

Speech by Ōno Genmyō, Head Priest of the Horyu-ji Temple  
“Shōtoku Taishi and Horyu-ji”  
(October 20, 2018, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo)

## MC

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming today. The town of Ikaruga, where the Horyu-ji Temple is located, is very conveniently located: just 10 minutes by JR from Nara, 20 minutes from Tennoji in Osaka, and 80 minutes from Kyoto. This historical area is home to sites that include the Horyu-ji, the Horin-ji, the Hkki-ji, the Chugu-ji, and the Fujinoki Kofun tumulus.

The Reverend Mr. Ōno will be speaking with us today in detail about the Horyu-ji, which was founded in 607 by Shotoku Taishi, Prince Shotoku, a member of the imperial family. As it is home to the oldest wooden building in the world, it was the first site in Japan to be registered as a World Heritage property.

However, its attractions go beyond the buildings. While Kyoto temples are famous for their gardens, Nara's attractions are, more than anything, its Buddhist sculptures. The Horyu-ji is home to some of Japan's most noted Buddhist statues, including the Shaka Sanzon [Shaka Triad of Buddha and Two Bosatsu], the Kudara Kannon, Yakushi Nyorai, and Kuse Kannon.

Prince Shotoku was featured on the 10,000 yen bill until 1986, so there may even be people overseas who know of him. Shotoku was the creator of Japan's first laws and bureaucratic system, a

proponent of relations with China, and incorporated Buddhism into politics.

Reverend Ōno, if you would be so kind.

### Head Priest of the Horyu-ji Temple, Reverend Ōno Genmyō

My name is Ōno Genmyō, and it is my honor to have the Horyu-ji Temple in my charge.

As our MC has just informed us, Horyu-ji was founded in the year 607. So I would like to start my talk from there.

Why is 607 considered the year Horyu-ji was founded? This is because Prince Shotoku expressed a desire to “build a temple to worship Yakushi Nyorai” as his father, Emperor Yomei, was ill. We have a record stating that this was the reason.

Initially, the temple was called Ikaruga-dera, being located in the town of Ikaruga. But the previous year, 606, it was already known as “Horyu-ji, also known as Ikaruga-dera.” This we know from records of Prince Shotoku giving lectures to Empress Suiko on the Annotated Commentaries on the Śrīmālā Sutra and the Lotus Sutra. If we can believe that, then the year 607 would appear to be when the temple was actually completed.

### Shaka Sanzon and Yakushi Nyorai Statues

But there is something strange here.

Prince Shotoku wanted to found a temple and create a sculpture of Yakushi to offer it to Buddha as a way to heal his father's illness, so the main image in the temple would have been Yakushi.

But today, if you come to Ikaruga and visit the Horyu-ji, you will find that the main image in the Kondo hall is Shaka (Shakyamuni) so something's a bit off.

The Horyu-ji is actually believed to have been struck by lightning and burned down in 670, after which it was rebuilt. This would mean that the original Horyu-ji was built for Shotoku's father, Emperor Yōmei, so the question is, why wasn't Yakushi Nyorai enshrined when the temple was rebuilt?

This is a very difficult question to answer. There is an inscription behind the Yakushi Nyorai figure in the Horyu-ji, on the halo behind his head, which states that the temple was founded by both Empress Suiko and Prince Shotoku to pray for Yomei's recovery.

If we check the inscription on the halo behind the Shaka Triad, it refers to "Kamusaki-no-Ōkisasi" in 621. This is a reference to Prince Shotoku's mother, Empress Anahobe-no-Hashihito, who died on December 21, 621. There is also a record that notes Shotoku himself fell ill on January 22, just a month later. Moreover, Kashiwade-no-Kisasi, one of his empress consorts, fell ill from the strain of taking care of him, taking to her bed. In other words, Prince Shotoku and his wife were both sick in bed.

