountain for a second time. This second time he brought with him two or three fellow monks, and when they made it to the top of the mountain they built a raft and floated across the lake located to the south of Mt. Nantai, known today as Lake Chūzenji 中禪寺. They stayed for a night on an island in the lake and set out again the next day. It was at this time that Shōdō had, according to Kūkai, yet another unitive experience.

The mirror-like reflective surface of the lake once again frames Kūkai's description of this experience (NKBT 71: 187). He depicts the natural world surrounding the lake as resonant with order and human significance. The pines and oaks form a green canopy, and the *sugi* 杉 and *hinoki* 檜 trees an indigo pavilion; the calls of the white cranes are the sound of bells, and the cries of the green ducks, the jingling of jewels; the wind through pines, the strings of the *koto* 琴

sounding out the five tones, the very music of heaven, and the waves lapping onto shore, the beat of the drum tapping out the rhythm of the flow of pure and clear water possessed of eight qualities. Kūkai then goes on to suggest that the morning sky over the lake manifests the presence of two protector divinities important to pre-Shingon mountain ascetic practice: the clouds obscuring the mountain peaks are curtains drawn by the Dragon King Nanda 難陀 and the twinkle of the stars in the early morning, the sleight of hand of Universal Fragrance (Fukō 普香),<sup>20</sup> a deva-prince who dwells on the planet Venus, and a transformation-body of the bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha.<sup>21</sup> The resonant order of the natural environment and its protection by benevolent Buddhist divinities further underscores one of the central claims of Kūkai's epitaph, namely, that Mt. Fudaraku, as the Japanese analog to Mt. Potalaka in India, is, in essence, the enlightened abode of Avalokiteśvara.

Having revealed the fundamentally enlightened nature of the natural environment of Mt. Fudaraku, Kūkai brings his preface to its climax. He describes the state of enlightenment experienced by Shōdō: "Gazing upon the round moon on the pond, Shōdō knew the mirror-like wisdom of Samantabhadra. Looking up at the sun of wisdom high in the sky, he awakened to the pervading wisdom that exists in his own being" (NKBT 71: 187). In his *Hannya shingyō hiken*, Kūkai depicts Samantabhadra as the personification of the teachings of the *Flower Garland Sūtra*, particularly its central teaching of interpenetration (HAKEDA 1972, 264, 268). Samantabhadra's mirror-like wisdom is thus the realization of the perfect interpenetration of Vairocana's wisdom that universally pervades all things like the light of the sun. Hence, in this climatic scene, Kūkai attempts to show that Shōdō experienced the state of enlightenment described in the *Flower Garland Sūtra*, an experience of union between the extraordinary individual, or

20. The Dragon King Nanda is one of the eight great dragon kings described in the *Lotus Sūtra*. He was worshiped at the dragon cave on Mt. Murō, an early site of mountain ascetic practice (KOBAYASHI 2009, 76). Based on the esoteric text by Śubhākarasimha (637–735), the *Qian-shou Guanyin zaoci cidī fa yigui* that he imported from China, Kūkai identified this Dragon King as one of Avalokiteśvara's twenty-eight divinities in her retinue. Hence, for Kūkai, Nanda was associated with Avalokiteśvara. This association would have been unknown to Shōdō, but, in the context of the epitaph, it further advances the idea that Mt. Fudaraku is Avalokiteśvara's enlightened abode.

21. In his description of his own practice of mountain asceticism as a youth in the preface to his *Sangō shiiki*, Kūkai mentions that he practiced a rite for the recitation of Ākāśagarbha's *dhāraṇī* (HAKEDA 1972, 102). Prior to Kūkai, scholar-monks from major temples in Nara, including Dōji 道慈 (d. 744), Gonsō 勤操 (754–827), and Zengi 善議 (729–812), as well as laypeople practiced the rite (ANDREEVA 2019, 130–134). Ākāśagarbha was to figure prominently in medieval mountain ascetic practice. As ANDREEVA (2019, 143–147) has shown, this bodhisattva played a key role in the process by which Mt. Asama 浅間 in present-day Mie Prefecture came to be understood as a mandala.

bodhisattva, and a universal, benevolent wisdom that inheres in the very being of things. As with the first ascent, Shōdō interprets the unitive experience of fusion with the natural landscape of the mountain as a sign that the place where that experience occurred is a “superior location.” It is at this location that Shōdō built a small temple that he called a *jingūji*, or shrine temple. He resided there for four years.

In the fourth month of 788, Shōdō moved his temple to the north side of the southern lake. Like the location of his initial hermitage and later of his shrine temple, Shōdō is depicted once again to have chosen the site as a consequence of an experience of union with the mountain environment there. Kūkai notes that Shōdō, upon encountering this new location, could not find any Daoist transcendents there, even though it seemed like the kind of place where they would have roamed (NKBT 71: 189). Even the scholar-transcendent Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (160–93 BCE) does not mention it in his list of famous retreats, and the legendary transcendent Wang Qiao 王喬 (or Zi Qiao 子喬; ca. sixth century BCE), is nowhere to be found. Rather than encountering the paradigms of the Daoist transcendent, Shōdō, we are told, realizes that the mountain itself is the tuft of hair on the Buddha’s third-eye, indeed the very “storehouse of the Lotus” (*kezō* 華藏), the realm of Vairocana’s enlightenment depicted in the *Flower Garland Sūtra*: “Contemplating the Storehouse of the Lotus in the sea of my mind, / I apprehend the true form [of reality] in the hair-tuft mountain” (NKBT 71: 189).

