

## CONTEMPORARY MEANING OF THE AVATAMSAKA PHILOSOPHY<sup>1</sup>

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### **The Great Buddha of Tōdai-ji is Vairochana Buddha**

*Vairochana Buddha is the Buddha of Illumination as Described in the Avatamsaka Sūtra*

The Great Buddha of Tōdai-ji (Tōdai Temple), known affectionately as the “Great Buddha of Nara,” is called Vairochana (Vairocana) Buddha (Rochana Buddha in some scriptures). This Sanskrit name means “the one who shines brightly throughout the universe.” The Chinese translated the name as “Omnipresent Illumination.” Some people associate the word “shining” with the sun and explain that it is a deification of the sun, but this is a mistake.



**Figure 1. The Great Buddha of Tōdai-ji (Photo by Kōsei Morimoto)**

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s Note: This article a transcript of a lecture given at Ryukoku University in Kyoto on October 8, 2013, with some additions, completed on June 21, 2021. Translated by Eri Tomita and edited by Sean Kelly.

Before his death, Shākyamuni Buddha willed that his flesh and body would be extinguished, but the teachings or the “dharma” he expounded would be immortal, so that after his death, people should rely on the “dharma,” the unchanging truth. However, the disciples believed in his teachings by means of the personhood of Shākyamuni Buddha, so they tended to regard him as a supernatural being. Thus, the theory of the Buddha’s body emerged, and early Buddhists personified the dharma taught by Shākyamuni Buddha and called it the immortal body, or *dharmakāya* (dharma body), while they called the human body the *rūpakāya* (form body).

With the development of Buddhist philosophy and the emergence of Mahāyāna philosophy, Buddhists came to believe that Shākyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment, transcended the flesh body or *rūpakāya* (form body), and became the *dharmakāya* (dharma body) as light, and referred to this state of Shākyamuni Buddha as Vairochana. The light here has no form, of course, but it penetrates everywhere, does not create shadows, and even reaches into places like hell to save people. In this sense, Vairochana is “the Buddha of Illumination.”

The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (*Flower Splendor Sūtra*, also translated as *Flower Ornament* or *Flower Garland Sūtra*), one of the early Mahāyāna scriptures, explains the existence of Vairochana in this way. Although there are countless sūtras, each one was expounded for the sake of specific recipients, and the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* is said to have been presented to bodhisattvas.

What does it mean to be a bodhisattva? Several hundred years after the death of Shākyamuni Buddha, Indian society was in turmoil due to the invasion of different ethnic groups, especially in northern India. In the *Amitābha Sūtra*, for example, this situation is described as the “unwholesome world with five types of pollutions.” A group of people called “bodhisattvas” appeared on the scene to help people out of their sufferings. These bodhisattvas were inspired by various cultures and religious beliefs that were practiced along the Silk Road and pursued their own methods of salvation.

They said that Shākyamuni was still alive and expounding the dharma to people, that a new buddha would come to replace Shākyamuni and save them, or that even if there was no Shākyamuni in the Sahā World (the world of endurance, the Earth), there were many other buddhas somewhere in the universe who were coming to save us. They were all praying for the return of the Buddha.

Among these bodhisattvas, there was a group that wanted to thoroughly explore the content of Shākyamuni Buddha’s “enlightenment.”

Their ultimate goal was to find out what a bodhisattva should be like and to establish bodhisattva identity. Their ideas were compiled into various sūtras from the second century, C.E., which were eventually compiled into a sūtra called the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* in Khotan in Central Asia. The original Sanskrit text was translated into Chinese by Buddhahadra at the beginning of the fifth century and became the sixty-fascicle version. However, in China, after hundreds of years, the meaning of the text became unclear due to changes in the language, and there was a movement to retranslate it. In the late seventh century, Shikshānanda retranslated it. However, by then the original Indian text had probably been expanded and it became the eighty-fascicle version.

#### *Shākyamuni and Vairochana*

In the Nara period (eighth century, C.E.), as part of the policy on Buddhism undertaken by Emperor Shōmu (reigned 724-749), monks were encouraged to read under the guidance of lecturers and study not only the Mahāyāna and early Buddhist sūtras, with the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* taking a central position, but also the precepts, treatises, and commentaries. As a result, temples in the southern capital Nara had a deeply-rooted spirit of learning and a traditional form of dharma rites called *rongi* or “dharma discussion” was born.

Dharma discussion is a ceremony in which a questioner, called a *monja*, asks various questions about Buddhism, and a senior monk, called a *kōji* (lecturer), who acts as a teacher, answers them. At some point in history, the text with the questions and answers on each topic was formulated, and the written content of these questions and answers became established as *rongisō* or “scripts for discussion.” In other words, the scripts for discussion became a textbook, and it is still used in dharma ceremonies today.

At Tōdai-ji, one of the titles of the dharma discussion is “the Lord of Avatamsaka Teaching,” in which it is discussed that Shākyamuni directly became Vairochana. For example, in the scripts for discussion, there are phrases such as: “Shākyamuni who attained the way under the (bodhi) tree became Vairochana...” And in the chapter, “The Honorary Titles (of Tathāgata),” we read: “The Buddha is sometimes called Vairochana and sometimes called Shākyamuni.” This is understood to mean that Shākyamuni directly became Vairochana Buddha.

Vairochana here is not the same as Mahāvairochana, the Buddha who is commonly called *Dari Rulai* in Chinese and *Dainichi Nyorai* in Japanese, the title that is said to have been created in the seventh century after

the development of Esoteric Buddhism. This is also a “dharma body,” but the concept is different.

In the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, Shākyamuni Buddha, who appeared in the historical world and had a human body (*rūpa-kāya* or form body) is regarded as having become the dharma body (*dharmakāya*) or Vairochana upon his enlightenment. In other words, the sūtra recognizes the continuity of the personhood of the Buddha. Apart from a human being, the act of enlightenment cannot exist. On the other hand, the “dharma body” of esoteric Buddhism is detached from personhood and is independent as the truth of the cosmos. In other words, Mahāvairochana resembles the One God of monotheism.

