

## In Situ: Buddhist Art and Ritual at the Imperial Court

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The highly aestheticized world of Esoteric Buddhist practice and belief, from which many of the objects in this catalogue and related exhibition are drawn, might seem to contradict the common understanding of core Buddhist values, namely the realization of the illusion of the phenomenal world. The gilt-bronze ritual objects included here (Plates 7–11), originally part of large glittering ensembles of implements on altars, the exquisitely decorated sutra (Plate 2) with its frontispiece and its text rendered in alternating lines of gold and silver, or the magnificent fourteenth-century Nirvana painting (Plate 4) executed in sumptuous colors on silk represent an aspect of Buddhist culture that was the opposite of the austerity often associated with the mainstream imagination of Buddhism. Buddhist sutras even include elaborate prescriptive passages for the ornamentation of liturgical settings and illumination of the sutra itself, a kind of sacred adornment (*shōgon*) that became a means of generating karmic merit on behalf of a practitioner or a deceased loved one. The content of the *Golden Light Sutra* (*Konkōmyōkyō*), which played a central role in court Buddhism, not only refers to sacred adornment but also employs language that is itself embellished, using gold metaphorically to describe Buddhas of resplendent brilliance:

I worship the Buddhas, who are like oceans of virtues, mountains gleaming with the color of gold like Sumeru. I go for refuge to those Buddhas and with my head I bow down to all those Buddhas. [Each one is] gold-colored, shining like pure gold. He has fine eyes, pure and faultless like beryl. He is a mine blazing with glory, splendour, and fame. He is a Buddha-sun removing the obscurity of darkness with his rays of compassion. He is very flawless, very brilliant, with very gleaming limbs. He is a fully enlightened sun. His limbs are as prominent as pure gold.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of *shōgon* was less rooted in doctrine, however, than in actual ritual practice, and therefore it could manifest in widely divergent ways in terms of objects, materials, craft, and logic of assembly, depending on the region of the Buddhist world in which it appeared. The objects assembled in this catalogue and related exhibition can be understood first and foremost in terms of how *shōgon* was interpreted by communities of Buddhist practitioners among the Kyoto aristocracy from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries.

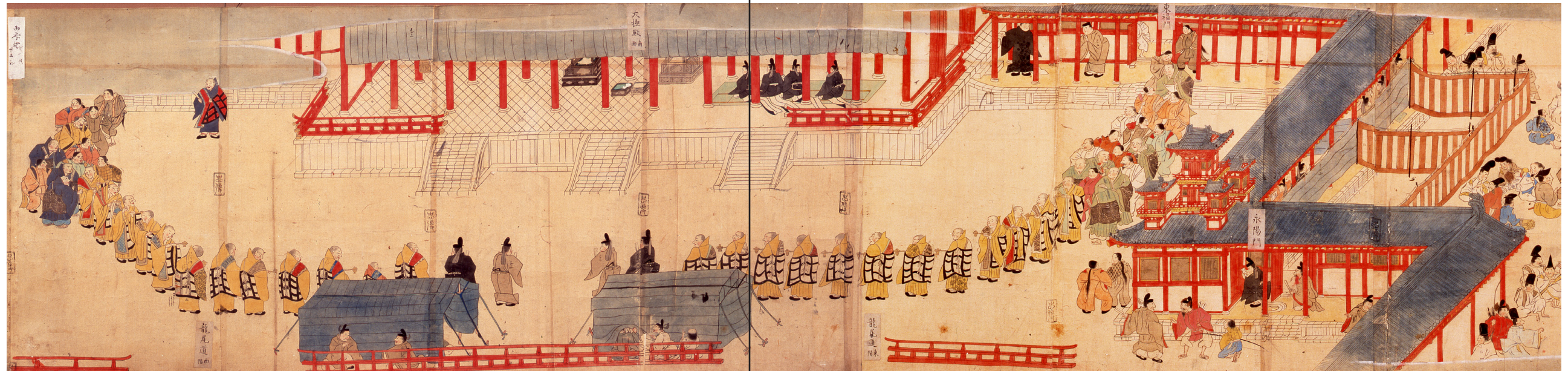


Figure 1  
*Picture Scrolls of the Annual Rites and Ceremonies of the Imperial Court (Nenjū gyōji emaki)*, detail of the Misai-e ceremony in the Imperial Palace, painted copy of 12th-century work, dated 1626, by Sumiyoshi Jokei, hand scroll, ink, and color on paper, Tanaka Collection.