The last section of Kūkai’s lengthy preface describes Shōdō’s activities off Mt. Fudaraku late in his life. He notes that Shōdō’s fame as a mountain ascetic garnered the attention of Emperor Kanmu. In 795, Kanmu appointed Shōdō as lecturer in the province of Kōzuke 上野. Kūkai also mentions that Shōdō went on to found another temple on Mt. Shiro 城 in present-day Kagoshima City. The last accomplishment Kūkai describes is Shōdō’s successful performance of a rainmaking rite in 807 on Mt. Nantai (NKBT 71: 189). Here, we learn of one specific instance of Shōdō’s ability to create benefits for others. In describing this accomplishment and his other activities off the mountain, Kūkai emphasizes that Shōdō, through his ascetic practice in remote mountains, developed a “mind empty [of discriminations]” (*kyoshin* 虚心) and so was able to “follow [the arising of] things” (*mono ni shitagau* 逐物); it was in this way, Kūkai stresses, that he “benefited others” (NKBT 71: 189). Hence Kūkai portrays the benefits Shōdō was able to share with others as a consequence of his individual ascetic practice.

The epitaph, which is quite short in comparison to the preface, presents us with a picture of Shōdō as a transcendent individual, as precisely the “extraordinary individual” held up as the ideal Buddhist practitioner in the opening to the preface:



Following the path, he shook off [the dust of the social world]  
 And entered directly into the tall mountains.  
 Like a leaping dragon, he ascended high peaks;  
 Like a rising phoenix, he traversed steep mountain passes. (NKBT 71: 189–191)

In the context of Kūkai's portrait, the figure of the flying dragon implies Shōdō's pacification of the benighted dragons whom Kūkai counts among the "numinous beings" on the mountain as well as "the Poisonous Dragon" named by Shōdō in his seven days of worship before his third ascent of Mt. Nikkō. This theme of pacification is underscored in the couplet that immediately follows the above: "By the power and protection (*igo* 威護) of the shining kami (*shinmei* 神明), he traversed [Mt. Fudaraku] and gazed upon its mountains and waters" (NKBT 71: 191). "Shining kami," here, like the luminous kami mentioned by Saichō, refers to kami who have been illuminated—indeed, enlightened—by the Buddhist teachings.

It is difficult to know with certainty to what extent Kūkai's portrait of Shōdō represents an ideal and to what extent it faithfully portrays Shōdō's life. As we observed in his description of Shōdō's enlightenment experience, Kūkai is careful to describe it in terms that would have been familiar to a monk steeped in the teachings of the *Flower Garland Sūtra*. It seems reasonable to assume that this approach to describing Shōdō's Buddhist experience on the mountain was based on the notes Kūkai received from Professor I and that, therefore, Kūkai's preface provides us with a not entirely unreliable picture of Shōdō's understanding of life on Mt. Fudaraku. For the same reason, we can, with perhaps even more certainty, assume that the main elements of Kūkai's portrait (Shōdō's ascent of Mt. Fudaraku, his performance of repentance rites on its summit, his construction of a shrine temple, his appointment as provincial lecturer in 795, and his performance of a rainmaking rite in 807) are mostly factually accurate.<sup>22</sup> Based on Kūkai's portrait, then, the basic contours of Shōdō's understanding of the ascetic life on the mountain can be surmised thus. Like Saichō and Kūkai after him, Shōdō believed that by renouncing human society and pursuing ascetic practice on the mountain, one may attain a kind of personal enlightenment that has the power to enlighten and thereby pacify the vengeful spirits and kami on the mountain. In the immediate years following his composition of this piece, Kūkai, as we shall see, would go on to articulate an explicitly mandalic understanding of the mountain. Yet, this mandalic understanding, as I show in the next section, was fundamentally informed by the same set of orientations and understandings that underpinned the practice of Shōdō and the other mountain-temple-founding monks who came before him.

22. On the historicity of Kūkai's epitaph for Shōdō, see KOBAYASHI (2009, 88–89).

*Kūkai's Founding of a Temple Complex on Mt. Kōya*

Kūkai's epitaph for Shōdō suggests that Kūkai idealized the monk who builds his mountain temple independently of state support. The approach he himself took to founding his temple complex on Mt. Kōya, however, was quite different. In the sixth month of 816, Kūkai submitted a petition to Saga's court requesting permission to build a temple complex on Mt. Kōya. The petition shows Kūkai attempting to convince Saga of the relation of mutual dependence he shares with the Buddhist monastic, particularly those who pursue ascetic practice in the mountains. Like Segyō and Saichō before him, Kūkai argues that while the emperor depends on the monastic for the production of this-worldly benefits, the monastic depends on the emperor for material support. Rather than the kind of direct economic support of mountain asceticism requested by Segyō, however, Kūkai, in his petition, seeks political support in the form of imperial permission to open new land and build a temple for ascetic practice.

