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## *The Transformation of Buddhist Stūpas in Premodern Japan*

*Exploring the Symbolism of Rulership in Religious Spaces*

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*In pre-modern Japan, Religion has always been employed to legitimize power, and its architectural manifestations have undergone changes to emphasize different nodes of authority. This paper will focus on the stūpa, a representative Buddhist architectural structure, and elaborate on its development and changes in Japan, with particular attention to the stūpa as a religious building and its temporal changes in doctrinal expression and internal structure. On this basis, I will further examine the imperial mausoleum stūpas built during the Japanese Insei period (11th to 12th centuries) and discuss how the stūpa, as a religious building, achieved its political representation by integrating with funeral rites.*

*During the Insei period, a transitional period between the ancient and medieval periods, retired emperors conceived of their power in new ways. In particular, Retired Emperors Shirakawa and Toba had themselves interred in stūpas at Jobodaiin and Anrakujuin, respectively. This was a strange, provocative act that attempted to buttress what was then declining imperial power. The stūpa, symbolizing the Buddha's burial mound and venerating the Dainichi Nyorai, stands out for its architectural presence in the landscape. In putting their remains inside a holy space of rich resonances, Shirakawa and Toba broke precedents and constructed a novel mode of articulating rulership. Moreover, the burial of Toba in the stūpa, along with the funeral rituals he established, can be highlighted as having been perceived as a way to reinforce the authority of the Insei system.*

*pre-modern Japan    Tonsured Emperor    Stūpa    Religious Spaces    funeral rituals*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In pre-modern Japanese history, the intertwining of religion and royal authority is vividly manifested in the evolution of religious architecture. This paper delves into this intricate dynamic by examining the stūpa (pagoda), a key Buddhist architectural form, tracing its developmental journey and metamorphoses within the Japanese context. Here, the stūpa is not only viewed as a sacred structure but also as a symbol of evolving doctrinal ideologies and power dynamics.

Rooted in ancient Chinese buddhism, the stūpa in Japan experienced significant adaptations, reflecting the unique religious and cultural landscape of the country. This exploration will chart these transformations, particularly focusing on how the architectural design and functional aspects of the stūpa evolved in harmony with the shifts in Japanese Buddhist practices and beliefs.

A significant period for the stūpa was during the insei period (11th to 12th centuries), marked by the construction of imperial mausoleum stūpas. These edifices epitomize a sophisticated amalgamation of religious symbolism and political stratagem. In this era, Buddhism was strategically harnessed by the imperial lineage to bolster their political standing, with mausoleum stūpas playing an instrumental role. The paper scrutinizes these structures, analyzing how they transcended their religious purview to become powerful symbols of political might and representation.

By analyzing the imperial mausoleum stūpas, the paper aims to illuminate the complex relationship between religion, politics, and architecture in pre-modern Japan. It will underscore the transition of the stūpa from a purely religious edifice to a symbol of political authority and influence. This inquiry aspires to enrich the understanding of the multifaceted and symbiotic relationship between religious architecture and the socio-political tapestry of Japan's historical landscape, thereby offering a more nuanced comprehension of its cultural and religious heritage.

## II. THE JAPANESE TRANSITION OF BUDDHIST STŪPAS

### A. Early Stūpas in Japan

When Buddhism traveled from India through China and the Korean Peninsula to Japan, it brought along the architectural form known as the pagoda. In Sanskrit, this structure is called a "Stūpa," which is phonetically transcribed into Chinese characters as "卒塔婆". Originally, stūpas were built to enshrine and venerate the relics (śarīra) of the Buddha and also served as objects of faith. While stūpas in India initially took the form of mounds, as the concept spread to different regions, a variety of styles emerged. In China, stūpas evolved by integrating with wooden tower architecture, leading to the establishment of multi-storied stūpas. These Chinese stūpas housed Buddha statues on upper floors and were accessible to people, a feature that seems not to have been transmitted to Japan. However, throughout Japanese history, numerous stūpas of various forms and materials were constructed, leading to a unique development of this structure in Japan.

Originally, stūpas were constructed for enshrining the relics of the Buddha. There is a legend that ancient Indian Emperor Ashoka, in his effort to spread the teachings of Buddha, distributed the relics of Buddha (Śākyamuni) into 84,000 stūpas. As Buddhism spread to China and Japan, the reverence for these relics was also transmitted. In Japan, during the Asuka period (593~710), it was common to drill holes in the top of the heart pillar or foundation of the stūpa to place the relics. Additionally, during the Asuka and Nara periods (593~794), some stūpas housed Buddha statues within their first layer. For instance, the first tier of the Five-Storied Stūpa at Horyu-ji Temple is adorned with sculptural groups against a backdrop of mountainous landscapes on all four sides, depicting scenes like the Buddha's Nirvana. The East Stūpa of Yakushi-ji Temple contains sculptural groups illustrating eight phases of the Buddha's life. Furthermore, Kofuku-ji Temple features representations of the Pure Lands of the Four Buddhas in the Four Directions. Tsuneto Yamagishi has pointed out that, although these stūpas vary in specific themes, their primary purpose remains the same: to glorify the relics and embody the teachings of Buddha [1].