During the Nara (710–94) and Heian periods (794–1185), Buddhist ceremonies figured prominently in court life. A primary example was the so-called Misai-e ceremony depicted in the *Annual Rites and Ceremonies of the Imperial Court* scrolls (*Nenjū gyōji emaki*, fig. 1). This event, the most important religious rite held at court, occurred during the second seven days of the New Year (the 8th through 14th) and consisted of the recitation of and lectures on the *Golden Light Sutra*, quoted previously. The intoning and exposition of this sacred text, said to protect a sovereign and his people from a host of calamities, promised the safety of the realm. In the illustration, court officials followed by the two ritual officiants stand at the head of two lengthy processional lines of priests. Dressed in long ochre robes draped over with surplices (*kesa*), the monks have assembled in the courtyard of the Daigokuden Hall, the palace building within which the sutra recitation will occur. Virtually all of the priests in the procession carry long-handled gilt censers (*egōro*, as seen in Plate 14), reflecting the importance of the smoke of lit incense in Buddhist ritual to demarcate the ritual space, to awaken the senses with an otherworldly perfume, and to link symbolically the dissemination of smoke to that of the Buddha’s teachings.<sup>2</sup> The illustration further prompts the viewer to imagine the power of the Misai-e ceremony once all of the monks have been seated inside the hall, their censers releasing the perfumed smoke, and their chanting of the sutra reverberating throughout the palace grounds.

The arrival of the monk Kūkai in 806, however, altered the dynamic of Buddhist ceremony at the imperial court. Kūkai brought with him the practices of Esoteric Teaching (*mikkyō*) that he had studied during a two-year stay in the Tang capital of Chang’an, and he established the Shingon sect, involving many ritual paradigms and paraphernalia new to Japan, including the use of painted mandalas and large ensembles of gilt-bronze implements. As institutionally vested as the Misai-e rite was, Kūkai managed to persuade the court to expand the New Year Buddhist ceremonies to include a new concurrent Esoteric Buddhist rite called the Mishuhō ceremony.<sup>3</sup> Kūkai argued that the incantation and lecturing of the *Golden Light Sutra* in the existing ceremony was insufficient, and that, for the sutra to be most efficacious, paintings of the deities and altars for their worship had to be built and employed in specifically esoteric rituals. In other words, he made the case for the crucial role of visual images and for an interactive engagement with them in the efficacy of ritual, an argument that would have an indisputably significant impact on the development of Buddhist art in Japan.<sup>4</sup> Kūkai was instrumental in establishing a building dedicated to esoteric ritual within the palace compound known as the Mantra Chapel (Shingon’in), thus securing the presence of Esoteric Buddhist rites physically within the palace and temporarily within the calendar of the annual observances of the court.