In making his request, Kūkai explains that for the benefit of the emperor and "those who pursue acetic practice," he would like to "cut down and clear out the dense thickets" of the mountain forests and build "a temple for the practice of meditation" (NKBT 71: 399). He then follows up his request by underscoring the subordinate status of monastics in the realm of temporal power, affirming that "the rise and fall of the Dharma depends on the mind of the heavenly [sovereign]." He, moreover, even offers scriptural support for the proscription against the unregulated construction of temples by monastics laid out in article five of the *sōniryō*: "There is a precept in the sutras, 'The mountains, rivers, earth, and water are all the possession of the sovereign of the nation; if a *bhikṣu* should make use of something without permission, he commits the sin of theft'" (NKBT 71: 399).<sup>23</sup>

Prior to making his request, however, in the opening to the petition, Kūkai carefully establishes the importance of Buddhist ascetic practice in the mountains for the production of this-worldly benefits, particularly better control of important sources of freshwater in the country:

[I] Kūkai have heard that where the mountains are high the clouds let fall much rain, thus nourishing vegetation, and that where drops of water accumulate fishes and dragons breed and multiply. Thus it was that the Buddha preached on steep Mount Ḡḍhrakūṭa [in North India] and that Avalokiteśvara manifested himself on Mount Potalaka [in South India]. Indeed, these mountains have evoked their presence. Guests [that is, students] of meditation array shoulder to shoulder in the five temples on Mt. Wutai, and comrades in

23. This citation appears to be a variation of a line from the *Xindi guan jing* (T 159, 3.297c).

concentration stand sleeve to sleeve in the one monastery of Mt. Tiantai. They are the treasures of the nation and the pillars of the people.

(modified from HAKEDA 1972, 47; NKBT 71: 397)

Here Kūkai portrays mountains as important sources of freshwater dominated by fishes and dragons. As we observed in his epitaph for Shōdō, by dragons Kūkai means not just a kind of animal or mythological beast but, more specifically, a category of numinous being that controls the waterways of the mountain. Mt. Kōya—or, literally, the high plains mountain—is a high-altitude watershed surrounded by eight mountain peaks. It is therefore natural that Kūkai should associate Mt. Kōya in particular but also mountains more generally with dragons (fishes, here, seem to function metonymically as a related class of water spirit).

In alluding to dragons and fishes, Kūkai suggests that it is precisely their presence that has attracted enlightened figures in the past—from Śākyamuni to Avalokiteśvara—to live and practice in the mountains. The tradition of mountain practice, he furthermore points out, has continued in China, where its most renowned temples are located on mountains. These temples, he concludes, benefit the nation and its people. Based on the broader context in which we find this claim, it can be inferred that they do so precisely by pacifying the malevolent kami and spirits who control the waterways of the mountain. Since both Śākyamuni and Avalokiteśvara are paradigms of Buddhist enlightenment, it can be inferred that Kūkai understood the pacification of mountain spirits to be the work of enlightened humans. As we observed in the case of shrine temples and Saichō's mountain temple, disruptions in the agricultural cycle occur because the spirits who influence that cycle are deluded: to eliminate the delusion that results in disruptive behavior, such beings need to be enlightened by the Buddhist teachings. This cannot happen, however, without the Buddhist practice of human beings, for it is human beings who are the primary agents of enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition.

Kūkai then goes on to argue that in comparison to the great Buddhist countries of India and China, Japan is inferior. He contends that while the court has given support to the monastic community by building temples across the realm, it has failed to support those monastics who could benefit it most; namely, meditation practitioners. “Few,” he writes, “are the guests [that is, students] of the fourfold meditation on tall mountains and high peaks; rare is the host [that is, teacher] who enters into concentration [that is, samadhi] in the dark groves and mountain caves” (NKBT 71: 399). Thus, he concludes, “the teaching of meditation” (*zenkyō* 禪教), with which he associates his temple complex, “has not yet been transmitted, and there is no abode in which to pursue union” (*sōō* 相應) (NKBT 71: 399). Kūkai hence calls on the court to transform its relationship to the monastic community. To put it in terms we have already laid out above, his

petition can be understood as an attempt to persuade the court to abandon its support of temples that serve primarily an impressive function and cultivate instead their practical function by sponsoring the construction of temples on mountains like those on Mt. Wutai and Mt. Tiantai in China.

In his analysis of Kūkai's rather sharp criticism of state Buddhism in Japan, TAKEUCHI (2006, 494–497) has called attention to Kūkai's sense of mission to spread the esoteric teachings to Japan. As we have just observed, Kūkai avoids using the term “esoteric teachings” (*mikkyō*) in his petition. This does not, however, belie his sectarian intentions; for the term “meditation” (*zen* 禪) as we saw above, already enjoyed widespread currency at court, and it, therefore, makes sense that he would use a term already familiar to the court to advance his mission rather than burden them with an entirely new taxonomy of the Buddhist teachings. Takeuchi discerns Kūkai's strong sense of mission a bit later in the petition. After Kūkai states his proposal to clear land on Mt. Kōya to build a temple, he explains that doing so will help him fulfill his “humble vow” (*shōgan* 小願).

