

# Texts and Textures of Early Japanese Buddhism

FEMALE PATRONS,  
LAY SCRIBES, AND BUDDHIST SCRIPTURE  
IN EIGHTH-CENTURY JAPAN

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IN the latter half of 742, a scribe copied an obscure Buddhist philosophical work entitled the *Abhidharma Treatise of Discerning Myriad Things* (Skt. *Abhidharma prakaraṇapāda śāstra*, Ch. *Zhong shifen apitan lun*; hereafter, *Discerning Myriad Things*) at the request of Queen Consort Kōmyōshi (701–760). This essay will examine the twelfth and final scroll of the 742 manuscript to explore the devotional and ritual practice of copying Buddhist scripture in eighth-century Japan.<sup>1</sup> Whereas most scholarship on Buddhism in the Nara period (710–784) has concentrated on male monks and has regarded texts as abstract philosophical works, a study of *Discerning Myriad Things* will provide a more textured portrayal of Nara Buddhism by pointing out the importance of female patrons, lay scribes, and the materiality of Buddhist scripture. This essay will argue that the patron, scribe, and text form an

1. The manuscript is presently a part of Princeton University's East Asian Library and the Gest Collection, Gest Manuscript 220 (hereafter, GM 220). How it entered the Gest collection is still unclear, but it may have been acquired by Guion Moore Gest (1864–1948) around the turn of the twentieth century. See D. E. Perushek, "The Gest Research Library," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 48, no. 3 (1987): 239. Martin Hejdra has pointed out to me that Perushek's account may refer to either of Princeton's two Nara-period manuscripts, so it is not completely certain if GM 220 or another eighth-century manuscript (GM 221) was the one described by Perushek. If GM 220 is the manuscript mentioned by Perushek, then it would have been one of the earliest, if not the earliest, Asian acquisition by Gest. Personal correspondence, January 14, 2010.

interdependent network and that each constituent part must be understood in relation to the network as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

#### BUDDHISM AND SUTRA COPYING

Before turning to the manuscript itself, I will briefly outline the functions of scripture (sutras) in the Buddhist tradition. Although both scholars and Buddhist practitioners alike often approach texts as fountains of knowledge, other “non-hermeneutic” textual practices are central to Buddhism as well. By non-hermeneutic textual practices, I refer to those acts related to a text that do not pertain to understanding the semantic value of the written words on the page. These acts include ritually transcribing a sutra, chanting scripture at a funeral on behalf of the deceased, and worshiping a text as if it were the Buddha himself.<sup>3</sup> These practices represent the way most Japanese throughout history have approached scripture, in part because Buddhist sutras transmitted to Japan were written in a somewhat opaque form of classical Chinese that relied on a heavily Sanskritized lexicon.<sup>4</sup>

2. This method offers a middle ground between two influential approaches in book history. Some scholars, such as Robert Darnton, take a social historical approach that focuses on human actors and social networks to understand the influence of the book on society. Others, such as Nicolas Barker and Thomas Adams, advocate a book-centric, bibliographic approach that examines the influence humans have on the book. I will draw on both approaches to suggest that the human factors of patronage and scribal cultures functioned to create a ritually empowered manuscript and that the manuscript in turn altered the social and religious worlds of those involved in its production. For two classic representative views of each position, see Robert Darnton, “What Is Book History,” in *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990 [essay originally published in 1982]), 107–35, and Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker, “A New Model for the Study of the Book,” in *A Potencie of Life: Books in Society*, The Clark Lecture 1986–1987, ed. Nicolas Barker (London: British Library, 1993), 5–43. I should note that these essays are primarily concerned with the book in the time of printing, but the broad theoretical points about the relationship between person and text are also relevant for manuscript studies.

3. I borrow the term “non-hermeneutic” from Fabio Rambelli’s look at the performative nature of sacred texts in the Japanese Buddhist tradition. For an overview, see Fabio Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 88–128.

