

CHAPTER FIVE

The Years 803-835

Principal Characters

Fujiwara Kadonomaru, Ambassador to China

Saicho, Buddhist priest, founder of the Tendai sect

The Emperor Kammu

Kukai, Buddhist priest, founder of the Shingon sect

Hui-Kuo, Seventh Patriarch of Esoteric Buddhism

The Emperor Heizei

The Emperor Saga

Four spanking new ships swayed in the tide of Naniwa harbor (now the port of Osaka). On this balmy spring day in 803 the roadstead was busy. The members of a mission to China were boarding the ships: the ambassador, his entourage, and the Buddhist monks, scholars, artists, musicians, and craftsmen being sent for study of a few months or several years. Already aboard were contingents of soldiers, in case pirates should appear.

Planning for this embassy had begun two years earlier, when the ambassador, vice-ambassador, and an administrative officer and a secretary for each ship were appointed. Since then, the ships had been built, the lavish gifts for the Chinese emperor and court had been assembled, the other members of the mission chosen.

The ambassador was Fujiwara Kadonomaru, a polished courtier from the elite branch of the Fujiwara; at the time of his appointment he was concluding a two-year term as Senior Assistant Governor General of Dazaifu, a post that presumably gave him experience in foreign relations. His subordinates were carefully chosen with both breeding and ability in mind; it was essential that they make a good impression, for every mission to China was intended to confirm Japan's position as a civilized nation.

The next day was filled with going and coming between ships and shore as last-minute wrinkles were ironed out, last-minute items delivered. Men on board thought of home and family. It was a lovely time of year. The cherry blossoms were long gone--how many wondered if they would ever seem them again?--but iris and azaleas were in full bloom. Tears had been shed at the many farewell banquets and at the private goodbyes; gazing at the shore, eyes misted over again.

On the following day they sailed, the ambassador's ship in the lead, the others trailing. One wonders if weather-wise seamen were comfortable about that departure, if the diviners had approved. For two days later, while they were still in the Inland Sea, they were struck by a devastating storm. One ship sank with the loss of almost all aboard. Two battered ships, including the ambassador's, made it back to Naniwa. One ship sailed through the storm and made it to Hakata.

Aboard that luckiest, or best-handled, ship was the vice-ambassador and an eminent Buddhist priest named Saicho. Saicho came with impeccable credentials: his patron was the Emperor Kammu. During most of the twenty-five years since the previous mission to China, Kammu had been preoccupied with internal politics. He had twice moved the capital, first from Nara to Nagaoka, and then, when that site was blighted by violence and scandal, to Heian, today's Kyoto. His leaving Nara is often attributed to his desire to break free from interference in court affairs by the powerful priests of the Nara temples, especially from the conniving of corrupt priests like Gembo and Doko, but it is also true that Heian was the base of the rising Fujiwara clan, while the strongholds of the older clans like the Otomo were around Nara.

At Heian a mountain called Hiei lay in the northeast, and northeast, according to ancient wisdom, was the direction from which evil and danger threatened. Priest Saicho had already built a chapel on Hiei. Soon after his ordination he had fled the distractions and worldliness of the Nara temples, and for seventeen years he had been studying and meditating on Hiei, immersing himself in a doctrine called Tendai; he was convinced that Tendai was superior to the tenets taught at Nara.

Since Saicho was established on Hiei, in a position to block peril to the new capital, it seems almost inevitable that he and his temple would be favored by the court. An influential official introduced Saicho to the emperor and arranged that Saicho give a series of lectures on Tendai. The emperor and crown prince may have attended; on completion of the lectures they sent congratulations, and not much later the emperor sent word that he supported Tendai and would help to propagate it.

Saicho took the opportunity to request permission to join the mission to China, pointing out that for Tendai to be accepted in Japan it would have to be presented by someone who had studied at the source. Kammu consented. Saicho was to stay in China for the few months that the embassy would be there and return with it; he would be accompanied by a monk who spoke Chinese to serve as interpreter.

When their ship anchored at Hakata the passengers disembarked to rest at the reception center. During days of anxious waiting, Saicho and his disciple prayed almost unceasingly for the safety of the others. At last came word of what had happened. It was clear that their wait would be a long one. The vice-ambassador, the administrative officer, and most of the passengers were moved to the Dazaifu headquarters, Saicho and his disciple to Kanzeonji.