Under the reign of Emperor Shomu, the construction of Todai-ji Temple marked a significant shift. The East Stūpa of Todai-ji housed not only relics but also the Sutra of Golden Light Sutra. This practice was emulated in Kokubunji temples across the country, marking a transition in the contents placed within stūpas from relics to sutras. However, it's important to note that while the Buddha's physical relics are referred to as "true body relics," sutras are considered "dharma body relics." Therefore, their placement in stūpas as a form of relics suggests that the fundamental significance of the stūpas remained unchanged [2]. Despite the evolution in the type of relics enshrined, stūpas continued to serve as a symbolic embodiment of the Buddha and his teachings.

*B. The Introduction of Esoteric Buddhism and the Transformation of Stūpas*

During the Heian period, the introduction of Esoteric Buddhism to Japan by Kūkai and Saichō, who studied in Tang China, significantly influenced Japanese Buddhism. This new movement brought transformative changes to the veneration and design of Buddhist stūpas. The catalysts for this change were the two "Vairocana Dharmakāya Embodiment Stūpas" (Birushana Hokkai Taishōtō) constructed by Kūkai on Mt. Kōya and the Five-Storied stūpa at Tō-ji Temple. In Shingon esoteric Buddhism, "Vairocana" is identified with the cosmic Buddha Dainichi Nyorai (Mahāvairocana), and the "Vairocana Dharmakāya Embodiment Stūpas" symbolized Dainichi Nyorai himself. Kūkai's vision was to erect a stūpa to the east and west of the main hall on Mt. Kōya. The Eastern Stūpa housed a 5.6 meters statue of the Womb Realm Dainichi Nyorai and 4 meters statues of the Womb Realm Four Buddhas, while the Western Stūpa contained the Diamond Realm Five Buddhas. The deities enshrined in these two stūpas clearly indicate Kūkai's intention to represent the Mandala of the Two Realms. However, these two stūpas were not completed within Kūkai's lifetime, reaching completion only towards the end of the 9th century.

Meanwhile, the construction of the Five-Storied Stūpa at Tō-ji Temple began in 826 under Kūkai's guidance and was completed around 886, after his death. Unfortunately, historical records detailing the original deities enshrined in this stūpa do not survive. According to the text "Tōhōki," it is only known that during the Einin era (1293-1299), the statues inside the stūpa, all crafted by Kūkai, were saved from a fire. This suggests that the original deities were still enshrined there between 1293 and 1299. The dedication prayer from the stūpa's reconstruction in 1293 reveals that the pillars were adorned with paintings of the Womb Realm and Diamond Realm Mandalas<sup>2</sup> [3]. Though only one stūpa was built at Tō-ji Temple, it was intended to represent the world of both Mandalas with only one Five-Storied stūpa. Thus, Kūkai established the two stūpas on Mt. Kōya and the single Five-Storied stūpa at Tō-ji Temple, all as representations of Dainichi Nyorai. Consequently, the pre-existing format of the Five-Storied stūpa from before 8th century was now linked with the Dainichi Nyorai of Esoteric Buddhism.

On the Tendai side, Saichō planned to construct six Hōtōin<sup>3</sup> (Treasure Stūpas) across Japan, a project known as the "Six Hōtōin." These were intended to house a thousand Lotus Sutras each. According to the text "Eizan Daishi Den"<sup>4</sup>, Saichō's plan for the "Six Hōtōin" is described as the construction of "six Tahōtō," marking the first appearance of the term "Tahōtō" (many-treasured stūpa) in the Heian period. Saichō's design for these six sites involved a Two-Storied structure, with the upper tier enshrining a thousand Lotus Sutras and the lower tier dedicated to practicing the Hokke Sanmai (Dharma-Lotus Samadhi<sup>5</sup>). This essentially constituted the Tendai school's "Lotus Sutra Stūpas."

However, during the era of Saichō's disciple, Ennin, alongside the esotericization of Tendai Buddhism, changes occurred in the contents placed within these stūpas. In addition to the Lotus Sutra, the Five Buddhas of the Womb Realm of Esoteric Buddhism were also enshrined. Even into the 11th century, Tendai Tahōtō with the Five Buddhas as the principal deities continued to be built, but a significant shift occurred – the Lotus Sutra was no longer placed within these structures. Hiroshi Shimizu points out that this shift indicated a move away from Saichō's original "Lotus Sutra Stūpas" towards a purely Esoteric Buddhist form [4]. This evolution reflects the dynamic nature of religious practices and architectural symbolism within the Tendai Buddhism, illustrating Tendai school's adaptation and integration of esoteric elements over time.