In a letter enclosed in the petition, Kūkai tells the story behind his humble vow. He explains that on his way back to Japan in the eighth month of 806, his boat was lost at sea, and so he made a “humble vow” to the “benevolent kami” that if they should offer him protection and help him return to Japan, he will build a meditation temple and practice asceticism in order to “enhance the light of the power of the various *devas*, protect the borders of the nation, and save living beings” (TKZ 7: 99–100). Since “the shining kami” did not let “darkness fall over him,” Kūkai states that he does not intend to betray the kami by failing to fulfill this vow. In considering Kūkai's vow, Takeuchi suggests that the intention behind it—to build a temple for meditation practice—can be traced back further to the final admonition of Kūkai's esoteric teacher in China, Huiguo 惠果 (746–805). In his *Shōrai mokuroku*, Kūkai recounts that Huiguo anointed him to be “the receptacle of the esoteric teachings (*mikkyō*)” and enjoins him to propagate them in Japan (HAKEDA 1972, 148).<sup>24</sup>

In addition to Kūkai's “humble vow,” TAKEUCHI (2006, 497) suggests another important context for Kūkai's petition: Saichō's establishment of the Tendai school. As mentioned above, it was only two years earlier that Kūkai parted ways with Saichō. By 810, Saichō, thanks to the support of Saga's court, had begun to develop his temple complex on Mt. Hiei into a full-fledged sectarian organization. Against the backdrop of this emerging school, Kūkai's petition aims to assert the superiority of his “meditation teachings.” Unlike the other temples

24. Kūkai's account could, of course, very well be apocryphal. Even if that is the case, it nevertheless demonstrates Kūkai's sense of mission to propagate the esoteric teachings in Japan already in 806 when he composed the *Shōrai mokuroku*.

sponsored by the court, his temple, Kūkai argues, will offer the practical benefit of controlling a key source of freshwater in the country.

Even though he refrains from using the term “esoteric,” Kūkai’s petition provides the first piece of textual evidence that he understood Mt. Kōya as a mandala. In explaining the reason he chose Mt. Kōya as the site for his temple complex, Kūkai states that, “According to the teachings of the *Dhyāna Sūtra* (*Zenkyō* 禪經), the best place for practicing meditation is on flat ground deep in a mountain” (NKBT 71: 399). No sutra named the *Dhyāna Sūtra* exists in the Buddhist canon. The following passage from chapter 2 of the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* corresponds most closely to Kūkai’s scriptural reference:

The practitioner [that is, *ācārya*], having with a compassionate mind inspired the [disciple], should further encourage him,  
 And when [the disciple] is firmly established and has received the teachings,  
 he should select a flat site.  
 Mountain groves with plentiful flowers and fruits and with agreeable pure  
 springs—  
 These are extolled by the buddhas, and [there] he should perform the deeds of  
 the circular altar. (GIEBEL 2005, 18–19)

The reference is not exact. Most notably, instead of meditation practice, the verse enjoins the esoteric practitioner to perform the “deeds of the circular altar” (*endan ji* 円壇事), that is, to build a mandala altar and perform esoteric rites on it.<sup>25</sup> While Kūkai avoids esoteric Buddhist terminology, his cryptic allusion to this passage suggests that he understood Mt. Kōya—the “high plains” mountain—to be an ideal environment for the construction of the circular mandala altar.

In the seventh month of 816, just over a month after he submitted his memorial, Saga issued an official proclamation granting the land of Mt. Kōya to Kūkai (TKZ 7: 340–341). Upon receiving permission, Kūkai sent a letter to the Provincial Magistrate of Kii Province to notify him that he has acquired imperial permission to build on Mt. Kōya and, moreover, that he is dispatching two disciples, Taihan 泰範 (b. 778) and Jitsue 実惠 (786–847), to build a pair of hermitages (KDDZ 2: 3). At the end of the letter, Kūkai indicates that he himself plans to visit in the fall of the coming year.

25. On the term *endan ji*, Yixing, in his *Dari jing shu*, elaborates:

Regarding the performance of the deeds of the circular altar: Among the superior places, mountain forests are best. The extreme tips of peaks are secluded and quiet. But people do not enjoy places without vegetation and flowing water, and so, without these various conditions, [they] dare not reside [there]. Thus, where there are famous flowers and sweet fruits and also pure springs and ponds that are loved and enjoyed [by the people], it is this place that is praised by the Buddha. It is here that the [*ācārya*] should perform the deeds of the mandala. (T 1796, 39.615b)

It appears that Kūkai did in fact ascend the mountain sometime in the next year. Fascicle nine of the *Shōryōshū* contains two liturgical texts labeled as expositions (*keibyaku* 啓白) for two different “zone-demarcating” (*kekkaï* 結界) rites: the first to demarcate the enlightened zone in which the temple complex of “Kōya” was to be constructed and the second to demarcate the enlightened zone in which an altar for esoteric practice in the larger temple complex of Kōya was to be constructed.<sup>26</sup> The first tells the backstory behind his founding of Mt. Kōya, and Kūkai indicates there that the rite was performed twelve years after his return from the Tang in 806 (NKBT 71: 409). If we count the year 806 as year one, this note indicates, then, that the rite was performed sometime in 817.

