

THE DIVINE BOY IN JAPANESE BUDDHISM

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Medieval accounts of holy men in Japan often make rather enigmatic mention of a class of spirits or deities called *gohô*, protectors of the Law. The word *gohô* is usually understood in Buddhist doctrine to apply to the numerous figures in the Mahayana pantheon whose function it was to protect the Buddha's law from the enemies expected to assail it during the degenerate period of the Latter Days. Brahma and Indra, for example, and the well known figures of the Four Deva Kings and the Twelve Generals, whose terrific aspect was intended to cow the opponents of Buddhism, are all described as *gohô-zenshin*, beneficent deities protecting the Law.

In the literature of the medieval period, however, particular, in the various collections of Buddhist stories, we find this guardian spirit appearing frequently in the form of a divine boy, *gohô-dôji*. Sometimes the boys are recognised to be well-known figures from the iconographical pantheon, such as the Eight Boys attendant on the deity Fudô Myôô. But more often they seem to be anonymous guardian spirits personally attached to priests and hermits who have acquired power and holiness through the practice of austerities.

In several stories they are found acting as servants or acolytes to their holy masters. The famous priest Jôzô Hôshi had an attendant *gohô* boy who brought him flowers and water during a period of seclusion and spiritual exercises at Yokawa.¹

1. *Kokonchomonjû*, book (*maki*) 2. *Nihon Bungaku Taikei*, Vol. 10, p. 371.

Kanchû Sôzu, another powerful priest, had a *gohô* boy who lit the incense for him while he performed the *goma* fire ceremony on a thousand consecutive days (*sennichi-goma*).² The priest Butsuren, the *Konjaku Monogatari* tells us, was an assiduous student and reciter of the Lotus Sutra, but he liked to have a hot bath three times a day. His subordinate servant monks disapproved of this habit, and one and all left the temple. Thereupon two beautiful boys appeared and offered to serve him instead. Butsuren asked them who they were and why they wished to serve him, and they answered that their names were Black Tooth and Flower Tooth, and that they revered him for his recitation of the Lotus Sutra. Butsuren recognised these names as belonging to two of the converted demons in the Lotus Sutra, and decided to let them do as they wished. They proved strong and solicitous in gathering firewood and heating the water for his three daily baths, and brought him fruit as well. They stayed serving him night and day until he died, when they buried him with tears and performed all the necessary obsequies for forty-nine days afterwards. When the forty-ninth day was up they vanished without trace, and everyone thought they must have been *gohô* boys.³

The same volume of the *Konjaku Monogatari* relates how the priest Giei, after wandering for several days lost and starving in the mountains, suddenly came upon an elegant wattle hut in the midst of the forest, with a beautiful garden of white sand and flowering fruit trees. Inside sat a priest, apparently about twenty years old, reciting the Lotus Sutra in an outstand-

2. Ibid. p. 370.

3. *Konjaku Monogatari*, book 13, No. 23. NBT, Vol. 8, p. 861-2. The ten *rakshasi* or female demons are described in the chapter on Spells in the Lotus Sutra (*Darani-bon*; Perne's translation Chapter 21) as coming before the Buddha and vowing to protect those who preached and kept the Sutra from all goblins, ghosts, devils and suchlike evil beings. In medieval Japanese stories they seem to have largely lost their female sex, being usually described as *jûrasetsu*, ten demons, rather than the feminine *jûrasetsunyo*. The *jûrasetsu* are certainly included among the *gohô* deities, but they usually appear in the form of divine boys. Compare *Hokkegenki* No. 41 (*Zoku Gunsho Ruijû*, 8, p. 142) where the priest Jôshô is safely guided over the raging and swollen Yodo river by ten boys who are transformations of the *jûrasetsu*. Perhaps their original form was too alarming, despite their conversion to Buddhism.

ingly impressive and holy voice. He invited Giei into his hermitage, where three smart looking boys brought him delicious food which instantly revived him. The hermit told Giei that he had lived there for more than eighty years, his needs constantly cared for by the three divine boys.⁴