4. This phenomenon is by no means limited to Japanese Buddhism. To give just one example, Muslims in Indonesia recite the Koran regularly, even though many people are unable to understand the semantic value of the Arabic words on the page beyond proper names. See James Baker, “The Presence of the Name: Reading Scrip-

Sutras often encourage readers to engage in non-hermeneutic practices. For example, the *Scripture on the Wisdom of Practicing the Path* (Skt. *Aṣṭasāharsrikā prajñā pāramitā sūtra*, Ch. *Daoxing bore jing*) states:

If one wants to obtain Buddhahood, then one should study the *Perfection of Wisdom*, one should uphold [the scripture] and one should recite it. Even if one does not study, uphold, or recite it, good sons and good daughters should merely copy it and with the sutra scroll in hand they should take refuge in it, worship it, serve it, and offer it famous flowers, powdered incense, ointment incense, mixed incense, variegated silken fabric, floral canopies, and banners.<sup>5</sup>

Here, the worship and the reproduction of the text substitute for scholastic study. The *Lotus Sutra*, which was unquestionably one of the most important texts in the East Asian Buddhist tradition, similarly advocates a variety of non-hermeneutic practices:

Again, if there is a man who shall receive and keep, read and recite, explain, or copy in writing a single verse of the *Scripture of the Blossom of the Fine Dharma* [the *Lotus Sutra*], or who shall look with veneration on a roll of this scripture as if it were the Buddha himself, or who shall make to it sundry offerings of flower perfume, necklaces, powdered incense, perfumed paste, burnt incense, silk canopies and banners, garments, or music, or who shall even join palms in reverent worship of it, O Medicine King, be it known that this man or any other like him shall have already made offerings to ten myriads of millions of Buddhas in former time, and in those Buddhas' presence taken a great vow. It is by virtue of the great pity he shall have had for living beings that he shall be born here again as a human being.<sup>6</sup>

Statements such as these, which promise rewards to those who worship and reproduce scripture, appear frequently in canonical Buddhist

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ture in an Indonesian Village," in *The Ethnography of Reading*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 98–138.

5. T no. 224, 8:435b. For canonical Buddhist sources, I have relied upon versions found in the *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, edited by Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaiyoku (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932). In citing sources from this collection, I begin with a "T" followed by Taishō number, volume, page number, and register letter, in that order.

6. T no. 262, 9:30c. I have quoted the translation from Leon Hurvitz with minor revisions. See Leon Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 174.

texts.<sup>7</sup> These commandments for textual reproduction are not limited to the sphere of prescriptive statements. Buddhists throughout the world have taken sutras up on their offers by copying and venerating sacred texts, often with the hope of securing present and otherworldly benefits through these actions.<sup>8</sup>

Although the approach to the performative nature of sacred texts pioneered by Fabio Rambelli provides a helpful tool for moving beyond traditional scholastic apparatuses, the divisions between non-hermeneutic and hermeneutic practices are not as clear-cut as the model implies. First, as described above, the texts of the sutras themselves ask readers to perform non-hermeneutic acts. In this way, the content of the sutras shapes the way that scripture is perceived to function in the Buddhist tradition. Second, the relationship between non-hermeneutic and hermeneutic practices can be considered dynamic in that devotional acts helped facilitate scholasticism by providing monks with large quantities of carefully copied manuscripts. Third, as will be noted briefly below, particular texts were sometimes chosen because their content corresponded to the patron's expressed aims, although

7. I have cited two examples, but a large number of influential texts, such as the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, and many others, all call for their own reproduction. For a revisionist reading of popular Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle Buddhism) sutras that argues this literature promotes the paternal authority of the text itself, see Alan Cole, *Text as Father: Paternal Seductions in Early Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