Their retainers and relatives were very worried, so offered their prayers and entrusted in the Three Treasures (the Buddha, the Law (Dharma) and the Priesthood (Sangha)).

They then created a sculpture of Shaka. Moreover, this statue was said to be the same height as Shotoku himself. In other words, the main image enshrined in the Kondo, the Main Hall of the Horyu-ji, was made to be the same size as Shotoku, and by worshipping this, the prayers of the parishioners would drive away his illness and prolong his life on this earth.

### The Beginnings of Buddhism in Japan

Something important is in all this.

And that is that the Kondo hall of the Horyu-ji was created in order to heal Prince Shotoku's own illness.

If we look into it more deeply, Buddhism during the Asuka period (592-710) was almost entirely the new beliefs and thoughts brought back from China by Japanese who had visited as part of the official missions to the Tang and Sui courts. It took until the eighth century, in the early Nara period, before most people were able to understand these new ideas brought back from China.

However, Prince Shotoku died in 622, so I do wonder how Buddhism was practiced around this time.

Buddhism was introduced to Japan from China via Korea. The currently accepted date for when Buddhism was officially introduced to Japan is 538. So if Buddhism was introduced to Japan in 538, what sort of religion was it then?

Buddhism was a religion that worshipped deities that were exactly the same as, or very similar to, the various gods that the Japanese

were worshipping at the time. As described in the *Nihon Shoki* chronicle as “banshin” (gods from neighboring countries), “busshin” (Buddha as a deity), and “tashin” (foreign gods), the feeling was that these deities were the gods of neighboring countries or other countries, as well as a god by the name of Buddha.

We see similar examples when Buddhism was introduced to China from central Asia. In China, in the early years, there were the *Húshén* god of the Xiongnu, nomadic tribes from the Mongolian steppes across central Asia, the *Róngshén* god (known as Ebisu in Japan) worshipped by the people of the west, and the same *Fóshén* (Busshin) as seen in the *Nihon Shoki*.

At any rate, at the point where the Japanese were worshipping gods on a daily basis, many people were concerned that suddenly worshipping all these new gods from nearby countries would anger the native Japanese gods, so they opposed the introduction of Buddhism.

But a man named Soga-no-Iname was in favor of these new gods. The emperor was uncertain about whether to embrace this new faith, but told Iname to go ahead and worship them privately. Pleased, Iname began to worship Buddha. Records state that “the house at Mukuhara was purified and made into a temple.”

The use of “purification” here shows that the process for founding this temple was based on long-standing Japanese customs.

Next, Iname selected three women to serve Buddha. These three were nuns, known as the Sangō, or Three Deans, and the eldest was eleven years old. As has been said for many years now, these girls can be seen as playing similar roles to the *miko* shrine maidens in Shinto.

## When was Buddhism introduced to Japan?

The official introduction of Buddhism to Japan is generally held to be in 538, though another theory states 552. The reason for this discrepancy is that there are different sources that have completely different lengths of time for the period between emperors Keitai and Bitatsu. Another reason is that the number of years Emperor Kinmei ruled since his coronation are completely different.

The *Jōgū Shōtoku Hō'ō Teisetsu* (a biography of Prince Shotoku) and the records of the founding of the Gango-ji temple, originally founded as Asuka-dera Temple, completely differently to the *Nihon Shoki* chronicle. However, we have no choice but to accept this, whether the original texts were different or whether they were revised in copying.

As you all know, official histories are always written in part to bolster specific people or clans. So one reason for this discrepancy in the period covering Emperor Keitai and his successors is that certain elements may have been carefully left out of the official records, and the narrative adjusted to bolster the position of certain people or clans.

Another reason is that all these biographies and narratives were originally passed on orally. And in those days, years were not given by reign periods, but by the Chinese zodiac. This means that in terms of year numbers, the same year will repeat. There are also errors in lining things up.

Moreover, when people began putting together history books, they

collected biographies and stories, and these get told and re-told. The same texts appear in other works in addition to the *Nihon Shoki*. It takes many years for something to move from a tale to a text.