Saicho was quick to realize that the delay gave him a chance to get acquainted with a region new to him but rich in history. This was the gateway where Buddhist priests first entered Japan, sent by the king of Paekche to knit spiritual ties between Paekche and Yamato; here they had first prayed and preached. Here the towering presence of Ganjin was first felt. Here was the home of Usa Hachiman, the first native deity to ally himself with Buddhism when he journeyed to Nara to join in dedicating and venerating the Great Buddha. And here was Dazaifu, the powerful sub-capital that linked the court with the world.

Shortly after Saicho took up residence at Kanzeonji, the ranking officer at Dazaifu, the Senior Assistant Governor General, came to pay his respects. In his party was the captain of the military, who offered to escort Saicho on an inspection of the water-gate and the fortified mountain that rose behind headquarters and temple. The next day horses were brought and they rode out. Saicho was impressed by both constructions, but from both his gaze turned frequently to the changing view of the peak called Homan.

For one thing, Homan lay in the same direction from Dazaifu that his own Mount Hiei did from the capital: it blocked the path of danger. But Homan's magnetism went beyond that. There are mountains in Japan that demand respect. Something about them--their form, their place in the landscape, the way they confront man--insists on veneration, and the Japanese have venerated them. Homan was, and is, such a mountain. Saicho knew he had to go to Homan.

The priests at Kanzeonji told him that when Dazaifu was planned its builders and their priests enshrined eight million sacred images on the mountain in supplication to the myriad gods for protection (Saicho understood "eight million" to be symbolic, and impressive).

He was told of the legendary priest Shinren who in those anxious times secluded himself on the mountain for ascetic practice. As he prayed one day he sensed an ineffable fragrance and a brilliant light in which a noble lady manifested herself. She announced that she was the deity Tamayori, a daughter of the god of the sea, and that she had long resided on Homan, guarding the country from invasion with an arsenal that included false signal lights, mountainous waves, and

gales that capsized ships. Then in swirling clouds she transformed herself into a Buddhist deity of fierce mien and disappeared on a nine-headed dragon-horse, leaving a hoofprint deep in the rock that Shinren faced. It astonished neither Saicho nor his hosts at Kanzeonji that a native, Shinto god should be also a Buddhist deity, and Saicho realized that at the foot of Homan he would find, harmoniously side by side, a Buddhist temple and a Shinto shrine.

To guide Saicho to Homan three Kanzeonji monks were chosen from the fittest, so that they would not slow the athletic thirty-six-year-old Saicho. Homan is not a high mountain, about 2,800 feet, but the climb is steep and the path, especially as it approaches the summit, is a jumble of jagged boulders. To the dismay of the Kanzeonji monks, neither Saicho nor his disciple stopped to catch their breath.

Saicho had been chanting mystic sounds all the while he climbed, and his practiced eye spotted the place where Shinren must have worshiped before the breathless Kanzeonji monks could point out the hoofprint left by Tamayori's steed. He looked into eaves, saw symbols scratched into the walls by holy men at their devotions. He was led a short distance along the ridge line to another peak, as high as Homan but very different, gentle and grass-covered. A little mound, the monks said, was Shinren's grave. Saicho led them in prayers of benediction.

Where would the ridge line take him, he asked. They answered that it led almost due east to another sacred peak, higher than Homan, called Mount Hiko. From Hiko, by continuing in the same direction, one could reach the shrine of Usa Hachiman. There was an animated discussion among the monks as to how far it was to Hiko. They could only agree that it was "very far." None of them had ever walked it, but a sinking feeling told them they were going to, struggling to keep up with this formidable priest who was the emperor's favorite. Saicho, listening quietly, deduced that he could do it in a day (it is about twenty-five miles) and determined to do it soon.

He did. He worshiped at Hiko's three peaks, each enshrining a different deity, and was informed that two of Japan's most sacred mountains, one having first risen in India, the other in China, had rested at Hiko on their flights to their new homeland.

He went on to Hachiman's shrine at Usa, and found a great complex of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples ranging up a slope to the holiest precincts. The priests of Usa made him an honored guest for several days of pomp and ceremony. As he listened to the history of the shrine, Saicho was disturbed by the thought that Hachiman, this deity so deeply Japanese, had migrated from Korea

centuries earlier with an influx of people from Paekche. When he left, some Usa priests guided him on the two-day walk to Mount Kawara, whose deity was openly called Korean. Feeling that it was appropriate to appeal to a deity who himself had crossed the sea, Saicho here prayed with special fervor that the mission to China might proceed in safety.