8. Numerous tales from China and Japan describe some of the devotional practices East Asian Buddhists performed toward sutras. For China in general, see Robert Campany, "Notes on the Devotional Uses and Symbolic Functions of Sutra Texts as Depicted in Early Chinese Buddhist Miracle Tales and Hagiographies," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 14, no. 1 (1991): 28–72. For the *Lotus Sutra*, see Daniel B. Stevenson, "Buddhist Practice and the Lotus Sutra in China," in *Readings of the Lotus Sutra*, ed. Stephen F. Teiser and Jacqueline Stone (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 132–50. John Kieschnick focuses on tales about the *Diamond Sutra* and provides an overview of sutra copying in China in general; see Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 168–76. For an excellent study of the use of an apocryphal scripture in medieval China that takes into account the material qualities of the text and the devotional practices connected to it, see Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), esp. 87–162. For a study and translation of one collection of Japanese devotional tales about the *Lotus Sutra*, see Yoshiko Dykstra, *Miraculous Tales of the Lotus Sutra from Ancient Japan: The Dainihonkoku hokekyōkenki of Priest Chingen* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1983).

this motive does not apply to the copying of *Discerning Myriad Things*. Finally, patrons chose to copy texts based on notions of canonicity, which were shaped by concerns over organizing an exhaustive collection of authentic texts.

“DISCERNING MYRIAD THINGS” AND THE 5/1 CANON

The authorship of *Discerning Myriad Things* is attributed to the Indian Buddhist exegete Vasumitra in the second century C.E. In the fifth century, the Indian monks Guṇabhadra and Bodhiyaśas translated the text into Chinese while staying at the Waguan Monastery located in present-day Nanjing, China.<sup>9</sup> It is this Chinese version that was transmitted to Japan and copied in 742. The treatise itself had minimal influence on the development of the doctrinal tradition in Japan and was of little significance for the scholastic world in the time it was copied.<sup>10</sup> Although this fact supports the non-hermeneutic approach outlined above, we must still ask why someone would go to the trouble of copying an obscure philosophical treatise at all.

The immediate answer is that the text was transcribed as part of a project to copy the entire Buddhist canon.<sup>11</sup> Information in the colophon

9. A modern printed version of this treatise can be found in T no. 1541, 26:627a–692b. Although the text is traditionally attributed to Vasumitra, recent scholarship suggests that it was actually a compilation. See Charles Willemsen et al., *Sarvāstivāda Buddhist Scholasticism* (New York: Brill, 1997), 212–21. Also see Eric Frauwallner, *Studies in Abhidharma Literature and the Origins of Buddhist Philosophical Systems*, trans. Sophie Francis Kidd (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), 32–36. Both studies provide a good summary of the doctrinal content of *Discerning Myriad Things*. A seventh-century Chinese catalog records the translation process. See *Gu jin yi jing tu ji*, T no. 2151, 55:362b.

10. The study of abhidharmic literature in eighth-century Japan is described in Ishida Mosaku, *Shakyō yori mitaru Nara chō bukkyō no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Tōyō bunko, 1930 [1966 reprint]), 124–31. *Discerning Myriad Things* appears to have been largely ignored, even in the small world of abhidharmic studies in Nara Buddhism.

11. For the classic study of this canon copying project, see Minagawa Kan'ichi, “Kōmyōshi kōgō gangyō gogatsu tsuitachi kyō no shosha ni tsuite,” in *Nihon kodai shi ronshū*, ed. Sakamoto Tarō hakushi kanreki kinnenkai (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1962), 1:501–71. An important recent study that refines some of Minagawa's claims can be found in Yamashita Yumi, *Shōsoin monjo to shakyōjo no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1999), 402–62. I have relied heavily on these studies in my general discussion of the 5/1 canon throughout this essay. GM 220 is one of more than 900 extant manuscripts from the 5/1 canon. Most of the others are in the Imperial Household's Shōgozō collection, but many are also scattered in private collections around the world.

identifies GM 220 as a scroll from the well-known 5/1 canon, which was sponsored by Queen Consort Kōmyōshi, a great patron of Buddhism. The name derives from the 5/1/740 date of a dedicatory prayer that appears in the colophon of each manuscript. Recent scholarship estimates that 6,500 scrolls were copied as a part of the 5/1 project, making it the largest canon in Japan at that time.<sup>12</sup> To put this number in perspective, the sheets of paper used for composing a canon of this size would run around forty miles (sixty-five kilometers) end to end.<sup>13</sup>