These miraculous boys also appear as saviours, rescuing their masters from evil demons, as well as from the dangerous consequences of too exaggerated austerities. We are told in the *Kokonchomonjû*, for example, how the priest Yuirembô was constantly hindered in his holy occupation of copying the Lotus Sutra by a *tengu*, the evil goblin who at this period seems to have figured among the chief enemies of Buddhism. This creature at last carried him off and deposited him in an old house in the mountains, where he was insistently invited to eat fish and wine of a kind he had never seen before. He refused, commending himself to the Three Treasures of Buddhism, when suddenly the door flew open and there appeared "two boys dressed in white and carrying branches in their hands." The *tengu* instantly vanished, but was discovered later, dwindled to the size of a rat, behind one of the pillars supporting the house. The boys conducted Yuirembô safely back to his temple.⁵

Divine boys also came to the rescue of the turbulent priest Mongaku, who subjected himself to extravagant austerities beyond all reasonable human endurance. The *Heike Monogatari* relates how he stood for days on end under the great waterfall at Nachi, in the depths of winter and up to his neck in icy water. Eventually he lost consciousness and would certainly have died had not two divine boys descended from the top of the waterfall and revived him by rubbing him all over with their warm and scented hands. They were two of the eight boys who form the retinue of Fudô Myôô, sent specially to give him strength to fulfil his vow of superhuman austerities.⁶

Again, when Eikô Risshi, in an excess of religious zeal, climbed up a cinnamon tree and cast himself down into the

4. Ibid. p. 823-6.

5. *Kokonchomonjû*, NBT Vol. 10, p. 728.

6. *Heike Monogatari*, book 5, chapter 8, 'Mongaku no Aragyô'. Utsumi's edition p. 287-9.

valley, he was saved by a *gohô* boy, who spread out his sleeves and caught him.⁷

Another story of the *gohô* acting as a saviour and guardian comes in the *Konjaku Monogatari*. Chôen, who had unremittingly studied and recited the Lotus Sutra since he was a child, found himself one day unable to cross a river, which was so blocked with ice that he could not tell where the ford was. Suddenly down the mountainside came a huge ox, which walked across the river and back again, breaking up the ice before it. Then it vanished, and Chôen, as he safely crossed the river, knew that his *gohô* boy had taken the form of an ox in order to help him on his journey. On another occasion too he lost his way in the mountains on his way to Mt. Kimpu, but after reciting a passage from the Lotus Sutra and praying for help he had a dream in which a boy appeared and showed him the way. When he woke up he followed the path thus divinely instructed, and soon arrived safely at his destination.⁸

As well as saviours and way showers of holy men, *gohô* boys also seem to have functioned as the agent of their supernatural powers. It was through his power to command the *gohô* boy that the holy man accomplished the magical feats which were the proofs of his power and sanctity.

Jôzô Hôshi, whose *gohô* boy we have already seen bringing him flowers and water, is described in the *Kokonchomonjû* as taking part in a *genkurabe*, or contest in magical powers, with another powerful ascetic called Shunyû. They sent the *gohô* into a white stone. Jôzô commanded the stone to move, whereupon it began to jump up and down like a football. Shunyû commanded it to be still, whereupon it at once lay quiet. Jôzô then recited a passage from the Nirvana Sutra in a voice which

7. *Zoku Kojidan*, book 4. *Gunsho Ruijû*, book 487. The 23rd chapter of the Lotus Sutra describes how the Bodhisattva Sarvasattva-priyadarsana burnt his own body after feeding on fragrant oils and herbs for twelve years. This sacrifice is commended in the strongest terms—no worship with flowers, incense or ointment, no sacrifice of family or position is equal to the sacrifice of one's own body. This passage (Kern's translation chapter 22, *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 21, p. 379-380) together with similar passages in other scriptures, led or misled a number of priests during the medieval period to take their own lives (*shashin*) by burning, drowning or other means. See *Genkô Shakusho*, Vol. 12 and *Shasekishû*, Vol. 4 for examples.