Through summer, autumn, and winter Saicho traveled northern Kyushu. Wherever he went, the force of his personality and the power of his message brought temples, priests, and people to Tendai, including Kanzeonji. Still today, the religion of the region bears his mark.

Dazaifu was kept informed of progress in restoring the embassy: a new ship built, the other two repaired and refitted; men appointed to replace those lost; another set of costly gifts procured. In the spring came word that a second departure was imminent.

The year's delay had made it possible for another priest to join the mission, a young monk named Kukai. Apparently he was accepted at the last minute: he was ordained only a few days before departure. Perhaps he had difficulty getting permission: he was from the Saeki family on Shikoku; the Saeki were a branch of the Otomo and both were in bad odor because of involvement in the killing and intrigue that aborted the construction of a new capital at Nagaoka. Kukai's announced intention was to stay in China for twenty years. He was quartered on Ambassador Kadonomaru's ship.

The crew of the ship anchored in Hakata Bay had readied it, the officers and passengers reassembled at the reception center. The priests at Kanzeonji bade Saicho and his disciple a tearful farewell and began marathon prayers for a safe voyage.

The favored route--across the Japan Sea to skirt the Korean peninsula--was no longer possible because of bitter relations with Silla, so they decided to leave Japan not from Hakata but from a harbor on Kyushu's west coast. From it they would head into the China Sea, hoping to reach a port they called Ningpo. Japanese mariners then had only the flimsiest knowledge of navigation. They relied on winds blowing generally in the right direction and were favored by the fact that China is so big it was hard to miss. They sailed almost exactly a year after their first departure from Naniwa.

Their luck had not changed. On their second day out they ran into a gale. The ships were scattered and lost track of each other. Kukai wrote: "A fierce storm struck us.... ripping our sail and breaking our rudder. Waves tossed our small

boat.... We cringed before the terrible wind, terrified that the great waves might wash us away.... We drifted north and south and saw nothing but the blue of sky and sea.... Our water was exhausted, our crew fatigued.... How can words describe our plight?"

The third and fourth ships were forced back to Japan. The vice-ambassador's ship, with Saicho aboard, reached China but only after almost two months of rowing, drifting, and near-starvation. They were warmly received, but soon after their arrival the vice-ambassador died, prostrated by the cruel voyage. The administrative officer took over.

The ambassador's ship, with Kukai, reached China sooner, after thirty- four days at sea, but three hundred miles south of their intended port. As usual, the Japanese had not provided the ambassador with the diplomatic documents the Chinese court prescribed, because such documents had to acknowledge subservience to the Chinese emperor; the Japanese tried to maintain that they were not subjects but equals, though they did label their gifts as "tribute." Without credentials, at a port that had never received an embassy, they were suspected of being merchants who were trying to evade customs duties by claiming diplomatic status. The official in charge tossed away Ambassador Kadonomaru's appeal because its Chinese was not acceptable; they were treated badly until Kukai saved them with an eloquent petition written in refined Chinese. Still, it took a long time for clearance to arrive from the central authorities, and it was late autumn before they began a forty-six day journey to the Chinese capital. There the two groups were united. Saicho was not among them. Once ashore, he and his disciple had set off for T'ien-t'ai, the mountain that gave Tendai its name, and the center of Tendai studies.

In the capital, Ch'ang-an, Ambassador Kadonomaru kept Kukai in his official party as he worked through the protocol of his mission: the presentation of the gifts, a formal audience with the emperor along with representatives from Tibet and other kingdoms, another audience at which the Japanese requested and were granted permission for their many students to remain in China, a round of banquets with much drinking, and, of course, sightseeing. To the Japanese, Ch'ang-an was a dazzling, cosmopolitan city. With a population of almost two million, it was the greatest metropolis in the world, a magnet for embassies, scholars, and merchants from all of Asia and the Middle East. But it was also a jittery city. The emperor's long reign had been marred by domestic revolts and foreign attacks; the T'ang dynasty was weakening.

The Japanese were in Ch'ang-an into the winter and the New Year's festivities. Early in the year they joined in mourning the death of the emperor, and

participated in the enthronement of the new emperor. It was an event that seemed less than auspicious: the new sovereign was ill and disabled, a weakened emperor of a weakening regime. When Ambassador Kadonomaru got home, his report on China would state: “Internally, there are disloyal commanders, and externally, the evil-natured men of Tibet. The capital is in chaos, with not a moment of tranquility.”