*The Original Scene of the World-Honored One Shākyamuni's Enlightenment*

So, what exactly was the state of the World-honored One Shākyamuni when he attained enlightenment and became the ultimate existence of Vairochana Buddha? In the beginning of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, the original scene of the World-honored One Shākyamuni's first enlightenment is depicted: “Long ago the Buddha, at a place of serenity in Maghada Kingdom, attained enlightenment. The place was solemn and pure, adorned with diamonds, various treasures, and flowers. Above was a wondrous jewel wheel, complete and pure. Countless wondrous colors, and all types of splendors was just like the ocean...”<sup>2</sup>

The words are quite difficult to understand, but I think they can be summarized as follows. In the past, the World-honored One Shākyamuni was troubled about human existence and his mind was covered with tremendous darkness. However, after a long period of asceticism, he meditated under a large tree, and after a few days he suddenly found a ray of light within himself. The scripture describes the outpouring of light as if he were watching a slow-motion film. It is a scene full of glitter, as if the morning dew on the tips of the leaves had turned into diamonds in the light emanating from Shākyamuni. And it did not stop there. The light gradually became brighter and brighter, spreading out like a vast ocean. Eventually, he himself became the light and left the earth, shining out into the universe in an infinite expanse.

The World Honored One Shākyamuni was aware of this dramatic experience of transition from darkness to light not only in space, but also in time. In other words, he had a spiritual experience of the infinite expansion

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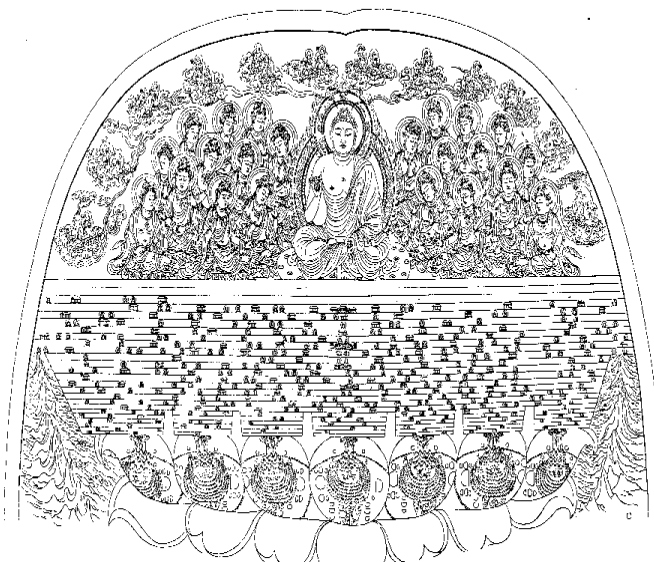
<sup>2</sup> *Taishō*, vol. 9 (Tokyo: Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō, 1912–1924), 395f.

and diffusion of the self in time and space. In this manner, he became Vairochana Buddha.

The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* is a scripture that describes this enlightenment of the World-honored One Shākyamuni. In it, there is a penetrating worldview of looking at all things, big or small, long or short, wide or narrow, as infinite. For example, historically, Shākyamuni Buddha is said to have practiced asceticism for six years, but in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, the time of six years is replaced by the absolute psychological time of infinity.

*The Hairline Engraving of the Pictures on Lotus Petals of the Great Buddha Pedestal (Painting of the Lotus Womb World)*

The visualization of this philosophy of infinity is depicted in hairline-engraved pictures on the petals of the lotus pedestal on which the Great Buddha of Tōdai-ji sits in a lotus position.



**Figure 2. Hairline engraving of the pictures on lotus petals of the Great Buddha pedestal at Tōdai-ji (Drawing by a painter stored at the Nara National Museum)**

The lotus petals of the pedestal consist of twenty-eight pieces, all of which have the same design. Later, Tōdai-ji was affected by two wars, one at the end of the twelfth century and the other in the mid-sixteenth century, and the temple buildings were destroyed by fire. However, most of the hairline engravings of the pictures survived the disasters, and their entire design has been restored (Figure 2). It represents a kind of spiritual cosmology known as the painting of the lotus womb world. It is still not known who it was that realized the Avatamsaka philosophy, iconized it, and had artisans carve the images.

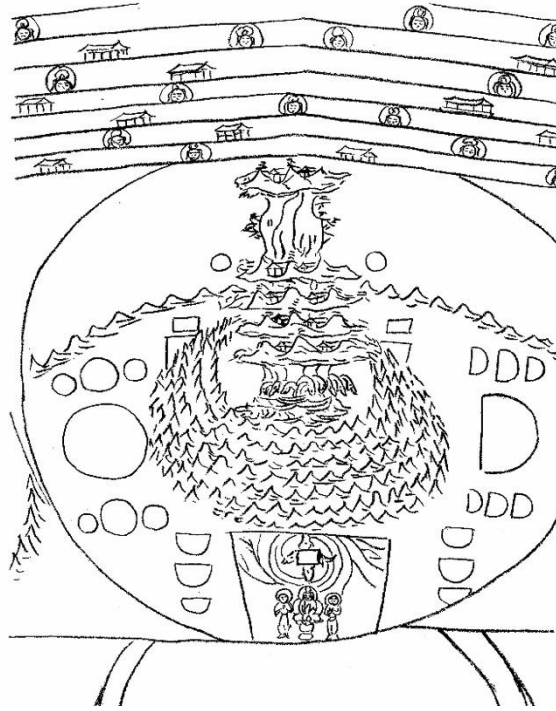
The eighth century, when Tōdai-ji was built, was the most flourishing period in terms of the exchange of civilizations between East and West Asia through the Silk Road. Japan often sent envoys to Tang China to eagerly absorb elements of the civilizations of India, Central Asia, and various remote parts of China. However, there is no other cosmological illustration similar to this one known at this time.

Roughly speaking, this picture is divided into upper and lower layers. In the center of the upper layer is a large, seated figure of the Tathāgata giving a dharma discourse with a halo with flames in the back. On both the left and right of the Tathāgata are eleven bodhisattvas, symmetrically and beautifully depicted.

In the lower half of the lotus petal, the upper part represents a celestial world in layers with small palaces and buddhas. In the lower part, there are several circles with a high mountain in the center, surrounded by mountain ranges and an ocean. And what seem to be drawn as circles and half circles are continents in the ocean. If you look closely, you can see that each of the circular shapes is a single lotus petal, forming a pair with the downward petal on the bottom. There are seven pairs of petals, all with the same image depicted on them, and this huge lotus flower is blooming in the middle of the ocean. If you zoom in on one of these circular lotus petals in Figure 3, you will see that it is an illustration of the world centered around Mt. Sumeru. There are seven such worlds depicted on each petal of the lotus.

