

Tōdai-ji Buddhist monastery 728 AD

Amalgamation of Indian Japanese spirituality



In writing this article I had to merge three sources of understanding - recorded history on Todai-ji and Bodhisena, the Hindu and Buddhist perspectives of the universe. I have been lucky to have some formal Buddhist education. I felt it was important to do this multi perspective, as all accounts that I have read have a one sided view and fail to tell the whole story. My several visits to Japan have taught me that this was not the state centuries back. While the world-view is fragmented today, as people are fragmented in their vision, in the early ages there was an all-inclusive wisdom, where everything blended in harmony. Having a fragmented one sided view unfortunately does not narrate the whole picture of the fantastic and extremely beautiful and harmonious amalgam of Buddhism, Hinduism, Indian, Japanese and Chinese culture in this extremely overwhelming and significant temple, which is a creation of a pan Asian cultural and spiritual age. It was an age where people saw more harmony than fragmented visions from fragmented mind patterns.

Nara was the capital of Japan from 710 to 794 A.D. during the reign of Emperor Shomu and his wife from the Fujiwara clan (The Fujiwara clan has always married & interwoven with the royal family for the last 1400 years up until Emperor Hirohitos time).

Todai-ji was commissioned by Emperor Shomu in 728 A.D. to appease the Gods for the loss of his son. It was the administrative center for the all the six schools of Buddhism in Nara prefecture at that time. (I.e. Hosso, Kegon, Jōjitsu, Sanron, Ritsu and Kusha)

The 1300 year old Todai-ji took 2,600,000 men 6 years to build what is even today, the largest wooden building in the world. Just the roof of the building weighs 3,000 tones. This building today is 30% smaller than it was when it was first built. Earthquakes & frequent fires devastated it several times, causing it to be repeatedly rebuilt and modified.

Within it sits the Daibutsuden or the idol of the Vairochana Buddha (The primordial Buddha) which at 52 feet is the largest Bronze cast in the world to date. As this article moves along its important to understand the distinction between the Physical Buddha who lived on earth and the Vairochana Buddha, who is the celestial or primordial Buddha. Vairocana is also seen as the embodiment of the Buddhist concept of Emptiness or Shunyata. In some sects it is also termed the clear mind /clear light Buddha.



It was during this period a South Indian monk called Bodhisena (Also called the "Baramon Sojo" or Brahmin Priest) travelled to Nara from South India. He travelled via China, Cambodia and Vietnam reaching modern day Osaka. Bodhisena was a realized master who had a vision that he would meet an incarnation of the Buddhist Goddess Manjushri in Mount Wutai in China. After reaching Mount Wutai, he was told that the incarnation was in Japan. During his stay in Wutai, he became acquainted with the 10th Japanese Ambassador to China. An invitation to visit Japan was extended by Emperor Shomu via the offices of the ambassador.



Baromon Sojo (Bodhisena, the South Indian monk)

Bodhisena travelled by ship to Japan. On the long voyage with him were two very important people who would influence Japanese history. Both were influenced by Bodhisena. These monks as well as officials were Genbo and Kibi no Makibi. Both had gone to China to study Buddhism for over a decade and to translate/bring back Buddhist scriptures that had been translated from Indian texts into Chinese and were being practiced by Chinese monks in schools that had sprung up as learning centers.

Genbo was also a bureaucrat who had studied Buddhism in China for 17 years. Kibi however was destined to be more influential in the history of Japan. Kibi is credited in helping develop the Katagana script that the Japanese use till date. Katagana has very heavy Sanskrit influence and this influence is attributed to Bodhisena. *Kibi also penned a poem about a crow that fed on rice grown by a Brahmin. This poem exists in the oldest book of poetry compiled in Japan called Manyoshu. Manyoshu has about 4500 poems compiled in a collection of over 10 books from the period 347 to 759 A.D. Indirectly Bodhisena was influencing the development of the Japanese script and several art forms as well.*

Accompanying Bodhisena was also a *Cambodian priest and musician* called Fo-t'ieh in Chinese (also known as Buttetsu and Fat-triet). He would later reside at the Daian-ji Temple with Bodhisena. Buttetsu wrote a work on the Sanskrit alphabet. He composed religious dances representing subjects taken from Indian mythology, which came to be known as Rin'yu-gaku or Champa dances. These dances were still existent in the early 20th century.