With the introduction of Esoteric Buddhism to Japan, new forms of stūpas, such as the Shingon school's "Vairocana Dharmakāya Embodiment Stūpas" and the Tendai school's Lotus Sutra Stūpas, were established. These were forms not previously

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<sup>1</sup> "Tōhōki" is a historical record of Tō-ji Temple compiled by gōhō in the year 1353.

<sup>2</sup> According to records in "Kōyō Shunju Hennenshūroku", "Tōhōki" and "Tō-ji Tō Kuyōki", the original statues placed in the Tō-ji Five-Storied stūpa were sculptures by Kūkai, but the statue of Dainichi Nyorai (Mahāvairocana) was not enshrined there until the Ei-nin period (1293-99). Ryūken Sawa points out in "History and Art of Tō-ji" ("Bukkyō Geijutsu" 92, 1973) that the central pillar of the Tō-ji stūpa can be considered as representing the Dainichi Nyorai of the Diamond Realm. Furthermore, Toshiyuki Tomishima notes that although a sculpted Dainichi Nyorai was not initially enshrined in the stūpa, Kūkai's intention for the Tō-ji stūpa to embody the virtues of Dainichi Nyorai is evident in the text "Daishi Sō Kanjin-hyō" from November 24, 826, which discusses the transportation of wood for the stūpa. This document reflects Kūkai's philosophy, prominently featuring Dainichi Nyorai, suggesting that the Tō-ji stūpa conceptually aligns with the idea of a "Vairocana Dharmakāya Embodiment Stūpa".

<sup>3</sup> The "Six Hōtōin" refers to Ando/Kozuke Hōtōin, Anan/Buzen Hōtōin, Ansai/Chikuzen Hōtōin, Anpoku/Shimotsuke Hōtōin, Annaka/Yamashiro Hōtōin, and Ansa/Omi Hōtōin. Among these, only the Kozuke and Shimotsuke Hōtōin were completed during the lifetime of Saichō. Masaji Hamashima, "Pure Land Faith and Lotus Sutra Faith" in "Illustrated Buddhism in Japan Volume 3: Pure Land Buddhism", Shinchosha Publishing, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> A Biography of Saichō, the Great Master of Mount Hiei.

<sup>5</sup> "On the upper floor, the Lotus Sutra is enshrined in a thousand volumes, and on the lower floor, the practices of meditation are cultivated. In other words, it is directed towards the original vow of the Great Master."

seen, and the sutras and Buddha statues enshrined within them differed from traditional practices. Subsequently, in the Heian period and beyond, regardless of the stūpa style, there was a notable increase in stūpas housing icons of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism, as well as those enshrining deities related to Tendai teachings.

However, during the transition from ancient to medieval Japan, particularly in the Insei (院政) period (when retired emperors held power), a unique development occurred in the realm of Japanese Buddhist stūpas. Stūpas began to emerge as burial sites for the "in" (retired emperors), representing a distinct divergence in their traditional function. This phenomenon was relatively rare in the history of Japan and prompts a deeper examination of the significance of these burial stūpas within Japanese Buddhist belief. It also raises intriguing questions about their relationship with the rulership of the time. This exploration of stūpas as imperial mausoleums reveals the dynamic interplay between religious practice, political power, and architectural expression in medieval Japan, highlighting the evolving nature of stūpa symbolism and utility in Japanese culture and history.

### III. Buddhist Stūpa Worship During the Insei Period

#### A. *Regarding the Insei Period in Japan*

In 1086, during a pivotal moment in Japanese history, Emperor Shirakawa abdicated his throne to Prince Taruhito, who would later ascend as Emperor Horikawa. Following his abdication, Emperor Shirakawa assumed the role of a "retired emperor," a position known in Japanese as "上皇" (Jōkō)<sup>6</sup>. In this new capacity, he not only served as the guardian for the young Emperor Horikawa but also continued to wield significant political influence, effectively overseeing the governance of the nation. This ushered in the era of Insei, a unique form of government where retired emperors retained substantial power and administered state affairs, often overshadowing the reigning emperor<sup>7</sup>.

This transition marked the commencement of the "Insei Period," a distinctive epoch in Japanese history where retired emperors played a central role in political affairs. The emergence of this unusual political system coincided with the gradual decline of the centralized and bureaucratic Ritsuryō state, a system that had been the bedrock of ancient Japan's governance. Concurrently, new power dynamics were emerging, most notably the rise of warrior clans and the nascent military government, which would later evolve into the shogunate.