8. *Konjaku Monogatari*, book 13, No. 21. NBT Vol. 8, p. 859.

echoed among the clouds, and the white stone leapt up and split in half. The two contestants then got up, bowed to each other and departed.⁹ From this enigmatic tale it seems clear that the priests' power was not exercised directly over the stone, but over the *gohô* through whom the stone was made to move.

Another baffling story of a magical contest involving a *gohô* is to be found in the third book of the *Ôkagami*. The retired Emperor Kazan, we are told, by dint of numerous austerities and pilgrimages to holy places, developed considerable supernatural powers. Once when he was passing the night in a temple at Kumano he found that the priests there were holding a *genkurabe*, and decided unobtrusively to try out his own powers against theirs. He prayed hard to his *gohô*, and at once one of the priests, possessed by the *gohô*, was dragged out to the screen which surrounded the Emperor and lay there unable to move. When the Emperor thought the priest had been there long enough he released him, and the man ran back to join the others engaging in the contest. Everyone then understood that this feat had been accomplished by the Emperor's *gohô*, which was stronger than any the priests could command.¹⁰

The *gohô* also seems to have played an important part in the process of exorcism at this period. Most cases of mysterious sickness and inexplicably difficult childbirth were attributed at the time the 'possession' by the malevolent beings known as *mononoke*, who would enter into the patient either from reasons of personal spite, or because his weakened condition gave them easy access. The usual method of exorcising these beings was to call in a priest or ascetic to whom long austerities had given a reputation for power, and get him to recite sutras and spells (*suhô*, *darani*) thought to be potent in overcoming the possessing influence. There are some accounts of exorcisms, however, which seem to indicate that the evil being was expelled not so much by the power of the priest and his spells as by the *gohô*, which the priest commanded to possess the patient and so displace the malignant influence. Sei Shônagon in her *Pillow Book*, for example, describes an unsuccessful exorcism in which the ascetic, after reciting spells for several hours until he is ex-

9. *Kokonchomonjû*, book 2. NBT Vol. 10 p. 371-2.

10. *Ôkagami*, book 3. *Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei* edition, p. 148-9.

hausted, confesses that he cannot make the *gohô* enter the patient.¹¹

Again, a short anecdote from the first book of the *Uji Shûi Monogatari* relates how the Lord of Uji suddenly fell from his horse unconscious. Messengers were at once sent to summon the powerful priest Shinyo Sôjô, but before he could arrive one of the ladies in waiting fell into a trance and a voice speaking through her announced that the lord's sickness was due to a malevolent possession, but that all would be well because the *gohô* boy had arrived ahead of the priest to drive it out. The Lord Uji soon recovered—which is clear proof, the story ends, of the power and holiness of Shinyo Sôjô.¹²

The *Uji Shûi Monogatari* contains another story which shows that the power to command an obedient attendant *gohô* was one of the proofs of a man's sanctity. An ascetic (*hijiri*) from the province of Shinano with a reputation for great holiness—so great that his begging bowl used to fly about and bring him back food and necessities without his having to move from his hermitage—was implored to come to the Capital to cure the Emperor's sickness, over which the usual prayers and spells seemed powerless. The *hijiri* agreed to help the Emperor, but refused to move from his mountain retreat, saying that his spells would be just as efficacious if recited there. 'But if the Emperor gets better how shall we know whether it is due to you or not?' they objected. 'What does that matter provided the Emperor gets well,' he replied. But at length he agreed to send, as proof of the efficacy of his spells, 'a *gohô* clothed in woven swords.' Three days later as the Emperor lay dozing, he saw something glittering brightly, and on looking harder he saw it to be the *gohô* clothed in swords of which the *hijiri* had spoken. At once he began to feel better, until soon not a trace of his pain and sickness remained. Everyone was duly filled with awe at this proof of the *hijiri's* holiness.¹³

11. *Makura no Sôshi*, Kaneko's edition, section 21.

12. *Uji Shûi Monogatari*. NBT, Vol. 10, p. 32.