On the day that the ambassador left Ch’ang-an, Kukai moved into a complex of temples where political turbulence seemed far away. There he hoped to find the master he had come to China searching for, the master who could teach him the secrets of a new current in Buddhism; it had originated in India and was called Esoteric Buddhism. It was not unknown in Japan. Deep in the mountains of his home island, Shikoku, Kukai had for fifty solitary days and nights practiced an austere ritual of Esoteric Buddhism that he had learned at Nara. He performed this fifty-day ritual once, twice, again and again, until at last, on a rocky promontory thrust into the Pacific, he broke through to enlightenment.

He had found the kind of Buddhism that he believed was superior to all others, but the texts in Japan were incomplete and he knew that the essential teachings could only be learned in person, master to disciple. He was searching for that master.

For Saicho, the months in China had been fruitful. Near Mount T’ien-t’ai he was welcomed by the governor of the province, a supporter of Tendai who was sponsoring a series of lectures by a distinguished monk; he invited Saicho and his disciple to attend, and was so impressed by Saicho that he gave him four thousand sheets of paper and provided twenty scribes who copied 120 texts. On T’ien-t’ai the two Japanese received instruction, and before they returned to the port for the voyage home they were fully ordained in Tendai.

At the port, they found that sailing would be delayed six weeks while provisions for the trip were collected, and Saicho received permission to visit another Buddhist center famed for its libraries. There he was able to get copies of Esoteric texts and was initiated in Esoteric rites. The Chinese masters of Tendai taught only Tendai doctrine, but Saicho, having been exposed to Esoteric practice in Japan, was eager to learn more; he saw no conflict between Tendai and Esoteric doctrines and he wanted to combine them in a Japanese synthesis.

In the early summer of 805 the two ships left China for an uneventful voyage home. In the capital Ambassador Kadonomaru returned his sword of office and was rewarded for his success. Saicho was welcomed by the emperor and honored for his achievements and for the texts and images he brought home. The

Emperor Kammu gave Tendai--with its Japanese infusion of Esoteric practices --official recognition as a sect. Saicho's mission to China had been a success: Tendai was firmly established, the aristocracy of the court embraced it.

Dazaifu celebrated the return of the two ships and hastily dispatched the two that had been blown back a year earlier. They were still loaded with valuable goods that it would be a shame to waste and, although the original diplomatic mission had been accomplished, there was now the excuse of sending congratulations to the new emperor. The Japanese habitually mixed diplomacy and trade. It was expected that the ships would conduct some sub rosa commerce, but the official gift-giving was in itself highly profitable, since the Chinese always reciprocated with items of greater value. The things that Ambassador Kadonmaru had brought back were being happily apportioned by the emperor and high officials even as the two ships set out.

As before, they soon ran into trouble. One ship was able to continue but the other was disabled and drifted to a lonely island. Most of those on board went ashore, leaving only a few archers to guard the ship. Its hawsers snapped, it drifted out to sea, ship and all on board were lost. Those marooned on the island made it back to Kyushu, probably picked up by passing fishermen; the court ordered that they be severely punished for losing their ship and valuable cargo; it took no note of the lives lost.

The remaining ship made it to China and its administrative officer and his party entered Ch'ang-an early in 806. Their congratulations to the emperor enthroned a year earlier came too late; he was already dead and his son was on the throne.

But for Kukai their arrival was opportune. He had visited many Buddhist teachers until at last he met Hui-kuo, the seventh patriarch of Esoteric Buddhism in a line that had originated in India. With open arms, the aged Hui-kuo welcomed him as the disciple he had been waiting for, and immediately began to pass on all that he had to offer. Kukai's years of lonely study and ascetic practice, and his phenomenal memory, made him amazingly quick. Three months later he was ordained as Hui-kuo's successor, the eighth patriarch and head of Esoteric Buddhism. Hui-kuo, near death, told him to return to Japan and transmit the teachings there. From all of Hui-kuo's disciples it was Kukai who was chosen to write the master's epitaph. His work in China was completed. He was ready to go home.

That remaining ship of the mission returned to Hakata in the late fall of 806. The administrative officer hurried to the capital. Along with his report, he carried

Kukai's memorial to the court. It included a list of all that he had brought from China: Buddhist sutras, Sanskrit texts, lengthy commentaries, images and paintings, ritual instruments, and gifts he had received from Hui-kuo.