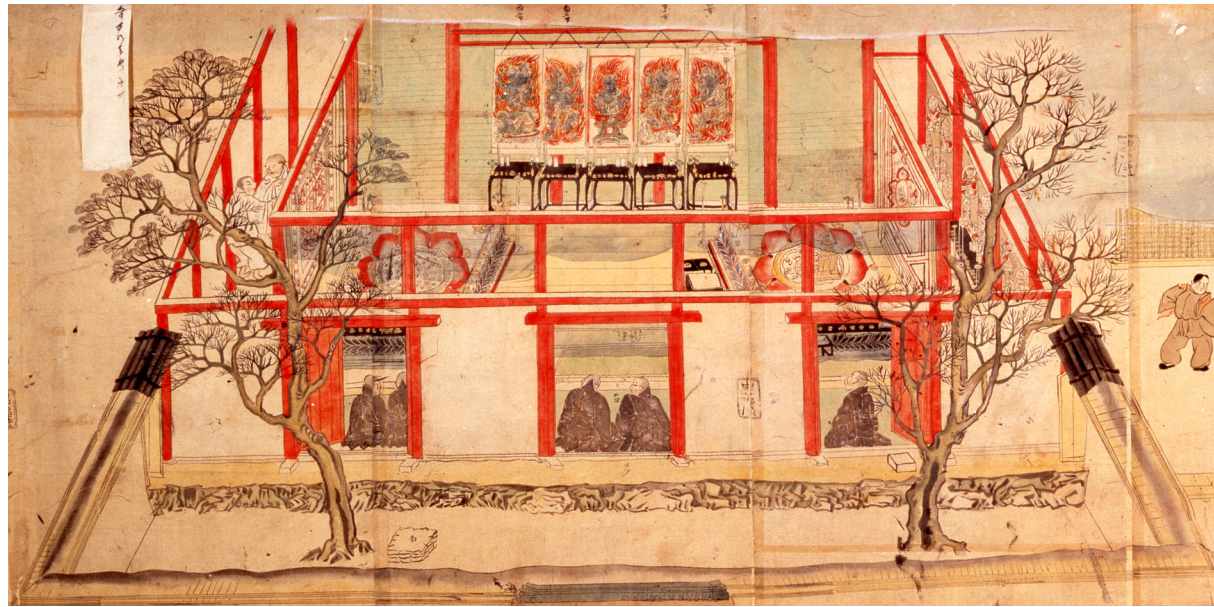


Figure 2  
*Picture Scrolls of the Annual Rites and Ceremonies of the Imperial Court (Nenjū gyōji emaki)*, detail of the Mantra Chapel (Shingon'in) in the Imperial Palace, painted copy of 12th-century work, dated 1626, by Sumiyoshi Jokei, hand scroll, ink, and color on paper, Tanaka Collection.