The 5/1 date of the prayer is significant. In extant Buddhist manuscripts from the Nara period, the 1st, 8th, 15th, and 23rd represent the most common dates found in colophons. The same is true for the Dunhuang corpus of Buddhist sutras discovered in western China, which date between the fifth and eleventh centuries. Similarly, the fifth month appears more frequently than any other in colophons from both Dunhuang and Nara Japan. These similarities are not coincidental; the 1st, 8th, 15th, and 23rd accord with Buddhist festival days set aside for abstinential practices (Ch. *zhai*; Jp. *sai*). The 5/1 date was likely chosen because it represented the beginning of an extended period of abstinential practices (*chōsai*) in the fifth month, when people would confess sins, take on additional precepts, and invite monks to preach.<sup>14</sup> Buddhist texts describe how celestial kings would descend to earth on these days to observe human behavior, so people were en-

12. Yamashita, *Shōsoin monjo to shakyojō no kenkyū*, 422.

13. This figure is based on my calculation that an average sheet of paper is around 50 centimeters long and that each scroll is composed of roughly twenty sheets of paper.

14. For Dunhuang manuscripts, see Paul Magnin, “Pratique religieuse et manuscrits datés,” *Cahiers d’Extrême Asie* 3 (1987): 138–41. I provide charts of Nara period totals in my forthcoming dissertation. The precise identity of which festival days Buddhist patrons had in mind is unclear. For an overview of the extended months of abstinence, see Anthony Forte and Jacques May, “Chōsai,” in *Hōbōgirin: Dictionnaire encyclopédique du bouddhisme d’après les sources chinoises et japonaises*, ed. Jacques May (Tokyo: Maison franco japonaise, 1979), 392–407, and Harumi Ziegler, “The Sinification of Buddhism as Found in an Early Chinese Indigenous Sutra: A Study and Translation of the Fo-Shuo Ching-Tu San-Mei Ching (the Samādhi-Sutra on Liberation Through Purification Spoken By the Buddha)” (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 2001), 164–66. For the presence of monthly abstinent practices in early Japan, see Minowa Kenryō, “Nihon kodai ni okeru hachisaikai no juyō,” *Indogaku bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 48 (1999): 28–34. For these abstinent practices in medieval China, see Sylvie Hureau, “Buddhist Rituals,” in *Early Chinese Religion*, Part Two, *The Period of Division (220–589 A.D.)*, ed. John Lagerwey and Lü Pengzhi (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1213–30.

couraged to perform good deeds during these periods. It seems likely that the prayer was commissioned on this day with these abstintial and observational traditions in mind.

The year 740 was also carefully chosen. Sutra copying activities began long before the date of the prayer and continued after as well. Transcription of the 5/1 canon stopped rather suddenly just prior to the date when the prayer was issued and did not resume again until the following year.<sup>15</sup> The break in the middle of the project, therefore, likely had special ceremonial significance. The date in the colophon does not simply mark the beginning or end of the transcription. In fact, 740 corresponds to the year Kōmyōshi turned forty according to the traditional calendar, an occasion that prompted great celebration in early Japan.<sup>16</sup> From this evidence, it is likely that canon copying was stopped to perform a dedication ceremony on 5/1/740, a date that was important both in the Buddhist festival calendar and in Kōmyōshi's own life. Each manuscript of the canon, including *Discerning Myriad Things*, was marked to commemorate this event, even those transcribed after the fact.

The term that I translate as “canon” (Jpn. *issaikyō*) literally means all the scriptures, but in fact refers to a collection of texts deemed authentic. The definition of a canon in both China and Japan was largely shaped by catalogs compiled by Chinese monks beginning in the fourth century. These catalogs provided exhaustive bibliographical and biographical information on Buddhist texts and their translators. Perhaps more importantly, these catalogs also distinguished authentic texts from those that the catalogers deemed spurious or suspicious.<sup>17</sup>

15. Ogura suggests that the threat of the impending rebellion of Fujiwara no Hitotsugu (d. 740) may have contributed to the prayer being issued on 5/1/740. See Ogura Shigeji, “Gogatsu tsuitachi ganmon sakusei no haikai,” in *Nihon ritsuryōsei no tenkai*, ed. Sasayama Haruo (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2003), 93–95. The political events he cites, however, post-date the prayer by several months, and he presents no evidence that suggests Kōmyōshi would have been aware of unrest at this time.