The first exposition sets forth—and then enacts—the purpose of Kūkai’s zone-demarcating rite. It opens by addressing the numinous presences who reside on the mountain: not only all buddhas and Buddhist divinities in “the oceanlike assembly of the twofold great mandalas,” including “the five kinds of *devas*,”<sup>27</sup> but also “the kami of heaven and earth in our nation” (*kokuchū tenjin chigi* 国中天神地祇) and “all the spirits of earth, water, wind, and air [who reside] on this mountain” (NKBT 71: 409). Like Saichō before him, Kūkai understood the natural world of the mountains to be teeming with powerful kami and spirits. Unlike Saichō, however, he situates these kami and spirits in “the twofold great mandala.”

Kūkai then goes on to elaborate the theoretical framework upon which mandala practice is based: all sentient beings have buddha-nature; buddha-nature is nondual with dharma-nature, the true nature of reality that is often identified with the *dharmakāya*; like the *dharmakāya*, buddha-nature pervades the entire dharma realm, or phenomenal world; for this reason, one’s own being (*jishin* 自身) is one with all others (*tashin* 他身); the individual who has awakened to this truth “sports freely on the pedestal of the five wisdoms” of Mahāvairocana; those who do not “sink into the mud of the triple realm” of *samsāra* (NKBT 71: 409).<sup>28</sup>

26. For a complete translation of both expositions, see GARDINER (1995). The textual history of the *Shōryōshū* is quite complicated. The last three of the ten total fascicles contain numerous works spuriously attributed to Kūkai. The works under examination here, however, appear to be authentic compositions authored by Kūkai (TKZ 8: 412).

27. The five kinds of *devas* are depicted in the outermost court of the womb-realm mandala. They include (1) those who dwell in the two realms of form and formlessness; (2) those who dwell in the heavens above Mt. Sumeru such as Yama, Tuṣita, Nirmāṇa-rati, and Paranirmita-vaśavartin; (3) those who dwell on the peak of Mt. Sumeru such as the four heavenly kings and the thirty-three *devas* of the Heaven of the Thirty-Three; (4) those who traverse the firmament (the various heavenly bodies of the sun, moon, and other constellations); and (5) those who dwell underground (*nāgas*, *asuras*, and King Yama) (ODA 2005, 576c–577a).

28. As Kūkai explains in the *Ben kenmitsu nikyō ron*, the esoteric teachings are distinguished by the view that the phenomenal world—namely, the three worlds (*sanshu seken* 三種世間) of the container world, the world of sentient beings (*shujō seken* 衆生世間), and the world of the

He then gives the genealogy of the esoteric teachings by which this truth came to be known, explaining that

The Great Compassionate Mahāvairocana Thus Come One, delighting in the wondrous flavor of *samaya*, observed the stains and taints of [sentient beings on] the six paths [of transmigration]; taking pity on them, he shook, with the thunder of his wisdom that is the suchness of reality, the palace of the dharma realm and transmitted to Jambudvīpa the secret mandala (*himitsu manda* 秘密曼荼). (NKBT 71: 409)

The secret mandala here refers both to Kūkai's esoteric teachings, using mandala synecdochally, and to the rationale for his teachings, which is that they represent the true form of reality itself. A mandala, in other words, is not a human representation of reality. It is the true suchness of reality itself, as revealed to humans from the very source of reality, Mahāvairocana. In this formulation, mandala is not, fundamentally, a human-made object but, rather, a natural phenomenon, the manifestation of the true suchness of reality in the world of *samsāra*. This formulation of mandala supports the central act of the rite: the transformation of a particular part of the natural world of the mountain into a zone of enlightened beings—that is, something like a mandala altar.

While knowledge of the secret mandala was transmitted to Jambudvīpa, it was not, Kūkai claims, until the present that it has been properly transmitted to Japan. He notes that the esoteric teachings were transmitted without any interruption from Vajrasattva to Nāgārjuna in India and, then, from Vajrabodhi to Amoghavajra, who brought the teachings to China. “And yet,” Kūkai writes, “here across the broad ocean in Japan, worthy vessels of this teaching had yet to appear and so the teaching has remained hidden in the secret palace of Mahāvairocana without being transmitted to our land” (NKBT 71: 411). Striking a sectarian tone, Kūkai dismisses all prior transmissions of Buddhism as inferior to his authentic esoteric transmission. Everything that came before him was only a partial truth. Kūkai, in transmitting the practice of mandala, now intends to transmit the whole truth.