The Insei Period, therefore, stands as a significant transitional phase, heralding Japan's shift from its ancient political structures towards a more complex, medieval societal framework. This period was characterized by both the crumbling of old orders and the nascent stages of new political and social systems, setting the stage for profound transformations in Japanese history.

During the Insei period, as the ancient Ritsuryō state was gradually dismantling, religion emerged as a pivotal ideological force to maintain national unity [5]. This period was marked by a growing reliance on religious doctrines to underpin and legitimize the state's authority. Exo-esoteric Buddhism, which was grounded in Mahayana Buddhism, became particularly influential. This form of Buddhism was adeptly utilized by the imperial authorities as a dominant ideology to govern the state and its populace. In this process, Buddhism itself evolved into a political entity, shaping a new sociopolitical order.

What's more, the Retired Emperor himself, while simultaneously the highest authority in the secular world, was ordained as a monk to transform himself into a sacred entity within the Buddhist world: what is called the Tonsured Emperor (Hōō). This paper focuses on the stūpas built as burial sites for Tonsured Emperors Shirakawa and Toba, which were constructed amidst this complex

historical and ideological landscape. These stūpas not only serve as final resting places for the tonsured emperors but also represent the intricate intertwining of political power and religious authority during this transformative period in Japanese history. Their construction and significance are a testament to the multifaceted role of Buddhism in the political and cultural fabric of the Insei period.

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<sup>6</sup> In Japan, during the mid-Heian period (late 9th century), the governance style shifted from direct imperial rule to a form dominated by the Fujiwara clan, particularly the Fujiwara North House. As imperial in-laws, the Fujiwaras monopolized real political power for generations, establishing a governance style known as the "regency government" or "Sekkan-seiji." However, by the late Heian period (late 11th century), there was a growing desire for a revival of royal authority and unification of the imperial lineage, favoring the ascension of emperors without regents from the Fujiwara family. In 1086, during the third year of the Ōtoku era, Emperor Shirakawa, who was not related to the regent Fujiwara family through marriage, abdicated in favor of Prince Taruhito (who would later become Emperor Horikawa).

<sup>7</sup> In a broad sense, 'Insei' (rule by retired emperors) began with Retired Emperor Shirakawa and intermittently continued up to Retired Emperor Kōkaku (1771–1840) in the Edo period. However, in the historical classification of Japan, the 'Insei Period' specifically refers to the era from the late Heian period to the early Kamakura period, dominated by the politics of four retired emperors (1180–1239): Shirakawa, Toba, Go-Shirakawa, and Go-Toba.

*B. Construction of Stūpas by Tonsured Emperors*

During the lifetime of Emperor Shirakawa, historical records confirm that numerous stūpas were erected in the eastern part of Kyoto. Among these, the most noteworthy is the octagonal Nine-Storied stūpa located at Hosho-ji Temple. Hosho-ji Temple, constructed over approximately 40 years beginning in 1075, is a grandiose temple complex representative of the Insei period. In 1081, inspired by Tonsured Emperor Shirakawa's devout wish, the octagonal Nine-Storied stūpa of Hosho-ji Temple was built. This stūpa became a symbolic monument of Kyoto at that time.

As stated in the text "Tonsured Emperor Shirakawa Hachiman Issai-kyō Kuyō Ganmon"<sup>8</sup>, Shirakawa himself was credited with the construction of many stūpas as acts of piety. This indicates Shirakawa's profound devotion to stūpas and highlights the significant role these structures played in temple construction during his reign. The construction of these stūpas under the patronage of the retired emperor not only reflected his personal religious devotion but also symbolized the intertwining of religious and imperial authority during the Insei period. These architectural endeavors were emblematic of the era's broader cultural and religious landscape, where the construction of religious monuments served as both an expression of piety and a demonstration of imperial influence.

Shirakawa not only established the octagonal Nine-Storied stūpa at Hosho-ji Temple in Kyoto but also built numerous other stūpas throughout his reign. Following his passing, the "Chuyuki,"<sup>9</sup> a historical record dated July 15, 1129, provides a testament to his prolific religious activities. It states: "In recent years, Tonsured Emperor Shirakawa carried out many acts of piety. He commissioned over 5,470 Buddhist statues, including 66 statues of about 91 cm in height, 3,150 life-sized statues, and over 2,930 statues less than 91 cm tall. Moreover, he constructed 7 temple complexes, 21 large stūpas, and over 446,630 smaller stūpas."