What is the meaning of this complex pattern? There are various theories, and there is not necessarily a unified view. However, if you read the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, you will find a description which says that Vairocana Buddha, in meditation, emits light and observes all phenomena in the vastness of the universe illuminated by that light. The bodhisattvas surrounding him intuit Vairocana Buddha's mind and expound the dharma on his behalf. I realized that this pattern is a visualization of the scene described in the sūtra. In short, it is an expression of the cosmic world of the

central deity, Vairochana Buddha. It can be said that it is an illustration or iconization of the spiritual worldview taught in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*.



**Figure 3. The worldview of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* centering around Mt. Sumeru (Drawing by Kōsei Morimoto)**

The core of the painting of the lotus womb world is the illustration of the world centered around Mt. Sumeru. It can be said that this is an early Buddhist cosmology, which was developed from the cosmology of the Aryan Civilization of ancient times, common to India and Iran. Buddhism did not simply adopt the creation myth, and in principle the universe was the object of fresh observations. However, since the observations were made more than 2,000 years ago, there was a natural limit to their ability.

If one looks at the enlarged illustration of the world centered around Mt. Sumeru, one can see that: First, (1) the Earth is a vast disc-shaped land, with Mt. Sumeru rising in the center. The height is eighty thousand *yojana*,

which is equal to a height of about 56 kilometers above sea level. The circular land is called the metal layer and its outer ring is surrounded by a mountain range called Iron Layer Mountain Range, which is made of iron and is said to keep the water of the oceans from spilling into the void. This is also shown in this diagram.

Also, (2) above Mt. Sumeru, there is a world of gods in layers. At the top of Mt. Sumeru, there is a Tushita Heaven Palace, where Thirty-three Gods reside, with Indra as the main deity. In the middle of Mt. Sumeru, the Four Guardian Kings and their attendants live in the four directions of east, west, north, and south, standing by to respond to prayers by believers. However, in the illustration of the world centered around Mt. Sumeru on the lotus petals of the Great Buddha pedestal, the four palaces of the Four Guardian Kings are represented as four layers from top to bottom. Since Mt. Sumeru is a sacred mountain that cannot be approached by humans, the Two Great Dragon Kings reside at the foot of the mountain, and the Eight Dragon Kings also rear their heads. Mt. Sumeru is surrounded by seven layers of mountain ranges separated by oceans and lakes. These are all functioning as a barrier.

Next, (3) outside the seventh mountain range from the center of Mt. Sumeru, there is a vast body of water called the Salty Ocean. It is bounded on all sides by Pūrva-videha Continent in the east, Dakṣiṇa-jambu Continent in the south, Aparā-godānīya Continent in the west, and Uttara-kuru Continent in the north, with islands attached to each continent.

Then, (4) the shape of Jambu Continent in the south resembles the Indian subcontinent. From this point of view, the world centered around Mt. Sumeru is how the ancient Indians thought of the Earth. In the void around Mt. Sumeru, the sun, moon, and planets are in orbit. People believed that the distinction between day and night was caused by the sun's orbit around the giant Mt. Sumeru. Since Mt. Sumeru is accompanied by the sun, moon, and planets, it can be said that the world centered around Mt. Sumeru is a kind of geocentric image of the universe.

Finally, (5) although it is not depicted in the pictures on the lotus petals of the Great Buddha pedestal, there is a liquid layer called the water layer below the metal layer with the same diameter. Below that, there is an atmosphere called a circular layer of air, which is so huge that its diameter and depth are not an issue.

Unlike the layer of metal and that of water, the layer of air has movement. Of course, people at that time did not yet know about the law of gravity. Nevertheless, the Buddhists in India 2,000 years ago believed that



celestial bodies were floating in open space. Then, they had to come up with a reason. This is what the “circular layer of air” was for. They thought that the circular motion of the huge gas whirling around created a “force” that supported the entire Earth to float in the open space. The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* describes these countless layers of air.

The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* depicts a vast and limitless view of the universe, which is nevertheless encompassed by the “the Buddha of Illumination,” Vairochana Buddha. Emperor Shōmu tried to actualize Vairochana Buddha, who was the invisible light, in concrete forms. Apparently, there is a reason for this.

### **Emperor Shōmu and the *Avatamsaka Sūtra***

*“Rushana Zō San Isshu Narabini Jo” (A Poem in Praise of the Image of Vairochana Buddha with a Preface)*

It is usually explained that Emperor Shōmu was inspired to build the Great Buddha at Tōdai-ji when he saw the Vairochana Buddha statue at Chishiki-ji in Kawachi Province in the twelfth year of the Tenpyō Era (740). This is based on the description in the *Shoku Nihon Gi* (Sequel to the History of Japan),<sup>3</sup> but in fact, the emperor had a good understanding of what kind of buddha Vairochana was much earlier. Evidence of this can be found in the emperor's own handwritten *Zasshū* (Miscellaneous Notes) kept in the Shōsōin Storehouse. The emperor selected 145 poems from a collection of poems and essays from the Six Dynasties Period to the Tang Period in China and copied them into the book, which contains more than twenty thousand ideographs. At the end of this notebook, there is an inscription that reads, “Completed copying on the eighth day of the ninth month of the third year of the Tenpyō Era (731),” indicating that it was written when the emperor was thirty-one years old.

In this *Zasshū*, there is an article titled, “Rushana Zō San Isshu Narabini Jo” (A Poem in Praise of the Image of Vairochana with a Preface), which reads as follows:

Although *dharmakāya* is not a form, it appears as a form  
for the sake of the phenomenal world, thus ten billion  
Jambu Continents are manifested. In the seven places and

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<sup>3</sup> A history of Japan from 697 to 791 C.E. compiled by the national government.

eight assemblies, the Buddha invites humans and devas to join...The image of Vairochana Buddha has awesome and complete presence. It feels as if the Buddha were right at the place of enlightenment. It is as if Boy Sudhana were to enter Maitreya Bodhisattva's dharma world of open sky... This is Vairochana Tathāgata in the lotus womb world.

In the first part of the verse, "*dharmakāya*" refers, of course, to Vairochana Buddha. The "form" refers to material existence, such as things with color and form. The word "the phenomenal world" means that which exists between heaven and earth. It extends to "all things" and "persons." In Buddhist terms, it means sentient beings, which in this case means "people." Therefore, this explains that "Vairochana Buddha naturally has no forms and shapes but for awakening sentient beings, the Buddha's form is revealed.