13. *Ibid.* p. 171-4. This story is illustrated in the late Heian handscroll *Shigisan Engi*. The *gohô* boy is depicted flying through the air with a Wheel of the Law rolling before him, wearing a collar from which hang numerous swords. He has a big sword in his right hand, and a noose in his left. Later he comes into the large room where the Emperor is seated alone, standing on a horizontal Wheel which floats on a cloud. This scroll is reproduced in black and white in volume 76 of the *Iwanami Shashin Bunko*.

Another more sinister story from the same collection shows that occasionally these personal attendant spirits could be used for ends scarcely in accordance with the Buddha's Law. A powerful *yamabushi* or mountain ascetic called Keitôbô arrived at a ferry to find that the ferry boat was already full and the boatman refused to take on any more passengers. As the boat moved away the *yamabushi*, left behind on the bank, flew into a terrible rage. He clenched his teeth, stamped his feet so that they sank right into the sand, glared with red eyes and rubbed his magic beads so hard together that they were almost broken. "Turn the boat back, *gohô!*" he shouted. "Unless you turn the boat back I will cut myself off from the Buddha's Three Treasures." No sooner had he spoken these words than the boat turned round and began to return to the shore, although there was no wind. "Nearer, nearer," he shouted, until the boat came within a hundred yards of the shore, when he screamed "Sink the boat, sink the boat." The people on board were terrified and implored him to have mercy, but he went on shouting "Sink the Boat" until the boat capsized and everyone was thrown into the water. Wiping the sweat from his brow Keitôbô said, "The fools! Don't they know powers yet?" and went away.¹⁴

Here again we understand that the magical force which turned the boat back to the shore and finally capsized it was accomplished through the power of the *yamabushi's gohô boy*.

Little of the *gohô* belief seems to have survived medieval times except in one respect. We have already seen that the *gohô* boy could possess a third person at the behest of his master, and indeed it seems that the chief characteristic of a *gohô*-possessed person was a violent shaking of the limbs and body, much as those people today who are said to be possessed by foxes, ghosts or Shinto deities indicate the entrance of the alien spirit by violently shaking their clasped hands. A story in the *Konjaku Monogatari* relates how a young serving boy of Fujiwara Morotada broke a priceless inkstone of his master's, and trembled with fear "like one possessed by a *gohô*."¹⁵ This capacity of the *gohô* to possess others seems to have been developed later into a deliberate cult, known as *gohô-no-inori*, 'gohô spells', whereby the *gohô* was induced by various incantations to enter into a

14. Ibid. p. 77.

15. *Konjaku Monogatari*, book 19. NBT, Vol. 9, p. 226.

medium, known sometimes as *gohôzane*, the stone or kernel of the *gohô*.

Yanagita Kunio mentions several of these rituals which seem to have been violent and strange. According to the *Sakuyôshi*, he writes, a 17th century guidebook to the western districts of Mimasaka province, *gohô* spells took place on July 7th at the Tendai temple of Iwamasan Honzanji. For the office of medium, the account runs, they selected a simple, ordinary person, and made him observe the rules of ceremonial purity for a certain period beforehand. When the day for the ceremony arrived all the priests assembled with the medium and began to recite spells. Suddenly the man leapt up and began to dance frenziedly, howling and roaring like a wild beast. Superhuman strength, enough to lift huge rocks, was endowed him. If there happened to be anyone in an unpurified state present—someone who had eaten fish, for example, or transgressed any of the other requirements for ceremonial purity—the possessed man would seize him and hurl him away ten paces. When the spells were over they offered him four buckets of water to drink, each of which contained about five gallons. When the man had drunk all four buckets he suddenly fell flat on the ground, and when he regained consciousness he remembered nothing of what had passed.