16. These celebrations of the fortieth year, known in Japanese as *shijū no ga*, became particularly prominent from the tenth century on, but I have found reference to the practice in eighth- and ninth-century literary works. For example, see *Kaifusō*, *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* 69 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1964), 127 and 171 [poems 64 and 107] and *Seireishū*, *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* 71 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1965), 214–16.

17. For an overview of the genre of Chinese Buddhist catalogs, see Kyoko Tokuno, “The Evaluation of Indigenous Scriptures in Chinese Buddhist Bibliographical Catalogues,” in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. Robert E. Buswell (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), 31–61.

The 5/1 canon's shape was based upon a Chinese catalog compiled in 730 by Zhisheng (669–740), known as the *Record of Śakyamuni's Teachings* [compiled] during the Kaiyuan Era (Ch. *Kaiyuan shijiao lu*; hereafter *Kaiyuan Catalog*). This catalog initially recorded the holdings of a monastic library but quickly came to serve as an official register that dictated the contents of state-sponsored canon copying projects in China. The *Kaiyuan Catalog* was imported to Japan by the Japanese monk Genbō (d. 746) in 735, a mere five years after its compilation. From 8/736, this catalog became the basis for the 5/1 canon, which had been initiated a few years earlier.

The contents and structure of the catalog partially explain why *Discerning Myriad Things* was copied at all. In addition to deeming texts canonical or spurious, the *Kaiyuan Catalog* imposes a classification scheme on Buddhist scripture. The final section of the *Kaiyuan Catalog* divides canonical texts into three major categories: Greater Vehicle (Mahāyāna), Lesser Vehicle (Hinayāna), and Biographies and Accounts of Sages and Worthies. The first two categories are further divided into three subheadings: scripture (Skt. *sūtra*), monastic codes (Skt. *vinaya*), and treatises (Skt. *śāstra*). The *Kaiyuan Catalog* lists *Discerning Myriad Things* as a Lesser Vehicle Treatise.<sup>18</sup> This classification is repeated in a scriptorium document that records texts copied for the 5/1 canon.<sup>19</sup> GM 220 was copied, therefore, because it corresponded to standards established in Chinese catalogs adopted by Kōmyōshi and other officials at the scriptorium.<sup>20</sup>

18. *Kaiyuan shijiao lu*, T no. 2154, 55:720a.

19. DNK 9:391–92 (ZSBS 27). For all eighth-century documents from the collection held at the imperial treasure house known as the Shōsōin, I will first give the volume number and page numbers of the print versions found in *Dai Nihon komonjo* (DNK) and then give the facsimile version in parentheses. I have tried to consult the facsimile version whenever possible. In citing the facsimile version, I follow the arrangement introduced by late nineteenth-century compilers, which are as follows: *Seishū* (ss), *Zokushū* (zs), *Zokushū kōshū* (ZSKS), *Zokushū besshū* (ZSBS), *Jinkai* (JK), and *Zokuzokushū* (Zzs). The facsimiles for all but the Zzs can be found in *Shōsōin komonjo ein shūsei*, ed. Kunaichō Shōsōin jimusho (Tokyo: Yagi shoten, 1988–). For the history of how this complicated and often unwieldy system was created, see William Wayne Farris, “Pieces in a Puzzle: Changing Approaches to the Shōsōin Documents,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 62, no. 4 (2007): 409–10. For the most detailed and up-to-date discussion of the history of the collection, see Sakaehara Towao, *Shōsōin monjo nyūmon* (Tokyo: Kadokawa gakugei shuppan, 2011), esp. 21–80.