In the next verse, which says "the ten billion Jambu Continents are manifested," "Jambu Continent" is supposed to be the southern continent of Jambu where we live, according to the illustration of the world centered around Mt. Sumeru shown earlier. There are seven worlds centered around a Mt. Sumeru depicted in the hairline engravings of the pictures. "Seven" is a substitute for an infinite number. In the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, it is believed that there are an infinite number of worlds centered around a Mt. Sumeru, or in modern terms, an infinite number of planetary systems in the universe. This is represented as "ten billion." However, since this is impossible to show, the seven worlds centered around Mt. Sumerus are drawn to represent the ten billion worlds centered around Mt. Sumerus and the ten billion Jambu Continents. In other words, it is saying, "no matter where you are in the universe, you can see the image of Vairochana Buddha." Without discussing the rest of the text, the emperor probably received an explanation of the contents of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* from monk scholars. However, the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* is a difficult sūtra with many volumes. It seems that the emperor wanted to have more systematic studies done.

*Lectures on the Avatamsaka Sūtra begin at Kōnsyū-ji*

In the tenth month of the twelfth year of the Tenpyō Era (740), the same year that Emperor Shōmu made a pilgrimage to Chishiki-ji in Kawachi Province, a series of lectures on the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* began at Kōnsyū-ji, the preceding temple of Tōdai-ji. In the *Tōdai-ji Yōroku* (Essential Record of Tōdai-ji, compiled during the early twelfth century in the late Heian Period), there is a description which reads as follows:

For the sake of His Majesty, Reverend Shinjō was asked to teach the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* for the first time. In the same year, celebrating the emperor's fortieth birthday, the first lecture was held.<sup>4</sup>

“His Majesty” refers to Emperor Shōmu. The lecture started by celebrating his fortieth birthday. The following is a summary of the events described in the *Tōdai-ji Yōroku*, taking into account the description in the *Shoku Nihon Gi*:

On the eighth day of the tenth month of the twelfth year of the Tenpyō Era (740), at the request of Emperor Shōmu, Reverend Rōben invited Reverend Shinjō from Daian-ji, who is a monk scholar who had studied in Silla (Korea) and had been recommended by Reverend Gonchi of Gangō-ji to give the first lecture on the Chinese translation of the sixty-fascicle earlier version of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* at Kōnsyu-ji. This year was the fortieth birthday of the emperor, and the lecture was held in celebration of the occasion. The lectures were given over a period of three years, with Jikin, Kyōnin, and Enshō as multiple lecturers.

In fact, Emperor Shōmu issued an edict for the construction of the Great Buddha Vairochana on the fifteenth day of the tenth month in the fifteenth year of the Tenpyō Era (740), as if to coincide with the completion of these lectures.

*The Imperial Edict for the Construction of the Great Buddha Vairochana*

On the twenty-fourth day of the second month in the thirteenth year of the Tenpyō Era (741), Emperor Shōmu issued an edict ordering the establishment of a state system of monasteries and nunneries in each province throughout Japan. The purpose of this edict was to publicize Buddhist philosophy as a spiritual support for the people who had been tormented with fear and depression from starvation and the epidemic of smallpox, exacerbated by natural disasters such as famine and earthquakes during the six years between the fourth and the ninth year of the Tenpyō Era (732 and 737). The will to build the state temples and nunneries seems to have been

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<sup>4</sup> *Tōdai-ji Yōroku*, annotated by Tsutsui Eishun (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1977), 156.

already developed in the ninth year of the Tenpyō Era (737), when an imperial edict was issued to build a seated form of the sixteen-foot tall Shākyamuni Buddha image and statues of the two attending bodhisattvas in each province.<sup>5</sup>

However, since the temple of the province of the capital city had an exceptional status, it was thought that Vairochana Buddha as the central deity, rather than Shākyamuni Buddha, would be appropriate, and an imperial edict was issued for its construction.<sup>6</sup> The contents of the edict are long and difficult to understand, so I summarize them as follows:

1. Since my accession to the throne, I have tried to save all living things and have governed the people with compassion. However, although I believe that my compassion has spread throughout the country, I cannot say that the benefits and virtues of Buddhism have spread throughout the land.
2. Therefore, I hope that the power of the awesome spirit of the Buddha dharma will bring peace to heaven and earth, and that all animals and plants will flourish by accomplishing splendid projects that will endure for generations to come.
3. Thus, on the fifteenth day of the tenth month in the fifteenth year of the Tenpyō Era (743), I will make a great vow as a bodhisattva. That is to initiate a great project to construct the gold-gilded bronze statue of the Great Buddha Vairochana, announce this project to the world at large, and make those who agree with the purpose of this project my dharma companions. Through this project, I wish for everyone to equally receive blessings of the Buddha and arrive at an enlightened state free from delusion.
4. In the first place, it is I who possess all the wealth and power in the nation. If I were to create a statue of the

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<sup>5</sup> *Shoku Nihon Gi*, vol. 2, 313.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 431–432.

Buddha with that wealth and power, the statue might be easy to create. However, it would be impossible to say that the true intention of creating the statue would be fulfilled.

5. The only thing that I am afraid of in undertaking such a project is that, by merely imposing hardships on the people, I would not be able to make them understand the holiness of its spirit, but would cause them to slander me, and some of them might commit crimes.

6. Therefore, those of you who participate in the project to create the Great Buddha statue as my dharma companions should bring forth great happiness with a truly sincere heart and worship Vairochana Buddha in your heart three times a day. I hope that each one of you will be willing to understand the purpose of this project and work on the construction of the Vairochana Buddha statue with the same spirit.

7. If anyone is willing to participate in the statue-making project, even if this adds only a blade of grass or a handful of soil, please allow them to do so.

8. Provincial governors, county supervisors, and other officials must not intrude on citizens' properties or rob taxes for this project.

9. I declare this to all areas of the country, both far and near, to inform them of my intention.

This edict is enough to convey Emperor Shōmu's intention regarding the creation of the Great Buddha. It is important to note that the emperor made his request from the standpoint of a bodhisattva and asked those who agreed with his intention to cooperate with him by becoming his dharma companions. Although the word *Avatamsaka Sūtra* is not explicitly mentioned in this edict, the words "bodhisattva," "dharma companions," and "a branch of grass and a handful of soil" are all expressions endorsed by the principles of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. The existence of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* in the emperor's mind was revealed six years later in an imperial edict issued

to the monks of the twelve great temples just before his abdication of the throne.