A similar rite, the *Sakuyôshi* also states, took place at another temple in the same district called Nijôsan Ryôsanji, which on one occasion ended in tragedy. A samurai in an unpurified state came to watch the proceedings, when suddenly the possessed medium leapt up and seized him. The samurai defended himself stoutly, but eventually in the course of the struggle both fell over a cliff and were killed. A pine tree marks the spot.¹⁶

In the temple of Kurama, not far from Kyoto, an even stranger *gohô* rite is recorded as having taken place as part of

16. Yanagita Kunio, "Gohô-dôji". *Kyôdo Kenkyû*, Vol. 2, No. 11, p. 642-3. These passages, together with other examples of the spells known as *yorikitô*, are also quoted in Nakayama Tarô's *Nihon Fujoshi*, p. 427. It is interesting to find that this *gohô* rite in Okayama-ken is still continued in a modified form. Yasutomi Nobuko in her article "Gohô-tobi Kembunki", *Okayama Minzoku*, No. 24, December 1956, describes how she saw the medium thrown into a trance by having drums banged and conch-shell horns blown close to his ears, and how in his state of trance he was sometimes as ferocious as a wild beast, sometimes as gentle as an angel dancing.

the well known *take-kiri* ceremony on June 20th. The *Miyako Zue*, an illustrated guidebook to Kyoto and its environs published about 1780 gives a cryptically short account of the proceedings. "After nightfall they take an ordinary man from the village and seat him in the main hall. The monks then by their magical powers pray him to death (*inorikorosu*) and then pray him to life again. Many strange things happen which are too secret to speak of."¹⁷ A fuller account is given in the journal *Kyôdo Shumi*:

"In the old days it is said that they used to make an offering of a man to the *gohô* deity, but later the rite was modified. At 8 o'clock in the evening they put out all the lights and made the priest who was to act as the offering (that is to say the medium) take up his seat in the hall. The other priests recited *dharani* and Shinto spells at the tops of their voices, and soon the priest was prayed to death. At this point the *gohô* deity was said to have received the essence of the man, and the rite ended. They put the apparently dead priest on a board and carried him behind the hall, where they revived him by dashing seven large buckets of cold water over him. Then, still naked, he would go to the *gohô* shrine to worship. This is called the rite of *gohô* possession. But nowadays such magical feats as praying a priest to death and praying him to life again no longer take place."¹⁸

It seems fairly clear that the original intention of these strange rites was to induce the *gohô* deity by means of spells to enter the body of a medium and through him to deliver message containing supernatural foreknowledge of the prospects of the weather and the crops during the coming year.

There are records of similar rites in other parts of Japan which indicate that these *gohô* spells were a version of a widespread cult whereby an entranced medium was made the channel for communication with a divine being, whose superhuman knowledge of things to come could be of benefit to the community.

17. *Miyako Meisho Zue. Nihon Zue Zenshû*, Vol. 7, p. 599.

18. Quoted in Nakayama, *op. cit.* p. 428-9. Also in Kida Teikichi's article "Tsukimono keitô ni kansuru minzokuteki kenkyû" in *Minzoku to Rekishi*, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 9-10.

When I visited the Kurama temple in the summer of 1961 and enquired about this strange rite, I found that no one in the temple seemed to have heard of it.

But in the case of the *gohô* spells the purpose of the rite—the supernatural message—seems to have been lost by the time the descriptions were written, and all that remained as indication of a divine possession was the violent and superhuman behaviour of the medium.¹⁹

But there is no mention in these passages that the *gohô* deity invoked by the spells is any longer the distinctive figure of the divine boy found in the medieval stories. He seems to have become merely an anonymous denizen of the supernatural world who, like other *kami*, can be called on to vouchsafe knowledge beyond the reach of ordinary men. We find a divine boy, certainly, appearing in various other roles and under other names throughout Japanese religion. The *chigo* or *hitotsumono*, for example, plays a significantly central part in many Shinto rites. The *chigo* is a living boy who at a festival represents the deity, indeed temporarily *becomes* the god himself in so far as he receives the feast of offerings which the parishioners have prepared for the deity's consumption. But it is unlikely that the boy's role in these rites is in any way connected with the figure of the *gohô* boy, rather it would seem to be a vestigial survival from the times when a boy was used as a medium (*yoriharawa*) for transmitting divine messages. Boys as well as women were apparently used for this purpose, and indeed Mr. Yanagita tells us how dreamy, hysterical boys were specially sought out for such a role and thrown into the required state of trance by loud and prolonged chanting of spells and playing on monotonous instruments. These practices were carried on openly and frequently until the police interfered, and the boy as he may be seen today in Shinto festivals, in his carefully purified state and ceremonial clothes, is no longer the channel for the god's messages, only the dumb embodiment of his presence.²⁰