Kūkai then recounts his trip to China to study the secret of the teachings (*kyōhi* 教秘) that he claims have not yet been transmitted to Japan (NKBT 71: 409). He describes how after he returned from China with the Vajrayāna (*kongōjō* 金剛乘) teachings of the twofold great mandala, there was no place suitable for practic-

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Buddha's awakened to wisdom (*chishōkaku seken* 智正覺世間)—is the body and mind of Vairocana Buddha (T 2427, 77.376c). Vairocana Buddha here refers to the *dharmakāya* in the absolute state (*jishō hosshin* 自性法身) whereby phenomena and buddha exist in a nondual relation. This ontology constitutes the premise for Kūkai's soteriological conception of the sentient being, which holds that all sentient beings possess intrinsic enlightenment (*hongaku* 本覺), or “buddha-nature” (T 2427, 77.375b). On Kūkai's theory of buddha-nature, see TAKASAKI (1985, 112–117).

ing them. Twelve years, however, have passed since then, and, now, Kūkai suggests, the time has come to propagate the Vajrayāna teachings by establishing a site for their practice.

After narrating his transmission of the Vajrayāna teaching of the twofold great mandala to Japan, Kūkai next sets forth his intention to “construct the twofold great mandala” (NKBT 71: 411). What he means by this can be inferred from a later text in which he explains his original plans for the design of his temple complex. In an 834 text that he composed to seek funds for the construction of Mt. Kōya, Kūkai explains that he “had begun the construction of the two towers of the body of the dharma realm of Vairocana and the twofold mandalas of the womb and diamond realms, but it was difficult to build due to a lack of provisions” (NKBT 71: 383). As noted in the *Shōryōshū benmō*, an annotated edition of the *Shōryōshū* composed by the monk Unshō 運敵 (1614–1693), these two towers are the origins of what came to be known as the Fundamental Great Tower (Konpon Daitō 根本大塔) and the Western Tower (Saitō 西塔), the former symbolizing the womb-realm and the latter, the diamond (SGSZ 42: 286).<sup>29</sup> Based on Kūkai’s 834 text, then, we can infer that Kūkai’s statement in his 817 exposition expresses his intention to construct his temple complex as a twofold mandala. Yet, as we shall see, the temple complex itself does not constitute the entirety of the twofold mandala on Mt. Kōya; it is rather only a core constituent element of it.

In setting forth his intention to construct his temple complex as a twofold mandala, Kūkai first expresses his gratitude to the emperor for “blessing [him] with His Imperial Beneficence by graciously granting [him] the site [of Mt. Kōya] for [his] temple” (NKBT 71: 411). He then explains that his purpose in constructing his temple complex is twofold: first, “to repay the beneficence of the buddhas by spreading the esoteric teachings;” and second, “to save living beings by enhancing the power of the five kinds of *devas*” (NKBT 71: 411). Both can be understood to be derived from the mission conferred onto him by his teacher Huiguo as recounted in the *Shōrai mokuroku* (HAKEDA 1972, 148–149). The first echoes what we observed above to be a central element in Kūkai’s own sense of his mission as a Buddhist monk: to fulfill his teacher Huiguo’s injunction to spread the esoteric teachings to Japan. The second, the corollary to the first, explicates the practical benefit of spreading the esoteric teachings; namely, to

29. Today, the iconography of the mandala altars housed in each tower mirrors the other. Whereas the altar inside the Fundamental Great Tower is arranged in an unusual combination of the womb and diamond realms, with Mahāvairocana of the womb realm as the central Buddha surrounded by the buddhas of the diamond realms, the Western Tower inverses this layout, with Mahāvairocana of the diamond realm as the central buddha surrounded by buddhas of the womb realm. As Kūkai notes in his 834 text, he was not able to ultimately realize his vision of a temple complex organized around two towers that symbolized the two kinds of mandala. The current iconography of each suggests an arrangement arrived at through compromise by later generations.



save people in Japan. Kūkai states specifically that it is by “enhancing the power of the five *devas*” that he will save people in Japan. The five *devas*, as noted above, refer to Buddhist divinities such as Brahmā, Indra, King Yama, and various *nāgas* and *asuras* as well as various heavenly bodies such as the sun, moon, and the constellations derived from religious cults and cosmological notions indigenous to India. When the power of these divinities is enhanced by the esoteric teachings, these divinities become protectors of the Dharma and, by extension, protectors of the state that supports the Dharma. When the state is thus protected, people will be saved; or, as Kūkai notes in his account of his teacher’s words about the benefits of the esoteric teachings, “the land will know peace, and people everywhere will be content” (HAKEDA 1972, 149).

Kūkai thus intends for his temple complex to serve the state by harnessing the power of a variety of Buddhist divinities. This underlying purpose of the temple complex aligns with a fundamental purpose of mandala practice itself: the creation, or demarcation, of a zone of enlightened beings. Kūkai, furthermore, makes clear that the beings who stand to be enlightened by this zone are not only Buddhist divinities but also the kami who dwell on the mountain. After setting forth his purpose in founding Mt. Kōya, Kūkai beseeches not only buddhas and *devas* but also “benevolent kami” to assist him in his project (NKBT 71: 411). By thus aligning kami and mountain spirits who are not traditionally depicted in mandala with *devas* who are, Kūkai attempts to bring the kami of Mt. Kōya into the zone of Mahāvairocana’s universal enlightenment and thereby transform them into benevolent protector kami.