20. Kōmyōshi was ultimately unsuccessful in obtaining all the canonical texts in the *Kaiyuan Catalog* for her 5/1 canon, as a significant number of sutras were still unavail-



Although individual monks and Buddhist lay associations occasionally sponsored canon copying projects in Nara Japan, the vast majority of such efforts were initiated by the royal family or took place through official sutra copying institutions tied to the Queen Consort's Palace Agency (Jpn. *kōgō gūshiki*) and the Imperial Palace (Jpn. *dairi*). The 5/1 canon is particularly significant when compared with other private projects because it was imperially sanctioned and would serve as a standard for future canons. Later projects used the 5/1 manuscripts as exemplars for copying and as additional witnesses for proofreading. Moreover, monks performed recitations and lectures based on the manuscripts of the 5/1 canon on behalf of the imperial family.<sup>21</sup> In this way, GM 220 would play a central role in later canon copying projects and other ritual activities after it was transcribed. In creating a definitive and unsurpassed collection of Buddhist texts that would be referred to throughout the Nara period, Kōmyōshi visibly established herself as the premier patron of Buddhism in the archipelago.

#### FEMALE PATRONAGE AND PRAYER

The 5/1 canon was deeply connected to Kōmyōshi's own religious and political goals. She was an active sponsor of Buddhist projects, including sutra copying and temple construction.<sup>22</sup> She outlines her explicit reasons for copying the canon in a dedicatory prayer found in colophons that are appended to each manuscript. The full text of the prayer is as follows:

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able in Japan. At the same time, the 5/1 canon contained a variety of texts deemed non-canonical by the *Kaiyuan Catalog*. In this way, the canon in Nara Japan took on a form unique from Chinese canons. For an overview of the relationship between the *Kaiyuan Catalog* and the 5/1 canon, see Kamikawa Michio, *Nihon chūsei Bukkyō shiryōron* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2008), 110–14; Miyazaki Kenji, *Nihon kodai no shakyō to shakai* (Tokyo: Hanawa shobō, 2006), 367–90; Yamashita Yumi, “Gogatsu tsuitachikyō ‘sōshutsu’ no shiteki igi,” *Shōsoin monjo kenkyū* 6 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1999), 27–68; idem, “Nihon kodai kokka ni okeru issaikyō to taigai ishiki,” *Rekishi hyōron* 586, no. 2 (1999): 31–44; idem, “Gogatsu tsuitachikyō ni okeru besshō, gigi, rokugaikyō no shosha ni tsuite,” *Ichidai Nihonshi* 3 (2000): 44–73.

21. See Yamashita, *Shōsoin monjo to shakyōjo no kenkyū*, 439–53.

22. For an English-language biography of Kōmyōshi that focuses on her strong Buddhist ancestry, see Mikoshihara Daisuke, “Empress Kōmyōshi's Buddhist Faith: Her Role in Founding the State Convent and Temple System,” in *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*, ed. Barbara Ruch (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), 21–37.

Offered by Queen Consort Kōmyōshi of the Fujiwara clan on behalf of her honorable deceased father, posthumously granted upper first rank, Great Minister of State, and her honorable deceased mother from the Tachibana clan, posthumously granted lower first rank. [Kōmyōshi] reverently [had] the canon copied including the scripture, the treatises, and the monastic codes. The ornamentation has already been completed. [Kōmyōshi] humbly prays that by relying on superior [karmic] causes, she will offer [her parents] mysterious aid to help them. May they take eternal shelter at the Bodhi tree and take the long journey across the ford of *prajñā* [wisdom]. Next, [Kōmyōshi] prays that ever expanding fortune and longevity be bestowed upward upon the sagely court and that loyalty and virtue extend downward to all government officials. Next, Kōmyōshi herself utters this vow to broadly save those sinking [in the sea of suffering], to diligently remove afflictive hindrances, to subtly investigate all dharmas, and to quickly achieve *bodhi* [awakening]. Now, may the transmission of the flame never be exhausted and may [the Buddha's teachings] spread throughout the entire realm. May the name [of the Buddha] be heard and may the scrolls be upheld. May fortune be obtained and disaster averted. May all deluded beings gather and take refuge in the path to awakening.