This year is the equivalent of Meiji 150, 150 years since Emperor Meiji took the throne, but even Meiji-era history has constantly changing aspects. So you can only imagine what has happened to the histories from the Asuka period and even earlier that were incorporated into the *Nihon Shoki*.

Nevertheless, we don't have the option of ignoring these texts without dates, as there simply aren't any alternatives. This means we should be thinking more along the lines of "so Buddhism was introduced."

### The Roots of Shinbutsu-Shūgō

Before Buddhism arrived, people in Japan worshipped gods (*kami*), seeing them in mountains and rivers as well. They venerated their ancestors, and shared both the bounty of the earth, and its threats. Moreover, in order for a large population to live in only a limited amount of land, they had to share with each other, help each other out, care for each other, and think of each other. This is the mindset that the environment fostered.

However, as Buddhism spread, society began to gradually change.

During this time, Prince Shotoku, for certain reasons, became very close with migrants from the Asian Continent, as well as with the Soga clan in particular, despite being a member of the imperial family. These migrants were Buddhists. They believed in the bodhisattvas.

This bodhisattva belief was the idea that anyone, no matter who they were, could be saved through or believe in Buddhist statuary.

If we think along these lines, then the bodhisattva belief of Mahāyāna Buddhism and the ideas developed over many years that the Japanese people had been passed on from their ancestors were both tied up inside Prince Shotoku's head.

So Buddhism was understood through the single character of Shotoku.

### How Japanese Saw Buddha

A record from this time refers to “depart and climb to Paradise,” one of the decrees of fate and in violation of everyone's wishes. Does this not seem strange? Does your awareness suggest that Paradise is a place you climb to? We normally just say “die,” but here it says “climb to Paradise.”

This record is the oldest inscription using “Paradise,” or Jōdo. However, all the sutras agree that the land of the buddhas is definitely on the horizon. Even Amida's paradise is described as an unimaginably distant paradise far over the western horizon. This is what the Amida Sutra says, so logically we think this way.

However, if you ask someone “Where is the land of the buddhas?” I rather doubt everyone will, as one, point to the horizon. They will all point up.

Already at that stage we are different to the Buddhism that arose in India. This is Buddhism as seen by the Japanese. So these new gods from India were understood by the Japanese as existing in a world above us, like the Takaamahara “Plains of High Heaven” of the gods that the Japanese believed in back then. So how the buddhas were understood varied between countries.

### Prince Shotoku’ s Life-Sized Statue

In February 622, Prince Shotoku’ s wife predeceased him. On the back of the halo on Shaka Triad in the Kondo hall, it says “The following day, the Cloistered Emperor passed away.” In other words, Prince Shotoku died. The term used here to describe him is Cloistered Emperor or “*Hō’ō*” in Japanese. Remember that word, as I will come back to it later.

Following that, the phrase “spiritual friends who believe in the path” or “*shindō no chishiki*” appears. This refers to belief in Buddhism, or perhaps the comrades who wished for the creation of a statue of Prince Shotoku.

So there was a wish to create a life-sized statue of Prince Shotoku as a buddha. The question of how far this was accomplished is a separate issue, but this wish to create this statue of Shakyamuni the same size as Prince Shotoku was actually offered before his death. In other words, after he had fallen ill but before his death, there was already a plan to create a Shakyamuni statue the same size as him, and it’ s likely that this plan was put into action then. Moreover, sculpting a statue of Shakyamuni and making it the same size as Prince Shotoku was about doing this for a living person.

There are actually other examples of exactly this same sort of thing.

In the Northern Wei dynasty of China, the Emperor Wencheng built a temple to pray for the repose of the Five Emperors either in the Yungang Grottoes or before them. The Five Emperors are believed to be first five emperors of the Northern Wei dynasty: Daowu, Mingyuan, Taiwu, Huang (who died as crown prince, and was Wengcheng's father, and was later known as Emperor Jingmu), and then Wencheng himself. In other words, while Wencheng was still alive, he had a statue of Shakyamuni carved to pray for his own repose after death.

