Introduction of the Buddhist Mikkyō

This was the situation that obtained until early in the ninth century when two priests returned from China and immediately set to work introducing the esoteric Buddhist mikkyō. These priests were Dengyō Daishi (767–822), better known as Saichō, who brought the esoteric doctrines that became the basis of Tendai-shū Buddhism, establishing them north of the new capital, Heianjō (Kyōto), at the Enryaku-ji on Hiei-zan in 806. The other was Kūkai (774–835), who, in 816, retired to the southern mountainous area of Kōya-san and built the temple of Kongōbu-ji, teaching the doctrine of Shingon-shū. A brief resumé of the mikkyō may help to understand the complexity of the influences that had another direct bearing on the appearance of the tengu.

Saichō was a young man when he was ordained as a priest at the Tōdai-ji in Nara but he rejected following the usual customary way of rising in the priesthood with the crowd, preferring instead to go up to Hiei-zan by Lake Biwa and seek out the hermits and wizards who secluded themselves there. These men were typical of those we have already discussed who practised their varying forms of spiritual discipline far removed from the world below. John Stevens observes that these recluses subsisted on herbs, wild mushrooms, nuts and wild vegetables, covering themselves against the weather with robes of bark and rushes. At length, after years of study memorizing the scriptures, Saichō joined a flotilla of four ships to make the perilous voyage to China. Beset by gales and high seas, only two of the vessels actually landed, separated by a long distance, Saichō reaching an island in the Chusan Archipelago (near the mouth of the Yang-tse-kiang) called Ningpō, later a famous landfall for the Japanese ‘Tally’ ships in the medieval period. He embarked
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on a short period of just nine months intensive study with a number of Chinese Buddhist masters, and gathered a collection of sacred writings, before returning to Japan with these precious texts. He found the Emperor, Kemmu, now aged sixty-six, in poor health and, through prayer, effected his revival. As a reward, he received Imperial permission to found his Tendai Hokkekyō as an independent sect. Wisely, perhaps, his temple was constructed on Hiei-zan as a ‘guardian’ of the new Imperial city below.

Another priest who sailed and survived in the same four vessel flotilla bound for China was Kūkai (774–835). He also studied at Ningpō, although for a briefer time, under the Chinese Buddhist masters, returning to Japan with Saichō also with a great many holy texts, but there was evidently some friction between the two which eventually led to a rift. This break was caused, it would appear, over the reluctance of Kūkai to loan scriptures to Saichō. Before travelling to China, Kūkai had also sought the mountains to spend much time in meditative austerities. At last, under the patronage of the Emperor Saga, successor to his brother, Heijō-tennō, in the year 812 or 813, he was allowed to build his temple at Kōya-san, guided there, so tradition says, by a hunter named Inukai and receiving permission from the kami of the mountain, commenced the construction in 819. There, he established the Shingon sect which was to become a great influence on all the esoteric sects including the nascent Shugendō.

The official approval given by the Court made the mountains more attractive and fashionable; throughout the three centuries of the ensuing Heian period, with the capital now firmly established by the Kamō River, an increasing number of pilgrims ventured on the arduous trek to Yoshino and Kumano in order to visit the hitherto out-of-reach holy places, both the burgeoning temples and the shrines. Only the most fearsome and inaccessible tracts remained for the old-time hermits.

Amongst the many esoteric bodhisattva venerated in these temples, pre-eminent was the fierce Defender of Buddha’s Law, Fudō-myō-ō, who offered his adherents protection against evil and spiritual power. This deity, of Indian origin, now held great appeal to the many recluses, some of whom may have been drawn into the Shingon sect, thereby regularizing their status. He also bestowed his protection and merits on the wild proto-yamabushi and to the elements in the emerging warrior class. The former, by this time, must have brought their beliefs and practices into a form that already resembled the blend of sankaku-shinkō with the Buddhist mikkyō, soon to become Shugendō. For all these disparate elements, constant meditation on the name or image of this all-powerful ‘Guardian’ bodhisattva, continuous rapid recitation of the Heart Sutra, the Lotus Sutra, and other exhortations, gave his followers unrivalled arigatami: virtue, sanctity and power.