While there might be variations in the actual numbers, the sheer volume of Buddha statues and stūpas commissioned illustrates the deep devotion of the to Buddhism. In particular, I would like to focus on the immense number of stūpas that were constructed. The retired emperor constructed 21 large stūpas and approximately 446,630 smaller stūpas. Furthermore, in the "Tonsured Emperor Shirakawa Hachiman Issai-kyō Kuyō Ganmon," there are descriptions related to the construction of stūpas. It states, "Tonsured Emperor Shirakawa built several dozen stūpas made of the seven treasures. Each year, he made about one hundred thousand small stūpas of clay, a practice that continued for over a dozen years." This clearly indicates Shirakawa's special interest in stūpas. What's more intriguing is that to accommodate the numerous small stūpas, he constructed a dedicated Small Stūpa Hall (Kotō-in) within Hosho-ji Temple, his own prayer temple. In the "Emperor Shirakawa Hachiman Issai-kyō Kuyō Ganmon," it is recorded that "in 1122, a Small Stūpa Hall (Kotō-in) was built, housing 263,000 small stūpas. This year, an additional 183,637 circular stūpas were added." Given that the document's closing date is listed as October 22, 1128, "this year" refers to 1128. The descriptions regarding the small stūpas in 1122 and 1128 are each recorded in the "Shifuku-ji Version of Kenken Hōkyō Hōsoku-shū."<sup>10</sup> In the "Kenken Hōkyō Hōsoku-shū," it is noted that "in April 1123, the Grand Priest of Jōjū-in Temple led as the chief priest, inviting thirty monks to conduct the second small stūpa offering ceremony." At that time, Shirakawa consecrated 284,000 small stūpas at Hosho-ji Temple. Additionally, on September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1128, under clear skies, a ceremony for the offering of 108,000 small stūpas took place at Hosho-ji Temple. Tonsured Emperor Shirakawa, Retired Emperor Toba, and Taikenmon'in (the consort of Toba) were present. Although there are slight discrepancies in the specific numbers, it is certain that the Small Stūpa Hall at Hosho-ji Temple housed an innumerable amount of small stūpas. The construction of these small stūpas was motivated by a desire to eradicate sins and wish for longevity. They were crafted by molding clay into various shapes, such as Five-Ring Stūpas and Three-Storied stūpas. Considering why Shirakawa was so deeply devoted to the construction of stūpas, it is believed to be influenced by the tradition of Emperor Ashoka in India, who is said to have built 84,000 stūpas. This reverence for the merit of constructing stūpas, perceived as immeasurable, was widely recognized in medieval Japan. On one hand, Shirakawa not only constructed numerous stūpas in the eastern part of Kyoto, an area regarded as the royal family's "religious space," but also in the southern part of Kyoto, known as the "political space." In particular, the stūpas built at the Toba Rikyu (Toba Detached Palace) in the south of Kyoto were not just acts of merit but also bore the intention of serving as burial sites. The implications of the highest authority, the Retired Emperor,

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<sup>8</sup> "Emperor Shirakawa Hachiman Issai-kyō Kuyō Ganmon" is a vow text associated with Shirakawa for the Hachiman All-sutras Offering".

<sup>9</sup> "Chuyuki" is a diary from the late Heian period written by Fujiwara no Munetada.

<sup>10</sup> The "Hōsoku-shū" collection preserved at Shinpuku-ji Temple is said to have originated from the Omuro Ninna-ji Temple in Kyoto. The "Hōsoku-shū" is a compilation of the rituals and procedures for Buddhist ceremonies during the Insei period.

choosing to construct stūpas as burial sites are significant. In the following chapter, alongside an examination of prayer texts, an in-depth analysis of funeral rites will be conducted to further explore what these constructions signify.

#### IV. Royal Authority Symbolized in Buddhist Stūpas

In 1108, Shirakawa planned the construction of a three-storied stūpa at Jōbōdai'in Temple and left a testament that he should be buried in that stūpa after his death. Shirakawa died and was cremated in 1129. In 1131, following the set period of directional taboos, his remains were removed from Kōryūji Temple where they were originally installed and placed within the stūpa at Jōbōdai'in Temple.

##### A. *Toward an Eternal and Sacred Existence*

To understand Shirakawa's stūpa, it is first necessary to decipher the vow text, or ganmon, which is read aloud on the occasions of memorial services. Since Shirakawa himself had planned to make his grave a stūpa, the vow text contains Shirakawa's own wishes. The opening of the vow text for the three-storied stūpa at Jōbōdai'in Temple reads as follows:<sup>11</sup>

"The stūpa is the fountainhead that shuts out evil and afflictions and reveals the truth. The stūpa is the symbolic form of the Dharmakāya Buddha, the abode of the buddhas and the venerable masses."