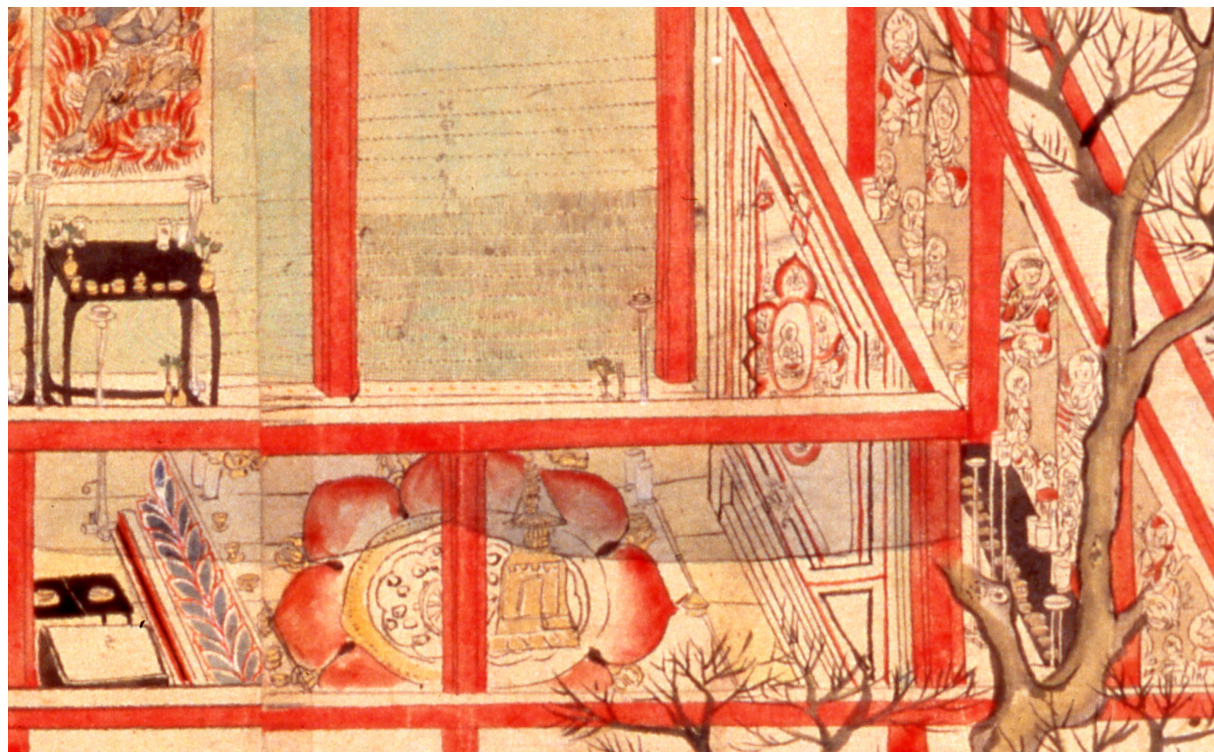


Figure 3  
*Picture Scrolls of the Annual Rites and Ceremonies of the Imperial Court (Nenjū gyōji emaki)*, detail of fig. 2, the Mantra Chapel in the Imperial Palace.

Another image from the *Annual Rites and Ceremonies of the Imperial Court* scrolls provides an artistic rendering of the Mantra Chapel, offering an approximation of how more of the objects in this catalogue may have appeared in their original ritual contexts (fig. 2). With the roof of the chapel “removed” in the picture, the viewer may peer down past the three open doors in the seven-bay facade and over and through architectural beams to glimpse the chapel’s interior. Hung on the northern wall are separate hanging scrolls of the Five Wrathful Deities (*godai myōō*), also known as the Five Wisdom Kings, fierce emanations and protectors of the Buddhas. Paintings of the Diamond and Womb Realm Mandalas are displayed respectively on the western and eastern walls, while on the ground before them are large and elaborate altars (fig. 3). These great altars would be outfitted with the necessary ritual implements, the offering bowls, incense burner, bell, and five-pronged club, all included in this catalogue.

Although space does not permit an elaboration of the hundreds of ritual actions that occurred within these spaces, the first one to take place during the Mishuhō ceremony, repeated three times a day for seven days, consisted of an offering to Mahāvairocana (known in Japan as Dainichi Nyorai, see Plate 5). This ceremony was performed through ritual and meditative actions by the celebrant and by setting offerings on the great altar before either the the Womb Realm Mandala (*taizō mandara*) or the Diamond Realm Mandala (*kongōkai mandara*), diagrammatic paintings that attempted to render in visual terms the structure of the Buddhist universe and the cosmic Buddha.<sup>5</sup>

The *Annual Rites and Ceremonies* scroll shows clearly the shallow golden bowls and incense burners lined up around the altar’s edge, as well as a miniature stupa placed on top of the lotus-flower pattern that adorns the altar’s surface. The miniature stupa used in this ceremony at the court was said to contain grains of a relic of the historical Buddha Sakyamuni and was intricately connected to Kūkai’s theoretical basis for the ceremony: the notion that the relic was related to the wish-granting gem in Buddhism, and in turn that the *Golden Light Sutra* itself corresponds to this jewel of the Buddhas. The relic and the stupa could even be incorporated into the details of ritual implements, as in the *Bell with Handle in the Shape of a Stupa* (Plate 10), which may have once contained Buddha’s relics.