*The Edict for Regarding the Avatamsaka Sūtra as the Basis*

In the second month of the twenty-first year of the Tenpyō Era (749), Emperor Shōmu's heart was filled with joy when he received news that gold, which was believed not to be found in Japan, had been discovered in Mutsu Province (present-day Tohoku region). This was because the emperor was concerned about how to procure the gold to cover the Great Buddha while it was taking shape. According to the political philosophy of the time, which regarded natural disasters as the Lord of Heaven's condemnation of the emperor's politics, nature had been giving the emperor a harsh fate. But at this time, heaven and earth granted him a blessing. With this understanding, on the first day of the fourth month, the emperor stood in front of the unfinished Great Buddha Vairochana statue and proclaimed himself to be "a servant of the Three Treasures." Wishing to share his joy with all people rather than to keep it to himself, he gave everyone an award. It was extended to the monks as well and became an imperial edict on the twentieth day of the leap fifth month of that year. The following is a passage from the text:

Each of the five temples (Daian, Yakushi, Gangō, Kōfuku, and Tōdai) is to receive five hundred rolls of silk and 1000 *ton* (2000 *kin*) of silk floss. It is my wish that the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* be the basis of all scriptures. You shall also recite and lecture on all the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna sūtras, precepts, treatises, summaries, commentaries, chapters, etc., and study them thoroughly...<sup>7</sup>

I have already discussed this edict, but here the emperor clearly states that "the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* shall be the fundamental sūtra." Furthermore, the fact that the emperor recommended that all Buddhist scriptures and their commentaries, whether Mahāyāna or earlier Buddhist teaching be studied without omission makes me think that he had already foreseen the tendency of later Japanese Buddhism to establish schools based on various sūtras.

In any case, the long-cherished Great Buddha Vairochana had an "opening the eyes" ceremony on the ninth day of the fourth month of the

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<sup>7</sup> *Shoku Nihon Gi*, vol. 3, 81–83.

Tenpyō Shōhō Era (752). According to the *Shoku Nihon Gi*, the grand scale of the event had never been seen before.

### **From a Multi-Dimensional, Multi-Layered Worldview to a Philosophy of Infinity**

#### *A Multi-Dimensional Worldview*

To reiterate the Avatamsaka philosophy, as can be seen from the illustrations on the Great Buddha pedestal mentioned earlier, in the early Buddhist period before the time of the Mahāyāna, people imagined only one world centered around Mt. Sumeru. However, around the time of the birth of Mahāyāna Buddhism, perhaps due to the development of astrology, some Buddhists began to believe that there were countless worlds or planetary systems in the universe with each centered around their own Mt. Sumeru. The Buddhists of ancient India used the idea of numbers to facilitate their understanding of this.

Indeed, the hairline engraving of the pictures on the lotus petals of the Great Buddha pedestal depict as many as seven worlds centered around Mt. Sumeru on a single petal. Seven is a sacred number that represents infinite numbers. In the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, ten is also used to represent infinite numbers, so the seven pictures on the Great Buddha pedestal may have been based on the *Two Guardian Kings Prajñā Sūtra*. One of the topics of discussion at the dharma discussion rites held at Tōdai-ji is called “Immediately eliminating the seven calamities” and explains as follows:

Seven calamities are immediately destroyed, and seven types of happiness are immediately born in a description of the *Two Guardian Sūtra*. What does it signify?” “Its meaning comes from the description that the power of the praised Sūtra King will destroy the seven calamities and produce seven types of happiness.” “He shall destroy countless calamities and bring boundless happiness.” Furthermore, “In India, people let the number seven represent infinity. Therefore, infinity was expressed in the seven difficulties and the seven blessings.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> From the scripts: “Immediately eliminating the seven calamities.”

This explains that, according to Indian custom, the number seven represents the full number that is infinity. In the carving of the lotus womb world, it refers to the existence of countless worlds centered around Mt. Sumerus, or countless planetary systems. Therefore, a single large lotus petal refers to a universe composed of an infinite number of worlds centered around Mt. Sumerus.

In order to express more concretely this vast universe consisting of an infinite number of worlds centered around Mt. Sumerus, the Buddhists of India at that time thought of it in this way: A collection of a thousand worlds centered around Mt. Sumerus is considered to be “small-thousand” worlds; a collection of a thousand “small-thousand” worlds is considered to be “middle-thousand” worlds; and a collection of a thousand “middle-thousand” worlds is considered to be the “great-thousand” worlds. Since this “great-thousand” worlds consists of three kinds of thousand worlds (small, middle, and great), this is named the “Three Thousand great-thousand worlds,” which is the third power of one thousand.

In other words, there are one billion worlds centered around Mt. Sumerus. It is not the number of one billion that is important. They used the aggregate of one billion worlds centered around Mt. Sumerus to represent an infinite number of worlds. In China, this was translated as ten billion and considered to be a world that is taught by one buddha. In terms of modern science, the “three thousand” great-thousand worlds can be thought of as a single galactic system that includes countless solar systems. In the hairline engraving of the pictures on the lotus petals, this is represented by a single painting of the lotus womb world.

By the time the Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures were formed, especially when the proto-Buddhāvataṃsaka, an original form of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, was born, the Buddhists in India, who came up with the “three thousand” great-thousand worlds, had further developed their imagination. They began to search for the existence of the countless “three thousand” great-thousand worlds in the ten directions. In other words, the four directions of east, west, north, and south, and the four directions in between, plus upward and downward, were added to create a universe called “all worlds in the ten directions.” This is an equivalent of the entire universe with countless galaxies. In the lotus petals of the Great Buddha pedestal, it is represented by twenty-eight petals, which is a multiple of seven. In conclusion, it can be said that all of these assume the existence of an infinite and multi-dimensional universe.



*Ocean of the Lotus Womb World: The World of Vairochana Buddha in the Avatamsaka Sūtra*

It must be said that the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* is difficult to understand without prior knowledge of these concepts, but it expresses various aspects of this multi-dimensional universe in an extremely poetic manner. An example is the following lines from the “Chapter on Vairochana Buddha”:

All children of the Buddha, you should know this. The Ocean of the Lotus Womb World is where Vairochana Buddha solemnly purified himself for as many eons as particles in the countless worlds when he was practicing the bodhisattva way. In each eon, he respected and made offerings to tathāgatas, as many as there are particles in the world, and in the body of each buddha he practiced as many vows as the particles in the ocean of the world.

All children of the Buddha, you should know this. There are layers of air equal to the number of particles of Mt. Sumeru, and it holds an ocean of the Lotus Womb Splendor Worlds. The lowest layer of air is called Equal, and it holds the Jewel Illuminating Land. The next layer of air is called the Splendor of Various Jewels.... Going up in this way, the next layer of air is equal to the particles of Mt. Sumeru.