The vow text delineates the stūpa as the sanmaiagyō (symbolic representation of buddha) of the Dharmakāya Buddha. Within Buddhist teachings, the Dharmakāya represents the fundamental essence of the Buddha, embodying the ultimate truth. The sanmaiagyō is a symbolic expression of the Buddha's essence. In Esoteric Buddhism, Mahāvairocana (Dainichi Nyorai), revered as the principal deity, is synonymous with the Dharmakāya<sup>12</sup>. The symbolic form of Dainichi Nyorai, along with the Womb and Diamond mandalas, finds representation in the stūpa. Therefore, the vow text offers an esoteric interpretation, imbuing the stūpa with profound spiritual significance.

Japanese scholar Susumu Ueshima has conducted an insightful analysis of Shirakawa's burial within a stūpa [6]. He examines the burial practices of Shirakawa and his close relatives, arguing that placing their remains in stūpas or Buddhist halls was indicative of an aspiration to attain a Buddha-like status after one's death. However, Ueshima notes a significant distinction: aside from Shirakawa, none of the burial sites for his relatives were actual stūpas; they were smaller stūpas situated within Buddhist halls. While it's true that these burials reflect a common theme of equating the deceased with Buddha, the uniqueness of Shirakawa's case, where the entire stūpa itself serves as the burial site, is particularly noteworthy.

The vow text for the Three-storied stūpa at Jōbōdai'in Temple created by Shirakawa explains that stūpas are the symbol of Dainichi Nyorai, therefore this stūpa embodies the meaning of the stūpa as defined by Shingon esoteric Buddhism. That is, it refers directly to Dainichi Nyorai. According to the Chōshūki, a diary written by Minamoto no Morotoki and a vow text "Tonsured Emperor Shirakawa Hachiman Issai-kyō Kuyō Ganmon", Shirakawa's remains were installed together with a statue of Amida Buddha and a copy of the Lotus Sutra on blue paper in gold ink. In this inclusion of the Lotus Sutra, we see an important connection to the Lotus Sutra stūpa established in the Tendai school.

Additionally, it was a stūpa for relics, as it contained the remains of Shirakawa himself. Thus, in total, Shirakawa's stūpa can be understood as encompassing three distinct faces: it was similar to the relic stūpa of exoteric Buddhism; it was the stūpa as Vairocana Dharmakāya, as defined by Shingon; and it was the Lotus Sutra stūpa created in Tendai, in line with Tendai. The stūpa thus constituted a mixture of various beliefs and was worshipped as a memorial expression of the essence of the exo-esoteric Buddhist doctrine. This is likely the reason why the stūpa was chosen as the burial site itself. Having decided to be buried in the stūpa, Shirakawa initiated his own crossing of ontological boundaries through making himself the sacred being of a Buddha. This way, through his own body after his death he could become the controlling ideology itself and would be worshipped by the people of later generations as a monument. Shirakawa's strategic use of the grave-stūpa would later be inherited by another tonsured emperor, Toba, who would also add crucial ritual elements.

##### B. *Transcending Boundaries in Life and Death*

Following Shirakawa's construction of the grave-stūpa, Toba saw to the construction of Anrakuji'in Temple, a monastery for his own grave. Toba was the grandson of Shirakawa. Shirakawa's death was the start of Toba's rulership. At Anrakuji'in Temple, Toba constructed two buildings: a Three-storied stūpa, to be used as his own grave, and a so-called "many jeweled stūpa" (tahōto),

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<sup>11</sup> "Goutotokunagonganmonshu" (Prayer Collections of the Counselor Goutotoku).

<sup>12</sup> The Samadhi form of the Womb Realm Mahāvairocana is represented by the Five-Ring Stūpa (Go-Rin-To), and the Diamond Realm Mahāvairocana is symbolized by the Treasure stūpa (Hōtō).

to be used as the grave for the empress, Bifukumon'in. This decision to use a stūpa as one's own grave was likely influenced by Toba's predecessor, Shirakawa.

According to a text about Anrakuju'in Temple mentioned above<sup>13</sup>, six monks were placed at the Three-Storied stūpa, in accordance with Toba's wishes. These six monks were not allowed to participate in any Buddhist rites other than those associated with the Three-Storied stūpa; they were thus monks specially charged with making offerings to the grave-stūpa. This establishment of monks with such a position is an element unique to Toba's Anrakuju'in Temple, something we do not see in Shirakawa's Jōbodai'in Temple.