The performative rituals of Esoteric Buddhism engaged all of the observer’s senses, and the visually stunning works of art that they featured suited well the aesthetic proclivities of the members of the aristocracy. The theater of Esoteric Buddhism proved to be a welcome vehicle not only for the expression of religious beliefs but also for the demonstration of worldly kingship. Ryūichi Abé has argued that Kūkai’s establishment of the Mishuhō rite at the palace was an attempt to “supersede



the Confucian characterization of the emperor as the Son of Heaven with that of [the] Buddhist ideal of cakravartin, the universal monarch who pacifies the universe by turning the wheel of the Dharma.”<sup>6</sup> The connection between Esoteric Buddhism and the court was thus more than a matter of a shared aesthetic sensibility; the potential for mutually enhancing the authority of the emperor and the centrality of esoteric practice for the well-being of the country and its ruler was apparent from the beginning. Kūkai’s newly established Mishuhō rite involved hundreds of ritual sequences during its seven-day period, but its culmination required the physical presence of the sovereign. Toward the conclusion of the rite, as the officiant chanted, the emperor’s robes would be placed on the altar and sprinkled with water. Later he would don those same robes while receiving the sacred water himself.

Whereas the esoteric ritual sited in the imperial court described above, which centered on the *Golden Light Sutra*, involved the body of the sovereign under the pretense of assuring the protection of the nation, court culture embraced Esoteric Buddhism in private ways as well. A perfect embodiment of the personalization of Esotericism and the imperial house is a copy of the *Golden Light Sutra*, with its characters superimposed over underdrawings, which was created after the death of Emperor Goshirakawa in 1192 as a dedicatory offering. The images in these underdrawings, which depict women with long hair and round faces wearing multilayered robes and seated within architectural settings seen from a bird’s-eye-view perspective, resemble the illustrations of a narrative tale. These pictures are unfinished, however, lacking the rich pigments and final touches of black ink that typically articulate facial features in Heian-period picture scrolls. Peeking out from beneath the sutra script are the eyeless figures that give the work its nickname, the “eyeless sutra” (*Menashikyō*) (fig. 4). A postscript to another sutra in the set reveals that the underdrawings, as personal possessions of the deceased emperor or drawings executed in his own hand, constituted the appropriate paper ground for the sacred text when the emperor passed away before their completion.<sup>7</sup> When considering the meaning of the central role of the *Golden Light Sutra* in court ceremony, the “eyeless sutra” may be interpreted as another example of the fusion of imperial identity, court culture, and Esoteric Buddhist practice.

With the diminution of imperial power during the Kamakura period and beyond into the Warring States period, lavish court rituals became a thing of the past. After the reunification of the country under the Tokugawa rulers in the seventeenth century, however, a number of court ceremonies were reinstated, including the Mishuhō in 1623,<sup>8</sup> during the reign of Emperor Gomizunoo (1596–1680; r. 1611–29), son of Emperor Goyōzei (r. 1586–1611), whose calligraphy is represented in this catalogue (Plate 3). Although it might be tempting to interpret the reestablishment of spectacular Esoteric Buddhist rites at the palace as a courtly revival, the ceremonies took place