The topmost layer of air is named Excellent Treasury, and it has the Ocean of Fragrant Water. At this Ocean of Fragrant Water, a great lotus flower called the Fragrant Banners Illuminating Splendor holds the Lotus Womb Splendor World Ocean. On the shore of this ocean of the worlds, there is a Diamond Mountain Range that spreads and surrounds... In this way, on top of it, there are Oceans of Fragrant Water (and their universality) as many as there are particles in the world. The worlds of all the ten directions are also like this. This is the place where Vairochana Buddha always turns the Wheel of Dharma.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Taishō*, vol. 9, 412–415.

Next, I will quote from the “Chapter on the Tathāgata’s Shining Enlightenment”:

Now, the World-honored One Virochana Buddha shines ten billion rays of light from the spires of his two feet, illuminating the ten billion worlds. It illuminates ten billion Jambu Continents and ten billion Pūrva-videha Continents...ten billion great oceans, ten billion Diamond Mountain Ranges...ten billion kings of Mt. Sumeru, ten billion Four Guardian Kings, ten billion Thirty-three Devas...ten billion Tusita Heavens, ten billion Wondrous Pleasure Heavens...and ten billion Ultimate Form Heavens. All things existing in this world are manifested.<sup>10</sup>

*A Multi-Layered Worldview*

The Buddhists who created the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* did not stop at merely imagining the existence of multi-dimensional worlds or vast worlds. They turned their attention to a more thorough understanding of the structure of the worlds. This may seem paradoxical at first glance, but it involves the observation that the big is contained in the small. Let’s look at some descriptions in the sūtra.

Since it would be too difficult to simply show the Chinese translations of the sūtra as they are, I will present some of them in a summarized form. First, here is a passage from the preface of the “Chapter on Entering the Dharma Realms”:

Shākyamuni Buddha embodies all the worlds in his body, and all the buddhas of all the worlds are contained in his body. In each of his pores, all the buddha lands, as many as the particles in all the worlds, are contained, and he inconceivably manifests perishing and forming of all the worlds throughout timeless eons (past and future).

In this way, the Jeta Grove became the buddha land, a pure Earth. The same thing happens to the ten directions – east, south, west, north, northeast, southeast, southwest, northwest, down, and up – of the Jeta Grove that has

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<sup>10</sup> *Taishō*, vol. 9, 422.

become vast and boundless, and all the worlds to the end of the universe become pure and splendid. Then, the ten great bodhisattvas from the ten buddha lands in these ten directions infinitely far away, only from these buddha lands with the permission of the buddhas, together with their countless followers, adorn the sky with clouds of flowers, sprinkle jeweled flower petals, descend into the Jeta Grove, and join in the dharma elucidation assembly.<sup>11</sup>

From the “Chapter on Vairochana Buddha,” the following words may be cited:

In a single pore, there peacefully abide a countless number of buddha lands all as many as the particles of the infinitesimal land, magnificently pure and vast... Within a single particle, all things, as many as the particles in infinitesimal lands, abide.<sup>12</sup>

The following is from “Chapter on the Merit of the Beginner Bodhisattvas”:

[Beginner bodhisattvas] know that the infinitesimal world is no other than the great world, and the great world is no other than the infinitesimal world... They know that a single world is no other than countless, boundless worlds, and countless, boundless worlds are no other than a single world. They know that countless, boundless worlds are within a single world, and a single world is within countless, boundless worlds... They know that a single world gives birth to all the worlds, yet they want to know that all the worlds are like open space. They want to know that all the worlds are in one moment and that there is nothing left. Thus, they arouse aspiration for supreme enlightenment...

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<sup>11</sup> *Taishō*, vol. 9, 677.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

Beginning bodhisattvas know that a long eon is no other than a short eon, and a short eon is no other than a long eon. They know that a single eon is no other than countless infinite eons, and countless infinite eons are no other than a single eon...They know that immeasurable eons are no other than one moment, and one moment is no other than immeasurable eons. They want to know that all eons enter no eon, and no eon enters all eons. They wish to fully understand formations and destructions of all number of eons in all worlds in the past, future, and present, thus, they arouse aspiration for supreme enlightenment.<sup>13</sup>

The following lines are from the “Chapter on the Ten Abodes of Bodhisattvas.”

The bodhisattva knows that one is not separate from many, and many are not separate from one. The bodhisattva examines the meaning and knows the significance and examines the significance and knows the meaning. The bodhisattva knows that non-existing is not separate from existing and existing is not separate from non-existing...It is because the bodhisattva wants to utilize skillful means in all dharma.<sup>14</sup>

We see such phrases as “all the worlds are contained in one body,” “see the countless number of buddha lands in a single pore,” and “an infinitesimal world is no other than the great world.” If we look for these meanings in the hairline engravings of the pictures on the lotus petals, we will find that the vast universe is depicted within a single large lotus petal. Moreover, mathematically speaking it is a multi-layered concept that the world centered around Mt. Sumeru is differentiated in each of the seven lotus petals. In other words, what is infinite converges into what is infinitesimally small. Moreover, this takes place both in time and space. Thus, a very complex mutual relationship is understood. The keywords that symbolize the Avatamsaka philosophy are “one is not separate from all, all are not separate from one,” “one is not separate from many, many are not separate from one,”

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<sup>13</sup> *Taishō*, vol. 9, 450–451.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 446.

and “small is not separate from large.” We can say these words summarize a view of extremity. In addition, it is noteworthy that one and many are in a two-way relationship, and the value of a balance between one and many is accepted. One and many are not only a matter of numbers. It is also inclusive of the contrast between uniqueness and diversity.

*Infinite Mutual Relationship – What This Viewpoint on Infinity Suggests*

If I were to rephrase this complex mutual relationship, it would be something like this. All things, including time, not to mention concrete matters and phenomena, are not isolated entities, but are limitlessly connected to all other entities, and also related to one another as parts of a whole. The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* teaches that this kind of limitless mutually dependent relationship functions in the world. We are not usually aware of such a relationship. However, in March 2011, when the Great East Japan Earthquake occurred, we were reminded of the fact that people are all connected with one another. We realized that we live in mutual interconnections and that we can live, or we are let to live, because of these connections.