19. Accounts of rites involving a *takusen* or divine message may be found in "*Inukaiyama no kami-oroshi*", in *Kyôdo Kenkyû*, Vol. 2, No. 1; the description of the *Kawazu-tobi gyôji* at Yoshino in the *Saikoku Sanjûsansho Meisho Zue*, book 6, p. 50; and Hori Ichirô, "Issegyônin to Toshi-uranai no Kamitsuke" in *Shûkyô Shûzoku no Seikatsu Kisoku*.

Violent behaviour under trance seems to be peculiar to male mediums in Japan, although one hears occasional stories of female mediums who eat superhuman quantities of food in that condition.

20. Yanagita Kunio, *Yama no Jinsei*, p. 49-50. Also *Minzokugaku Jiten*, article *yorimashi*.

But the figure of the supernatural boy as a saviour, servant and wayshower of holy men seems, like other symbols which inexplicably lose their power and meaning, to have disappeared from Japanese popular Buddhism by the end of the medieval period.²¹ Yet in this role the *gohô* boy is surely an example of the widespread symbol of the miraculous child. The Radiant Boy appearing spontaneously in visions,²² the Wonderful Boy endowed with superhuman strength and wisdom, the heroic child who solves riddles and overcomes giants and monsters, is an archetypal figure appearing in myths of many ages and traditions. The *puer aeternus*, in his fusion of weakness and strength, seems to represent the wholeness which comes from the union of opposites, the complete man who has transcended the

A supernatural boy was also found in certain districts in the north of Japan playing the part of a household familiar or guardian. The *zashiki-warashi* was apparently a child of five or six, with a red face and long straggling hair who was believed to be kept hidden in a back room of large and wealthy houses. So long as the child remained there the house would continue to prosper, but once let it leave the house and the fortunes of the family would fail. The child was often described as a heartless nuisance, plaguing and terrifying guests sleeping in the house. Yanagita associates it with various figures in Japanese folklore and popular religion, but not with the *gohô-dôji*, though the two figures have at least in common the element of guardianship. See Yanagita Kunio, *Ôshû no Zashiki-warashi no Hanashi*, Tokyo 1920.

21. It is interesting to note however that one of the causes ascribed to the Shimabara rising in 1637 was the prophesy, surreptitiously circulated through the countryside about 1614, that when five times five years had passed a divine boy would make his appearance and usher in a Christian revival in Japan. Though the crypto-Christians in Kyûshû must certainly have absorbed the Christian message of the divine saviour child, it seems likely that this also linked up with a symbol in their own tradition. See Charles Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan*, p. 378.

22. A Radiant Boy used to appear in Corby Castle in Cumberland, a 'mild and beautiful phantom' of a boy clothed in white with bright golden hair. In a house in Ireland too a 'beautiful naked boy surrounded by dazzling radiance' is said to have appeared to Lord Castlereagh. See Christina Hole, *Haunted England*, p. 120, and John Ingram, *The Haunted Homes and Family Traditions of Great Britain*, (1886), p. 48. The last of the three apparitions in Macbeth is 'a child crowned with a tree in its hand.'

limitations of ordinary consciousness.²³ The *gohô* boy who appears as a saviour, a bringer of healing, a magical means to men who have particularly set out on the path of the expansion of consciousness involved in sanctity, is surely this same miraculous child.

23. C.G. Jung and C. Kerenyi, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology; the Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, p. 115. Also C.G. Jung, *Answer to Job*, p. 157. Examples of the Wonderful Boy in Indian mythology may be found in Heinrich Zimmer's *Myth and Symbol in Indian Art and Civilization*.