Japan's traditional court dance and music still preserve some of the forms introduced by Bodhisena into Japan.

The forty seven letters of the Japanese alphabet are said to have been devised after the pattern of the Sanskrit alphabet by the Japanese Buddhist saint Kobo Daishi (774-835 AD) as well. *The arrangement of the Japanese syllabary based on the Sanskrit system is also attributed to the influence of Bodhisena in Japan.* According to Riri Nakayama (A Buddhist monk who attend a world Pacifist meeting in India in 1950), "this influence will continue as long as the Japanese language continues to exist".

Bodhisena's ship arrived at Naniwa (Osaka) in August 736 and was met by a monk named Gyok. Gyoki and Bodhisena recognised each other as past life acquaintances. According to the Shui Wakashu, quoting from the Tōdaiji Yōroku, Gyoki stated that they were together at Vulture Peak when the Buddha preached the Lotus Sutra. Bodhisena additionally refers to them being together at Kapilavastu. He also recognised Gyoki as the reincarnation of the Boddhisatva Manjusri he was seeking. Their exchange is recorded thus -

Gyoki:

*On the Holy Mount,
In the presence of Sakya, (Gautama Buddha was also called Sakya)
The self consistent
Truth we swore has not decayed:
I have met with you again!*

Bodhisena in reply:

*The vow we swore
Together at Kapilavastu
Has borne fruit:
For the face of Manjusri
I have seen again today*

Gyoki accompanied Bodhisena to Nara and presented him to the Emperor Shōmu. He was treated with great honour and lodged in the temple called Daian-ji, where he founded Kogen Buddhism and also taught Sanskrit.

In 752, Emperor Shōmu asked him to perform the eye-opening ceremony for the giant bronze statue of the Buddha Vairocana in Tōdai-ji. While Dosen, another monk, played a significant role, the painting of the eyes of the Vairochana Buddha was done by

Bodhisena. The painting of the eye is an extremely auspicious event it is similar to consecrating the idol. The Buddha head today is not the same. The head had to be rebuilt in 1692 because of damages caused by earthquakes.



After a visit to Mount Tomi (Nara), Bodhisena petitioned the emperor to name the prayer hall there Ryōsen-ji, as he found the place to strongly resemble the mountain in India where Buddha preached, known as Vulture Peak, or *Ryoujusen* in Japanese.

Bodhisena resided in Daian-ji in Heijō-kyō for the rest of his life till he died on February 25, 760 at the Daian-ji temple. He was buried on the Ryoujusen Mountain, following his wish when he died at the age of 57.



Daian-ji Temple, home of Bodhisena and Buttetsu in Heijō-kyō

We now turn our attention to the wonderful Southern Gate of Todai-ji. To understand the structure of the gate and the temple, one has to understand the structure of Hindu and Buddhist mandalas. The center of the Mandala is the pinnacle of the structure of the universe i.e. The Bindu or the point of creation of the universe, and the outer layers are representations of Samsara or the physical universe which moves from the divine to the mundane in decreasing levels consciousness.

The center is sometimes represented by Shunyata (emptiness) or the clear mind from which all creation of cause and effect springs forth.

For Hindus this is Param-atma or the unmanifest from which all manifest springs forth. For Buddhists this value is represented by shunyata, the Clear light Buddha or Primordial Buddha or the Clear mind Buddha. Different sects use different terminology, but the sum essence is the same whether you follow a Buddhist or a Hindu structure. It is just terminology or nomenclature substitution.

If you have visited, or read my earlier blog on the Sanjusangendo Temple in Kyoto, (<http://www.esanskriti.com/essay-chapters/Harmonious-blend-of-Hinduism,-Buddhism,-Shinto-strains-in-Japan-1.aspx>) you would realize that there was a strong united identification of Hindu and Buddhist deities in peaceful coexistence. In the Sanjusangendo temple in Kyoto, we see Hindu deities protecting the 1000 Buddhas. One

must remember even in the Hindu Dasha Avtar of the 10 reincarnations of Vishnu, the 9th reincarnation is accepted as Gautama Buddha. So from both Hinduism and Buddhism, there was an acceptance of each others deities. In fact to use the word 'each other' itself is wrong, as Buddhism was seen as another school of thought within the multiple streams of Hindu thought.