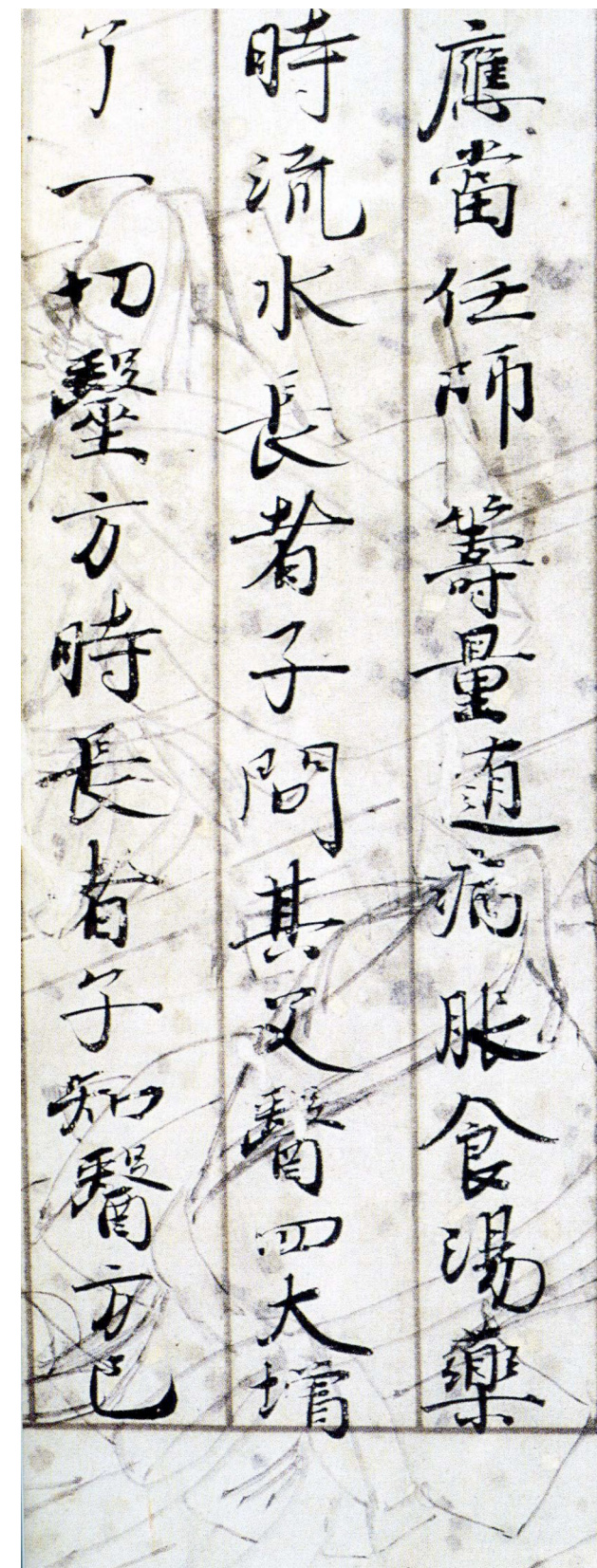


Figure 4  
Golden Light Sutra (*Konkōmyōkyō*),  
with underdrawings, known as  
the “eyeless sutra” (*Menashikyō*).  
12th century, ink on paper.  
Kyoto National Museum.

under the watchful eye of the Tokugawa shogunate. The military rulers had strategically arranged a marriage between Gomizunoo and Tōfukumon'in, daughter of the second Tokugawa shogun, Hidetada, giving them direct access to the throne. The grand scale on which Gomizunoo and his Tokugawa consort patronized Buddhist institutions and revitalized Buddhist ritual at the court must therefore be understood within the context of Tokugawa control of the imperial institution. In such a context of Tokugawa hegemony, an aggrandizement of the sovereign vis-à-vis Buddhist ritual could only benefit the military rulers, who could boast of controlling not merely the sovereign, but also the universal monarch and ultimately Buddhist power itself. The courtly aesthetic linking Esoteric Buddhism and ritual thus lived on, but in a strikingly different form than Kūkai could have envisioned in the tenth century.

#### Notes

1. *The Sūtra of Golden Light: Being a Translation of the Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra*, 3rd rev. ed., trans. R. E. Emmerick (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2001), 13–14.
2. Anne Nishimura Morse and Samuel Crowell Morse explain the important relationship between transcendent religious experience and the aesthetic in Japanese Buddhist art, specifically the meaning and ritual function of implements, such as the censer, in *Object as Insight: Japanese Buddhist Art and Ritual* (Katonah NY: Katonah Museum of Art, 1995), see esp. 67, 126–27.
3. Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 344–55, discusses in detail the various esoteric rites that took place within the palace grounds.
4. The centrality of the visual to Esoteric Buddhism, its precedents, and its implications are thoroughly discussed in Cynthia J. Bogel, *With a Single Glance: Buddhist Icon and Early Mikkyō Vision* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).
5. For more on mandalas in Esoteric Buddhist practice, see Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, *Japanese Mandalas: Representations of Sacred Geography* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999).
6. Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, 65.
7. Willa J. Tanabe, *Paintings of the Lotus Sutra* (New York: Weatherhill, 1988), 59–60; for the Japanese inscription see Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan, ed., *Tokubetsuten josei to bukkyō: inori to hohoemi* (Nara: Nara National Museum, 2003), 222.
8. Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, 347.