Moreover, we can learn what Toba said about these Buddhist ceremonies through his own will, which survives in the text Hyōhanki<sup>14</sup>. We see that Toba's funeral was conducted largely in accordance with his final testament. According to that testament, following Toba's death, his remains were to be interred in the Three-Storied stūpa within three days following his death and without concern for auspicious days or directional taboos. The document also indicates that Toba had decided that when his remains were being moved to the stūpa, nenbutsu monks were to be forbidden from participating in the procession. Nenbutsu monks were those practitioners who recited the name of Amida Buddha on behalf of the dead individual to ensure that he would achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. Ueshima Susumu has argued that in not allowing nenbutsu monks into the procession, Toba was rejecting the awareness of his death. He also points out that the lack of avoidance practices that are normally associated with death indicates that those courtiers who participated in his funeral shared Toba's sensibilities [7]. However, it was common practice at the time to make every attempt to avoid sources of defilement, and the relevant rituals were observed when Shirakawa's remains were moved to the stūpa. In this context, the reasons and the meaning conveyed by disregarding these practices in Toba's burial become particularly significant.

Like Shirakawa, Toba wished to be interred in a stūpa, but he sought not to be cremated, worried not about directional taboos, and wanted his remains promptly placed in the stūpa. There are two possible reasons for these actions. The first is related to Toba's concerns regarding the unstable political situation at the time. Two days after Toba had died, the so-called "Disruption of the Hōgen era" occurred. This was an armed conflict internal to the court that resulted from imperial succession disputes and discord among the regental families. Toba probably wanted his funeral to be prompt because he knew during his lifetime that this political toil would be inevitable. The second reason is related to Toba's religious consciousness. Toba did not understand the end of his life to mean his death; rather, he sought to redefine that moment as a transcendence of life and death, and to be worshipped eternally himself as a buddha. This explains well why an auspicious day for the funeral was not chosen, why the remains were swiftly installed in the stūpa, and why nenbutsu monks (who normally assist the rebirth of the deceased) were not allowed to join the funeral. Toba's own words to the monks who would oversee his stūpa are proof of this "Offering-monks should feel especially grieved—until the Compassionate Worthy appears in the world and conducts the sermon of the three Dragon-Flower Assemblies, you must continue to lead me on the Buddhist path."<sup>15</sup> In other words, the placing of Toba's remains in the stūpa would not be a funeral of a dead man; rather, it would be so that he may wait—alive—for the three assemblies of the Compassionate Worthy, that is, Maitreya's future appearance<sup>16</sup>. In this way, through his own mortuary ritual, Toba pursued a path beyond the boundaries of life and death, hoping that he might be worshipped as an eternal, sacred being.

### *C. Embodiment Through Rituals*

It is interesting to note that in terms of items interred inside and the Buddhist ceremonies conducted, the stūpa established for Empress Bifukumon'in was essentially the same as that for Toba. Toba initially planned to be buried together with Bifukumon'in in Anrakuju'in Temple. When Bifukumon'in died in 1160, she was cremated at Anrakuju'in Temple, but according to her own religious faith, she sought to be buried at Mt. Kōya. When her remains were transferred to Mt. Kōya, six offering-monks stationed at her stūpa resisted. Following Toba's will, those monks joined forces with the six at Toba's stūpa and sought to keep her remains at Anrakuju'in Temple. Fujiwara no Shigekata was one among those who attempted to persuade these monks to change their position. Shigekata convinced the monks that even if her remains were not physically at the site, if the monks did not neglect their ritual, it would have no significant effect on the belief of the imperial household. As demonstrated by the words of Shigekata, the reason that the offering-monks, who upheld Toba's final orders, agreed to allow the relocation of Bifukumon'in's remains to Mt.

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<sup>13</sup> "Anrakuju-in Temple Daily Records of Temple Lands and Other Matters", currently preserved at Anrakuju-in Temple, this is a Muromachi period manuscript.

<sup>14</sup> "Hyōhanki" is the diary of Taira no Nobunori. It covers a period of approximately 40 years, from 1132 to 1171.

<sup>15</sup> "Go-Kishōmon" (Prayer of Vow Text) from "Anrakuju-in Temple Daily Records of Temple Lands and Other Matters".

<sup>16</sup> 5.6 billion and 70 million years after the passing of Shakyamuni Buddha, it is believed that Maitreya Bodhisattva will descend to this world. At that time, under the Dragon Flower Tree, Maitreya will attain enlightenment and conduct sermons across three occasions, aiming to enlighten and save people. This event is referred to as the three assemblies or teaching sessions of Maitreya.