But his memorial was more than a list of treasures. It was a report of what he had achieved as a government-sponsored student in China, and what his achievement had prepared him to do for Japan. He described how he had succeeded Hui-kuo as the authentic transmitter of Esoteric Buddhism. In essence, he was petitioning for recognition of Esoteric Buddhism as a new sect--implying that it was superior to existing sects--and he was asking that he himself be recognized as head of that sect. A new sect had to be sanctioned by the government. Without government approval it did not exist, it could not function.

He was asking much, and circumstances were not favorable. Approval was in the hands of what amounted to a council of bishops whose ideas were firmly planted in the previous century. Moreover, Saicho was already performing Esoteric rituals and was accepted as a master. The Emperor Kammu, who had authorized Kukai's journey to China, had died and been succeeded by his son Heizei. Heizei was not an ardent Buddhist, and what enthusiasm he had was focused on Saicho; when he was crown prince he had given Saicho several hundred ounces of gold to help cover his expenses in China.

Having submitted his memorial, Kukai waited. He could not even travel to the capital without authorization. Like Saicho, he rusticated in Kyushu, but unlike Saicho, he had no great sponsor. He was in limbo.

To house and protect the treasures he had brought from China he built a small building not far from where he had landed. He installed an altar, making it a temple, and called it Tochoji to express his hope that he could transmit his doctrine to the capital in the east. Twice burned in warfare and twice moved, Tochoji today is a handsome temple in Hakata's business district.

Kukai probably lived at Tochoji through the winter of 806-807. It is recorded that in the spring Dazaifu's Junior Assistant Governor General asked him to make a painting of the Thousand-Armed Kannon, a compassionate deity whose many hands signify boundless efforts to save lost souls. In the early summer he was directed to live at Kanzeonji.

Little else is known about the three years following his return to Hakata in 806. We do not know how long he stayed on Kyushu or what he did there. A man so drawn to solitary meditation in mountains must have climbed often to Homan's rocky sanctuaries to pray for deliverance in this time of trial.

Toward the end of that uncertain period he seems to have been at the temple near Naniwa where he had been ordained just before he left for China. In the latter half of 809 the court called him from that province to take up residence in a temple in the suburbs of the capital.

Bringing him into the orbit of the court was the answer to his memorial. The climate had changed. Heizei had retired after reigning only four years, relinquishing the throne to his brother, who became the Emperor Saga. As their father Kammu had been patron to Saicho and Tendai, Saga became patron to Kukai and his sect: Shingon, "True Words." Saga was not only patron but friend, often demanding of Kukai's time and energy but ensuring his rise to eminence.

They were in the same city now, Saicho and Kukai: two giants, not just in their time but for all time. Each in his own way, they naturalized Buddhism, shaping a Japanese religion that reached beyond the court to all the people. They were rivals, but relations between them were at first cordial. Saicho recognized that Kukai's knowledge of Esoteric Buddhism was greater than his: he borrowed texts from Kukai, came to Kukai for training and initiation, and sent disciples to learn from Kukai. But relations cooled when some of Saicho's disciples chose to stay with Kukai instead of returning to Saicho, when Kukai insisted that Shingon was superior to Tendai, and when Kukai's influence eclipsed the older man's.

Kukai's great years began with his call to the capital. He was given a state temple in the heart of the city; like the city, it was still unfinished, but it was critical to the plan of the capital and it was his to complete as he wished. He founded the first school open to the poor as well as the rich, the lowly born as well as the aristocracy. He demonstrated a mastery of civil engineering when the governor of his home province on Shikoku begged the court to send him to rebuild a ruptured irrigation pond that government engineers had for three years struggled and failed to repair; in three months he supervised the construction of a great earthen dam that still, today, impounds one of the largest irrigation lakes in Japan, "The Pond of Ten Thousand Fields." He asked for and was given Mount Koya, deep in the mountains of the Kii peninsula south of the capital, a place he had discovered in his wanderings as a young monk; there, far from the distractions of the capital, he built his great monastery, for he believed always that meditation should be practiced in high mountains, in deep forests.

Religious founder, philosopher, poet, artist, educator, engineer, intimate of the emperor, honored and revered, he performed his last services to the court and retired to Mount Koya in 835. At the age of sixty-one he died surrounded by disciples. Almost immediately he

moved into legend. Beloved all over the country as Kobo Daishi, his posthumous title, he was deified as master, savior, miracle worker.

The man who had once been Junior Assistant Governor General of Dazaifu knelt before his painting of the Thousand-Armed Kannon and earnestly prayed.