This concept was passed on to Prince Shotoku.

### Sui Missions

Prince Shotoku sent Ono-no-Imoko and others to Sui China on an official mission in 607. A famous phrase associated with this mission is the letter that opens with "From the Son of Heaven where the sun rises, to the Son of Heaven where the sun sets..."

This has, in a sense, been used for political purposes since before World War Two. But that's not actually what it says. There was a major movement in the Northern Wei and Northern Zhou dynasties to destroy Buddhism, and the religion was later restored by Emperor Wen of the Sui Dynasty. Prince Shotoku knew about Wen, which is why he sent the mission. So in "Dàyè Year 3" (AD 607) in the *Book of Sui* official history, it says "the Bodhisattva Prince of the Western Seas," which refers to Emperor Wen. The Book of Sui goes on to mention "The Buddhist Law was once again raised up." In other

words, Buddhism was suppressed twice. And Prince Shotoku knew this. Moreover, Emperor Wen built a capital city called Daxing, “Great Prosperity,” and a temple called “Dàxīngshàn-sì,” Great Prosperity and Goodness Temple. So these ideas of Emperor Wen were transmitted to Japan. But not as an ideology.

### Completion of the Shaka Triad

If we look more at the inscription on the back of the halo behind the Shaka Triad, we see that it says “In the third month of the year 623 the vow to make the Shaka statue, the bodhisattvas and accessories was respectfully fulfilled.” In other words, the sculpture was completed. As it was completed in March, it may be that work was done rapidly so as to ensure it was ready for the first anniversary of Prince Shtoku’s death. However, it didn’t quite make it, and was only completed in the next month, a bit later.

The inscription then says “left this life to enter into death,” which is a very meaningful phrase: we all die in the end.

Then it says, “Accompany the Three Nobles (*sanshu*) [Empress Anahobe-no-Hashihito, who had died already; Prince Shotoku’s wife, Princess Kashiwade; and Prince Shotoku himself], performing their duties for the good of the Three Treasures,” or in other words, entering death and spreading the Three Treasures (the Buddha, the Law, and the priesthood), they would “eventually make their way to the other side” to spread the Three Treasures, performing the work of Buddhism, and finally achieving enlightenment.

The important part is what comes next. Having been written in 623, it shows that this way of thinking was already spread by then.

If Prince Shotoku had written this while he was alive, we could compare it with the Annotated Commentaries on the Three Sutras or the Seventeen–Article Constitution, but he did not write this. Because he was ill and near death; he couldn't have written it.

So who did? It's often credited to the Buddhist priest Hyeja (Eji), but Hyeja had returned to Korea in 615. So considering this, we can know that in addition to the unique personage of Prince Shotoku, there were others around him who would have shared the ideas in this inscription.

### Who Wrote the Shaka Triad Halo Inscription?

Further on, we can see it says “...come to a full understanding of the Law through the Six Paths [*rikudō*, six states of existence].” This applies to all of us. The Six Paths are Hell, Hungry Ghost, Animal, Asura (demi–god), Human, and Heaven, and thus includes the people wandering lost through these worlds.

Next, it says “freed from the painful bonds.” In other words, freed from the world of suffering, of doubt, and “eventually arrive at the Awakening.” What is written here is our complete, ideal bodhisattva ideology.

We are filled with earthly desires, so every day, we end up thinking about everything in terms of ourselves. Even a wonderful person who devotes their life to ascetic practices cannot escape their earthly desires. So they want to find some path that will help them in their troubles. Moreover, from the phrase “eventually arrive at the Awakening,” we know they all have the wish to reach awakening, or

enlightenment: become a bodhisattva. In other words, the Shaka Triad was partially complete when Prince Shotoku died. And it took a bit over another year to be complete. This inscription on the halo was composed and added then.