To conclude his exposition, Kūkai performs the main ritual action of the zone-demarcating rite: expelling malevolent spirits and inviting benevolent ones to stay and protect the temple complex. “All malevolent spirits and kami to the east, west, south, and north, the four directions in between, above and below, within seven *ri* 里,” he declares, “be gone from this zone I hereby demarcate!” “All benevolent kami and spirits (*zenshinki* 善神鬼) who can provide benefits,” he continues, “may reside as they please” (NKBT 71: 411). As specified in a variation of this statement in the second exposition, the point from which the seven *ri* radius extends is his temple complex (*kono innai* 此院内) (NKBT 71: 413). One *ri* is one third of a mile. Kūkai thus aims to pacify an area that extends across just over a two-mile radius from the temple complex.

As we observed above, in his 816 petition to the throne, Kūkai alluded to a passage from the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* in which the esoteric practitioner is enjoined to perform “the deeds of the circular altar” on a flat site in the mountains; or, as we noted, to build a mandala and perform esoteric rites on it. In light of this allusion, Kūkai’s act of binding an area within a seven-*ri* radius can be understood as an enactment of this injunction, but one that does so using the mountain landscape itself as the circular altar of the mandala. This suggests an important

point: Kūkai understood not only the temple complex but a wide seven-*ri* zone surrounding it as a mandala, or circular altar. His 817 exposition thus provides evidence that he not only conceived his temple complex as a mandala but, more precisely, understood it as a core component of a larger mandala altar. In the view he articulates in his exposition, the buildings of the temple complex (specifically, the two towers) correspond to the ritual implements placed on the broader space of a mandala altar, while the mountain landscape represents the mandala altar itself. Thus, the two towers that he mentions in his 834 text constitute the core of the mandala—specifically, the inner courts of the womb and diamond realms—but not its entirety. As we have observed, throughout his exposition, Kūkai is fundamentally concerned with the divinities that dwell on the edges of the mandala—the five *devas*—as well as those deities on the mountain who correspond to them in terms of their relationship to cosmic forces but are not traditionally depicted in mandalas, namely, the kami and spirits of the mountain. His emphasis on beings who have the potential to operate on the margins of the mandala as protector deities is consistent with the main purpose of the rite: to ensconce the two towers of his temple complex—the inner court of the mandala—in the wider protective circle of the mandala, one that encompasses a seven *ri* circumference surrounding the two towers.<sup>30</sup>

Kūkai's conception of Mt. Kōya as a mandala altar for a temple complex was novel. Even Saichō, who was steeped in the esoteric tradition and who, as we saw above, depicts a vast assembly of Buddhist and local deities in his liturgical writings, does not explicitly invoke the notion that Mt. Hiei is, in essence, a kind of real-world mandala. Nonetheless, in terms of its basic function as well as its relation

30. Kūkai's understanding of Mt. Kōya as a mandala has a long history of reception, and that history too has tended to portray the larger area on the mountain in which the temple is situated as a mandala altar. We observe this interpretation of Mt. Kōya, for example, in an Edo-period drawing, the *Kōyasan renga mandara zu* 高野山蓮華曼荼羅圖, preserved at the Kōyasan Reihōkan Museum. Specifically, the drawing depicts the temple complex of Kongōbuji inside an eight-petaled lotus flower, with Jison'in 慈尊院 to the west as a paddy leaf stemming from the central eight-petaled flower and Okunoin 奥院 to the east as a separate three-petaled flower. A caption to the right states that Mt. Kōya is composed of the pure lands of the buddhas of the past, present, and future and the twofold mandala of the womb and diamond realms. Today, there is a sign outside Jison'in that features a close reproduction of this image. This image has even served as the basis for an episode of the NHK show, "Buratamori," aired on 16 September 2017. The notion that Mt. Kōya itself constitutes a mandala is also implied by the present-day term for Kūkai's Kongōbuji Temple complex: "Monastic park on a mandala altar" (*danjō garan* 壇上伽藍). It is also often invoked when describing the geography of Mt. Kōya. As mentioned above, the toponym Mt. Kōya refers to high-altitude watershed, or basin, surrounded by eight mountain peaks: Imakimine 今來峰, Hōshumine 宝珠峰, Hachibuseyama 鉢伏山, Bentendake 弁天岳, Koyasan 姑射山, Tenjikusan 轉軸山, Yōryūsan 楊柳山, and Manisan 摩尼山. These eight peaks are said to correspond to the eight petals of the lotus flower located in the central court of the womb-realm mandala (MATSUNAGA 2014, 3).

to the surrounding natural environment, Kūkai's temple complex does not represent a radical break from mountain temples founded by his earlier generations of mountain ascetics. Like Shōdō's shrine-temple on Mt. Fudaraku and Saichō's temple complex on Mt. Hiei, Kūkai intended his mountain temple to pacify the kami of the mountain and thereby provide practical, this-worldly benefits. Moreover, like his predecessors, he also emphasized the intention to attain personal enlightenment as the basis for the monastic's power to pacify the deluded, vengeful kami on the mountain. Given these shared characteristics, Kūkai's mandalization of Mt. Kōya is best understood as a further articulation of, or variation on, the understanding first formulated by mountain-temple-founding monks of the Nara period. Although Kūkai did not invent this framework for understanding Buddhist practice, he did contribute to its development in one particular area: the establishment of mutual dependence with the imperial court.<sup>31</sup> Yet, even in this regard, Kūkai was not entirely original; for, as we observed above, articulations of this view can be found in Kōnin's 780 edict and Segyō's 785 petition.