Kōya, was that they were convinced that even without her remains, their rituals could secure the faith of the imperial household. In another document, we read the following details about the relocating of Bifukumon'in's remains:<sup>17</sup>

In 1160, on the night of November 23rd, Empress Bifukumon'in peacefully passed away at the Shirakawa Oshikōji Palace, aged forty-four. She was cremated at the new stūpa at Anrakuju'in Temple. This stūpa was designed as her grave by Toba, but according to her own will, she sought to be buried at Mt. Kōya. When her remains were moved to Mt. Kōya, the offering-monks of her stūpa joined up with those of the Toba's stūpa in order to stop this relocation and preserve her remains at Anrakuju'in Temple in accordance with Toba's will. Fujiwara no Shigekata convinced the offering-monks of her stūpa by saying "even if her remains are not here, there will be no change in the belief of the imperial household". On December 2, Bifukumon'in's remains were installed at Mt. Kōya by her brother, Fujiwara no Tokimichi. After that, during the monthly anniversaries of her passing, Dharma Prince Kakushou, led the six offering-monks in a śarīra offering ritual and secret rite for Amida Buddha.

The offering-monks who complied with Toba's final will eventually agreed to the relocation of Empress Bifukumon'in's remains to Mt. Kōya, as Fujiwara no Shigekata articulated. They were convinced that their rituals could still attract the imperial family's faith, even without her physical remains. Originally, the stūpa designated for Bifukumon'in's burial was expected to be the focal point of this devotion. However, her intended interment in the new stūpa was orchestrated as a ritual, embodying Toba's strategic vision.

As demonstrated by the words of Shigekata, the reason that the offering monks, who upheld Toba's final orders, agreed to allow the relocation of Bifukumon'in's remains to Mt. Kōya, was that they were convinced that even without her remains, their rituals could secure the faith of the imperial household. Initially, that faith was to be directed at the stūpa in which Bifukumon'in was buried, but in line with Toba's strategy, that burial was enacted through the performance of ritual. To put it another way, there was a shared belief at the time that ritual was a means to transcend embodiment. This is further demonstrated in the monthly anniversary rituals carried out by the six monks even after her remains were long gone.

On the other hand, Emperor Konoe, the young son of Toba and Bifukumon'in who passed away before he could become a tonsured emperor, also became a part of this ritualistic tradition. In 1163, though not by his own choice, Konoe's remains were transferred to Bifukumon'in's stūpa. This action can be seen as a reflection of the understanding and acceptance within Toba's circle of the concept of a stūpa where the physical body and ritualistic practices were integrally linked.

The interment of Konoe, who was the intended successor of Toba, in the stūpa further signifies that the idea of a grave-stūpa, as a monument of imperial authority conceptualized by Shirakawa and Toba, resonated with people during the Insei period. It highlights how the grave-stūpa evolved from merely a burial site to a symbol of continuity and reverence in the context of imperial power and religious practice, gaining widespread acceptance and embodying the legacy of the retired emperors.

This series of events reflects the complex interplay between religious rituals, imperial wills, and the handling of royal remains, illuminating the nuanced practices surrounding death and memorialization in the imperial court during the Insei period.

## V. CONCLUSION

The Insei period, marking the transition from ancient to medieval Japan, saw the retired emperors, particularly Shirakawa and Toba, exerting significant influence in both the political and religious spheres. This era was characterized by the blending of state power with religious ideology, a fusion prominently embodied in the construction and use of stūpas as royal burial sites.

Emperor Shirakawa, initiating the Insei period, innovatively chose to be interred in a stūpa, thereby symbolically transforming his physical remains into a sacred entity and aligning his royal authority with Buddhist doctrine. This act was not just a personal or religious statement but also a strategic political maneuver, showcasing his power and legacy. Emperor Toba, following in Shirakawa's footsteps, expanded upon this concept. Toba's own funeral arrangements and the rituals associated with his burial stūpa were meticulously planned to transcend the conventional boundaries of life and death, aiming to establish his eternal presence as a sacred being within the realm of Buddhist belief.

On the other hand, Bifukumon'in's remains were not installed in the stūpa according to Toba's wishes, her mortuary rites were indeed performed there. We see here recognition, shared at the time, that ritual was a means of overcoming the limitations of embodiment. Moreover, Emperor Konoe's burial, although not of his will, within the stūpa, further signifies the widespread acceptance of this royal and religious practice during the Insei period. The concept of the grave-stūpa, as a monument of imperial authority and religious significance, was a powerful symbol in the transitional phase of Japanese history.

Nevertheless, the practice of using stūpas as royal burial sites did not continue beyond Shirakawa and Toba. This change can be attributed to the shifting political landscape, most notably the rise of military governance, which brought new ideologies and practices to the forefront. The unique blend of imperial power and religious ideology, so vividly represented by the grave-stūpas of Shirakawa and Toba, gradually faded, marking an end to a distinctive chapter in the history of Japan's imperial and religious traditions.

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<sup>17</sup> "Joshu kii gun Takeda Anrakuju'in Temple genyoki" (a Record of Anrakuju'in Temple).



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