The last part of the inscription reads “Buddhist Image Sculptor (Busshi) Shiba-no-Kuratsukuri-no-Obito Tori was asked to make this triad.” So we know this was made by Tori Busshi.

Halo inscriptions behind Buddhist statues are almost never signed, yet this Shaka Triad Halo Inscription clearly says “Tori Busshi.” Even when a large Buddhist statue is erected in a temple, the purpose of its erection and the man who sculpted it are often recorded in the history books, but the man who wrote the inscription is almost never known.

### The Tenjukoku Shucho Mandala

Now I would like to talk about the Tenjukoku Shucho Mandala, which is believed to date from around the same time as the Shaka Triad Halo Inscription. It is in the collection of the Chugu-ji Temple.

The record states that “I was greatly pained to tell Empress Suiko about the death of Prince Shotoku. I felt many things within my soul, but there was nothing I could do [...] It was extremely hard losing both the prince and his mother. [...] Prince Shotoku spoke thus: the world is an illusion; only the world of the buddhas is true. I believe Prince Shotoku is in the Land of Infinite Life (*Tenju*).”

The location of this Land of Infinite Life is usually explained as Heaven, the Moon, or the Sun. The Sun represents the three-legged

crow, the moon represents the rabbit and the frog. This is based on Chinese Xian (enlightened person; celestial being) ideology. So the ideas regarding the Jōdo paradise of “climb to Paradise” were quite confused at this stage. There were a number of views: that it was the world of the gods, the “heaven” of Buddhism, or the “heaven” of Xian thought. At any rate, the ideas regarding it were rather vague.

The text goes on to say that “The form of this Land of Infinite Life cannot be imagined, but I would like to gaze upon this image and imagine what my husband might be doing.”

Hearing this, Empress Suiko was greatly moved, and ordered the creation of the Tenjukoku Shucho Mandala. The name of the person who created the mandala is also shown on it, and if this is accurate, then we know that it was created a little earlier than the Shaka Triad.

However, the Tenjukoku Shucho Mandala we see today was remade at some point in its life. The characters written there could be the original ones, or they could be new ones—opinions are divided. Broadly speaking, there are people who believe what is written on the mandala, and people who do not.

At any rate, we do know the name of the person who made this in this very brief period of history, and as far as that is concerned, I believe it is an accurate fact.

I think the figure of Yakushi Nyorai appears to have burned when the Ikaruga-no-Miya palace burned. It is believed that only the inscription on the Yakushi Nyorai was written based on an older text. I would like you to consider this as another major issue.

## Hō'ō and Tennō

Finally, near the start of this talk I asked you to remember the word “hō'ō” or “cloistered emperor.” This term also appears on the inscription on the halo behind the Shaka Triad. Hō'ō is not a common title at all, but Prince Shotoku has been called it for many centuries now.

Another thing: there is a text in the Yakushi Nyorai inscription that has a very important last line. It reads “Make-no-Kimi Hijiri-no-Kimi.” *Make-no-Kimi* refers to the crown prince. The name *Make-no-Kimi* is believed to have been used in a later era, but some people think the word might have been used earlier.

Moreover, in this period of history when eras get confusing, we need to think about when the title “Tennō” came to be used. Generally, it's said to have started with the Tenmu court in the late seventh century, but in fact, there were a lot of people among the Sixteen Kingdoms of China who styled themselves thus. Each chieftain would overthrow his neighbor and declare himself king (*wáng*), then if he became emperor (*huángdì*), would then make his son the emperor and style himself the Heavenly Sovereign, *Tiānhuáng*.

We use the phrase Four Heavenly Kings, *Shitennō*, in Buddhism, but the word *Tennō* here seems to have been from tribes of nomads from central Asia being inspired by this and styling themselves *Tiānhuáng*, or *Tennō* in Japanese.