### Conclusion

It is hoped that this article has contributed to our understanding of the socio-cultural significance of Kūkai's understanding of the mountain landscape as a mandala. In the forgoing, I have located Kūkai's mandalic understanding of the mountains in its practical context—namely, his efforts to found Mt. Kōya—and have tried to situate that practice in a genealogy of mountain-temple-founding monks. Kūkai's mandalic understanding of the mountains should, I have argued, be understood as a further articulation of a background understanding shared

31. Like Saichō's temple complex on Mt. Hiei, Kūkai's temple complex on Mt. Kōya was to develop into a temple-shrine complex. Today, on Mt. Kōya there stands a tutelary shrine called Miyashiro 御社 that enshrines Niutsuhime 丹生都比売, a kami associated with worship of Mt. Kōya as a watershed (*mikumari* 水分) and her son Kōya Myōjin 高野明神, an ancestral deity of hunters on Mt. Kōya who, in legends about the founding of Mt. Kōya, is said to have directed his two dogs to lead Kūkai to the site of Mt. Kōya. It is claimed that this shrine was founded in 819 by Kūkai. On the origins and identity of these kami as well as the founding legend, see GORAI (1976, 28–35). The claim that Kūkai founded a shrine in 819 is based on an exposition attributed to Kūkai in the *Kongōbuji zōbun* and entitled “Exposition Text for the First Invocation for Protection of the Construction of Kongōbuji” (*konryū Kongōbuji saisho kanjō chinju keibyaku mon* 建立金剛峰寺最初勧請鎮守啓白文) (KDDZ 2: 15–16). The text is dated 819.5.3. While SAWA Ryūken (1976, 53) treats this text as authentic, the corrupted grammar in places suggests that it was composed by someone who lacked the mastery of Chinese prose for which Kūkai was well known and that is evident in the texts translated above. Other scholars such as WADA Teruo (1976, 99) share my skepticism. Although this text does not appear to have been composed by Kūkai, there is evidence to suggest that it was composed not long after his death. In 859, the *Nihon sandai jitsuroku* (KT 4: 17) records that Niutsuhime was awarded a kami rank, an honor the court reserved for those kami whose shrines were associated with a temple.

by mountain ascetics of earlier generations, going as far back as Shōmu's reign in the early Nara period. If we follow Kūkai's own definition of the esoteric teachings and consider mandala as one of its key distinguishing features, then my argument suggests that Kūkai's brand of esoteric Buddhism does not represent a radical break with the form of temple Buddhism that began to take shape already in the Nara period and was to find its earliest clear expression in Saichō. This suggestion, of course, has far-reaching implications for how we understand the orthodoxy that was to emerge in the generations after Saichō and Kūkai, particularly as the Tendai school rose to dominance in the mid-to-late ninth century. Since Kuroda Toshio's groundbreaking work almost half a century ago, the medieval Buddhist establishment has been understood as a "system of exoteric and esoteric schools" (*kenmitsu taisei* 顯密体制) in which esotericism served as the linchpin (KURODA 1996). The concept of temple Buddhism that I have used in this article suggests a new, potentially productive line of interpretation, one that describes the medieval orthodoxy of Japanese Buddhism not in terms of sectarian doxographies but rather sociological categories that help us to distinguish transformations in the institution of the Buddhist temple and its relation to the imperial court.

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- DNBZ *Dai Nihon Bukkyō zensho* 大日本仏教全書. 151 vols. Tokyo: Bussho Kankōkai, 1912–1922.
- DNKM *Dai Nihon komonjo* 大日本古文書. 25 vols. Tokyo: Tokyo Shiryō Hensanjo, 1940.
- KBTK *Shinshaku kanbun taikai* 新釈漢文大系. 120 vols. Tokyo: Meiji Shoin, 1960–2018.
- KDDZ *Kōbō Daishi den zenshū* 弘法大師伝全集. 10 vols. Ed. Hase Hōshū 長谷宝秀. Tokyo: Rokudai Shinpōsha, 1934–1935.
- KT *Shintei zōho kokushi taikai* 新訂増補国史大系. 60 vols. Ed. Kuroita Katsumi 黒板勝美. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2007.
- NKBT *Nihon koten bungaku taikai* 日本古典文学大系. 100 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1958–1966.
- SGSZ *Shingonshū zensho* 真言集全書. 42 vols. Kōya: Shingonshū Zensho Kankōkai, 1934–1940.

- SNKT *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikai* 新日本古典文学大系. 100 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1989–2003.
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- Shoku Nihongi* 続日本紀. KT 2.
- Shōrai mokuroku* 将来目錄. Kūkai. In HAKEDA 1972.
- Shōryōshū* 性靈集. 10 fascs. Kūkai. NKBT 71.
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