The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* teaches that there are limitless mutually dependent relationships among everything in this world. What is remarkable is that such mutual relationships can be understood even for completely opposing matters and phenomena, such as “small is not separate from large,” “one is not separate from many,” and even “one is not separate from all.” This is an extreme interpretation of the Buddhist common philosophy of simultaneous codependent arising.

In Avatamsaka studies, this is expressed by the phrases, “mutually inseparable and mutually interacting.” “Mutually inseparable” means that seemingly opposing matters and phenomena are in relationship of being in one body and inseparable. In modern terms, this is a defining concept when matters and phenomena are perceived statically. In Buddhist teaching, this corresponds to examining things from the viewpoint of “things as they are.” On the other hand, the concept of “mutually interacting” is an attempt to understand matters and phenomena from the perspective of “working,” in Buddhist terminology. In modern terms, it is a mutual relationship that is understood when examining matters and phenomena dynamically.

In this way, all matters and phenomena are endlessly overlapping chronologically and in multiple layers. In Avatamsaka studies, this is expressed by the phrase “overlapping without end.” Another important suggestion of this extreme perspective is that it includes the concept of seeing

both extremes, or both extreme ends—that is, of relativity. In order to recognize such an inseparable mutual relationship between completely opposing matters and phenomena, we must be grounded in a penetrating view that there is nothing that can be determined as substance. This is an idea that there is nothing in the world that is absolute and unchanging. In other words, to see things as relative is possible by making the concept of *shūnyatā* (emptiness/ boundlessness) in Mahāyāna Buddhism a common denominator of both extremes. A substance is thought of as independent, unchanging and lasting forever but there is nothing in this world that exists on its own without depending on other things, maintains its own identity without changes, and exists forever. A basic philosophical tenet of Mahāyāna Buddhism is that all things are “empty” or “without boundary.”

Existence as a substance includes, for example, “the One God who created the cosmos,” “a self as a soul,” and “the atom.” The One God who created the cosmos is said to be eternal, is neither born nor dies, and does not change. However, this concept of God did not exist in India and East Asia. A soul is a substance that is thought to survive the death of the body, but Shākyamuni Buddha denied the existence of such a soul as an individual entity. From ancient Greek to modern times, the atom has been thought of as the ultimate unit of matter, considered to be a single particle that cannot be further divided. However, in modern quantum physics, there is no such substantial particle, but rather there is a matter in motion, forming and perishing moment by moment.

*Keywords of Avatamsaka Philosophy*

I would like to summarize the flow of Avatamsaka philosophy as I have described it so far with some keywords. First, “From *rūpa-kāya* (form body) to *dharmakāya* (dharma body), and from *dharmakāya* to *rūpa-kāya*.” One great person, Shākyamuni, attained enlightenment and became the dharma body. In reality, however, Shākyamuni Buddha ended his life, so there was no longer a Shākyamuni Buddha, or Buddha, in this world as a guide, and we entered the age of no buddhas.

Even so, the people of the world who sought salvation continued to long for Shākyamuni Buddha who used to be alive. Such a period indeed lasted for a long time, but there were inevitably limits. In particular, when the age of turmoil came and people’s desire for salvation became more earnest, various movements were formed to try to fulfill that desire. One of these movements was to visualize Shākyamuni Buddha in concrete forms as a means to remember him. As a result of this “from *dharmakāya* to *rūpa-kāya*”

trend, many Buddha statues were created. Historically, this was around the time of the Kshāna Dynasty.

As I mentioned earlier, “pushing the view of simultaneous codependent arising to its extreme” means to take the Buddhist common philosophy of simultaneous codependent arising to the extreme point, which has to do with the core principle of the Avatamsaka philosophy. “An infinite chain and its multi-dimensionality” means that, although all matters and phenomena are boundlessly connected to one another, according to the Avatamsaka way of thinking, it is not connected merely as a linear chain, but multi-dimensionally. As a concrete metaphor, I use the example of “Indra’s net,” which is an “entity of the net-shaped infinite chain.” Indra’s net is a beautiful net of jewels that is said to be stretched over the palace where Indra lives above the top of Mt. Sumeru. Each knot has a jewel attached to it, and they shine brightly and reflect each other endlessly. It is used as a beautiful poetic way of explaining the relationship of “lying on top of another without end.” In the modern age, the Internet has made us realize that the world is connected in a network. However, it seems that this network is not always as beautiful and shining as “Indra’s net.”

In order to maintain this kind of relationship, “acceptance of diversity” is a prerequisite. In addition, if we can observe the relationship between “static and dynamic mutual dependence of all matters and phenomena,” then we will be able to “speculate on seeing conflicting extremes in relativity.” However, the reality of society and the world is harsh. I believe that the Avatamsaka philosophy suggests a principle of action in the actual competitive society that comes with the difference between the superior and the inferior as well as winners and losers.

Of course, Shākyamuni Buddha did not clarify the nature of the universe. He explained what human existence is, what the self is, and what the relationship between the self and others is. The early Mahāyāna Buddhists deciphered Buddha’s profound insight. The bodhisattvas, especially, who created the Avatamsaka philosophy, recaptured the Buddha’s insight from the perspective of extremity.

Today, in the twenty-first century, human beings on Earth are living in the context of diverse races, languages, religions, cultures, nations, and political systems, while struggling for survival in the face of globalization centered on the economy. Under these circumstances, if I were to point out a principle of action that the Avatamsaka philosophy calls for, it would be “solemnly purify all types of flowers.” This phrase is a very simple description of the scene when the Buddha first attained enlightenment. It

states that “the moment the Buddha attained enlightenment, various flowers bloomed all around (due to the light emitted by the Buddha) and (the place of enlightenment) was beautifully decorated.” There are peonies, violets, and small flowers that bloom in the wild whose names we don't know, but they all decorate the world as beautifully as they can. Like these flowers, let each one of us become a flower and decorate this world beautifully.

This is the message in the phrase “solemnly purify all types of flowers.” If we are to apply this message in the real world, we must start with the purification of our own bodies, minds, and immediate surroundings. Then, we must face the reality of the various pollutants that we humans are emitting and spreading, resulting in climate change, and make unceasing efforts to purify and purge them from the local communities, nations, and ultimately the universe. Moreover, people of the world are currently facing a spread of infections by a new type of coronavirus, similar to the smallpox epidemic that the Japanese encountered in ancient times (including the eighth century). I hope that with the help of science, the minds and bodies of people around the world will be purified and the new coronavirus disaster will be brought under control as soon as possible.