We see this same philosophy displayed in Todai-ji. While the center of the temple complex is dedicated to the Primordial Buddha or the equivalent of Parmatma in Hinduism to enter this holiest of spaces, one has to pass through the 3 arched gate that is full of symbolism.

The Southern Gate which is the main point of entry has three arches. When I was passing through it, I was told that passing through that gate is symbolic of entering Nirwana. So what does the gate symbolize? The three arches stand for AUM, The first sound or vibration that comes out of the infinite unmanifest emptiness according to Hindu Yogic philosophy. AUM is also pronounced as OM, in short. The ancient Hindu philosophy indicates 3 distinct syllables.

I am AUM, the Word that is God. -- *Bhagavad Gita* 7:8

A stands for Brahma the creator, the first action from the unmanifest primordial. So as you say A, you start to open the mouth to let the sound out which symbolizes the beginning of creation from nothing. Then comes U which stands for Vishnu, or the preserver/sustainer. So when AUM is narrated, U gets the longest sound or vibrational

interval. Then we end with a Mmm. M stands for Shiva the destroyer, where everything comes to an end Hence the mouth closes, with the lips coming together.

In essence the 3 arches represent the fundamental three facets of samsara i.e. creation, sustenance and death. This is a non ending cycle unless and until you reach Moksha as Hindus call it or Nirwana as Buddhists call it. In other words Liberation from the cycle of samsara.

Now curiously, in Hindu philosophy, Brahma is born from the naval of Vishnu. Thus Vishnu precedes Brahma by birth. So if we look at the first instance of creation we have Vishnu and Shiva.

Now comes the interesting turn. In the 3 arched gate, We have a 26 foot tall statue of Vishnu on the left hand side, opening his mouth to say A, an empty middle arch and on the right hand side we have Shiva with a closed mouth displaying M



**26 foot tall Vishnu in Japanese expression opens his mouth to symbolize A
In the left arch recess of the gate**



**26 foot tall Shiva in Japanese rendition opens his mouth to symbolize M
In the right arch recess of the gate**

The gate therefore symbolizes that if you can immerse your consciousness deep enough in AUM the mantra and the vibration You release yourself from samsara to enter the Primordial state of the Buddha. In Japan the Vishnu and Shiva expressions are also Neo protectors by some. A lot of substitute names are given and assorted explanations came up in later ages when the tenuous links to Hinduism was lost and local folklore was made up to fill the gaps in memory and understanding.

But to a Hindu Buddhist familiar individual, the entire structure of Todai-ji comes alive in an instantaneous flash.

To someone like me personally, I feel sad when I see in Modern Japan, a lot of this sublime understanding of a more sublime harmonious era is lost , but then again, knowledge comes in cycles.

About Author - In search of the ultimate truth beyond concepts and notions, in that silence, after 20 years in soulless corporate board rooms.
<https://twitter.com/#!/sanjayrao1010>

Also read

1. Harmonious blends of Hindu, Buddhist and Shinto threads in Japan <http://www.esamskriti.com/essay-chapters/Harmonious-blend-of-Hinduism,-Buddhism-and-Shinto-strains-in-Japan-1.aspx>
2. To read above article in Japanese language <http://www.esamskriti.com/essay-chapters/In-Japanese-Harmonious-blend-of-Hinduism,-Buddhism-and-Shinto-strains-in-Japan-1.aspx>
3. Pics of Japanese, Chinese visitors to Bodhgaya Temple and their monasteries in Bodhgaya <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/Bodhgaya-Temple-2.aspx>
4. Pics of Bodhaya Mandir <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/Bodh-Gaya-Temple.aspx>
5. Indian Cultural influence on Japan <http://www.esamskriti.com/essay-chapters/China-Korea-Japan-3.aspx>