### Kanji Glossary

Amitābha Sūtra 阿弥陀經	Amida-kyō
Apara-godānīya Continent 牛貨洲	Goka shū
Avatamsaka philosophy 華嚴思想	Kegon shisō
Avatamsaka studies 華嚴教学	kegon kyōgaku
Avatamsaka Sūtra 華嚴經	Kegon-kyō
bodhisattva 菩薩	bosatsu
Boy Sudhana 童子善才 (善財)	Dōji Zenzai
Buddhabhadra 仏駄跋陀羅	Buddabadara
ceremonies/ dharma rites 法儀	hōgi
Chapter on Entering the Dharma Realms 入法界品	Nyūhokkai-bon
Chapter on the Merit of the Beginner Bodhisattvas 初發心菩薩功德品	Shohosshin bosatsu kudoku bon
Chapter on the Tathāgata's Shining Enlightenment 如来光明覺品	Nyorai kōmyō-kaku bon
Chapter on the Ten Abodes of Bodhisattvas bon 菩薩十住品	Bosatsu jūjū bon



Chapter on Vairochana Buddha 盧舍那仏品	Rushana Butsu bon
Chishiki-ji 知識寺	Chishiki-ji
countless worlds 阿僧祇世界	asōgi sekai
Daian-ji 大安寺	Daian-ji
dharma 法	hō
dharma discussion 論義	rongi
dharma rites 法要	hōyō
dharma-kāya 法身	hosshin
Diamond Mountain Range 金剛圀山	Kongō-isen
Eight Dragon Kings 八龍王	Hachi-ryūō
Emperor Shōmu 聖武天皇	Shōmu Tennō
enlightenment 悟	satori
Enshō 円証	Enshō
eon 劫	kō/gō
Excellent Treasury 勝蔵	shōzō
Four Guardian Kings 四天王	Shi-tennō
Fragrant Banners Illuminating Splendor 香幢光明莊嚴	kōdō kōmyō shōgon
Gangō-ji 元興寺	Gangō-ji
Gonchi 巖智	Gonchi
great-thousands worlds 大千世界	dai sen sekai
hairline engraving of the pictures on lotus petals of the Great Buddha pedestal 大仏蓮弁毛彫圀	Daibutsu remben kebori-zu
Hīnayāna 小乘	shōjō
illustration of the world centering around Mt. Sumeru 須弥山世界圀	Shumi-sen sekai-zu
immediately eliminating the seven calamities 七難即滅	shichinan sokumetsu
imperial edict ordering the construction of state monasteries 国分寺建立の詔勅	Kokubun-ji konryū no chokoku
Indra 帝釈天	Taishaku-ten
Indra's net 因陀羅網	indara mō
Iron Disk Mountain Range 鉄輪圀山	Tetsurin-isen
Jambudvīpa Continent 瞻部洲	Sembu shū

Jikin 慈訓	Jikin
kōji (lecturers) 講師	kōji
Konsyu-ji 金鍾寺	Konshu-ji
Kyōnin 鏡忍	Kyōnin
Lord of Avatamsaka Sūtra 華嚴教主	Kegon kyōshu
Maghada Kingdom 摩竭提国	Magada koku
Mahāvairocana 大日如来	Dainichi Nyorai
Mahāyāna 大乘	daijō
Mahāyāna philosophy 大乘思想	Daijō shisō
Maitreya Bodhisattva 弥勒菩薩	Miroku Bosatsu
Metal Disk 金輪	konrin
middle-thousand worlds 中千世界	chū sen sekai
monjya (questioners) 問者	monja
Mt. Sumeru 須弥山	Shumi-sen
multi-dimensional world view 多元的世界觀	tagenteki sekaikan
multi-layered world view 多重的世界觀	tajyūteki sekaikan
Mutsu Province 陸奥国	Mutsu-no-kuni
Ocean of Fragrant Water 香水海	kōzui-kai
Omnipresent Illumination 光明遍照	kōmyō henjō
opening the eyes ceremony 開眼供養	kaigen kuyō
Painting of the lotus	
womb world 蓮華藏世界図	rengezō sekai-zu
philosophy of simultaneous	
codependent arising 緣起思想	engi shisō
place of the Buddha's enlightenment 寂滅道場	jakumetsu dōjō
Pūrva-vidēha Continent 勝身洲	Syōshin shū
Rōben 良弁	Rōben
rūpa-kāya 色身	shikishin
Rushana Zō San Isshu Narabini Jo	Rushana Zō San Isshu
(A Poem in Praise of Virocana Buddha	Narabini Jo
and Preface) 盧舍那像讚一首并序	
Sahā World 娑婆世界	shaba sekai
scripts for discussion 論義草	rongi-sō
Shikshānanda 実叉難陀	Jisshananda

Shinjō 審祥	Shinjō
Shoku Nihon Gi (Sequel to the History of Japan) 続日本紀	Shoku Nihon Gi
Shōsōin Storehouse 正倉院	Shōsō-in
shūnyatā (emptiness/boundlessness) 空	kū
small-thousand worlds 小千世界	shō sen sekai
solemnly purify all types of flowers 雜華嚴淨	zakkegonjō
state nunneries 国分尼寺	Kokubun-niji
state monasteries 国分寺	Kokubun-ji
statues of the two attending bodhisattvas 二菩薩像	nibosatsu-zō
Tathāgata 如来	nyorai
Tenpyō Era 天平	Tempyō
theory on the Buddha's body 仏身論	busshin-ron
Thirty-three Devas 三十三天	sanjū san-ten
three thousand great-thousand worlds 三千大千世界	sanzen dai sen sekai
Three Treasures 三宝	sambō
Tōdai-ji 東大寺	Tōdai-ji
Tōdai-ji Yōroku (Essential Record of Tōdai-ji) 東大寺要録	Tōdai-ji Yōroku
Tushita Heaven Palace 忉利天宮	Tōriten gū
Two Great Dragon Kings 二大龍王	Nidai-ryūō
Two Guardian Kings Prajnā Sūtra 仁王般若經	Ninnō Hannya-kyō
Ultimate Form Heaven 色究竟天	shikikukyō-ten
unwholesome world with five types of pollutions 五濁惡世	gojoku akuse
Uttara-kuru Continent 俱盧洲	Kuru shū
Vairocana Buddha 毘盧遮那仏	Birushana Butsu
Water Disk 水輪	suirin
Wind Disk 風輪	fūrin
Wondrous Pleasure Heaven 化樂天	keraku-ten
World Honored One 世尊	seson
Zasshū (Miscellaneous Collection) 雜集	Zasshū

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