—Recorded on the First Day of the Fifth month in Tenpyō 12 [740]<sup>23</sup>

The prayer begins by stating that the scripture was copied on behalf of Kōmyōshi's deceased parents. As noted above, sutra copying was thought to create merit or blessings that could then be transferred to others at the discretion of the patron. Here, Kōmyōshi prays that her parents will be able to realize the wisdom of the Buddha and thus escape the cycle of birth and death. Sutras were frequently copied on behalf of deceased ancestors in the Nara period.<sup>24</sup> Numerous stories from this time describe how the power of sutra copying could rescue departed loved ones suffering in Buddhist hells.

Next, Kōmyōshi offered her prayers to the sagely court, a term that

23. A published print version of this prayer can be found in Takeuchi Rizō, ed., *Nara ibun* (Tokyo: Tōkyōdō, 1962), 616. A space appears in the manuscript before the term "sagely court" and before the names of her parents to designate respect. Manuscripts from this period often leave spaces open before the names of social superiors or the deceased.

24. For a good English-language overview of the importance of memorializing the dead in early Japanese Buddhism, see Lori Meeks, "Chūgūji and Female Monasticism in the Age of Shōtoku," in *Hōryūji Reconsidered*, ed. Dorothy Wong (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 237–62.

衆事高顯卷第十二

皇唐藤原氏光明子奉為

尊考贈正一位太政大臣府君尊妣贈  
從一位橘氏太夫人敬西一切經論  
及律莊藏既了伏願憑斯勝日奉  
資宜助永庇菩提之樹長遊般  
若之律又願上奉 聖朝恒延  
福壽下及寮采共盡忠節又光  
明子自蒙誓言和齋沈論勤除煩障  
妙窮諸法早契菩提乃至傳燈無  
窮流布天下聞名持卷獲福消災  
一切迷方會歸覺路

天平七年正月日記

Dedicatory prayer at the end of scroll twelve of *Discerning Myriad Things* (742). Gest Manuscript 220, East Asian Library, Princeton University.

refers to the present reigning emperor. The purpose of this section is twofold. First, it asks for the longevity and prosperity of the emperor. Second, it prays for a loyal and virtuous bureaucracy. This prayer likely responded to the political realities of Nara Japan. Kōmyōshi and her husband, Emperor Shōmu, found themselves in a precarious political position with no male heir. Numerous factions vied for power at the court throughout the century. In this unstable political climate, Kōmyōshi's prayers for social order and for Shōmu's longevity responded to genuine fears over the future of her family and the throne. Of course, there is also a personal element in this prayer for her husband that must not be overlooked.

In asking for benefits to be bestowed on deceased ancestors and the throne, Kōmyōshi participated in a widely shared discursive tradition. Prayers of this nature were common and were performed by diverse members of society in eighth-century Japan. As the Nara period witnessed the early development of state institutions alongside bitter rebellions and rampant disease, prayers intended to bring salvation to the departed and to maintain social order addressed issues that reflected all too familiar realities for courtiers and provincials alike. The first half of the prayer shows that the transcription of the manuscript was commissioned for reasons far removed from scholarly exegesis.

The language used in the next section represents a shift from a prayer (Jpn. *gan/negau*) to a vow (Jpn. *sei/chikau*). This difference is one of voice. In the earlier sections, Kōmyōshi asked for blessings to be bestowed on others, but the vow section describes actions that she promised to take up herself. Although Buddhists sometimes use the terms I have translated as prayer and vow interchangeably, continental commentaries describe some key differences between the two. According to these commentaries, vows are distinct from prayers in that they are more sincere and closer to Bodhisattva conduct.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, an examination of the structure of Kōmyōshi's vow shows this to be the case. Her vow is broken into four sections, each phrased with four characters. Each section corresponds to one of the four vows a person takes when starting on the Bodhisattva path. The term "Bodhisattva" literally means "awakening being" and refers to those who strive for full enlightenment equal to that of the Buddha. In continental sources, the four universal Bodhisattva vows (Ch. *si hong seiyuan*, Jpn. *shiguzeigan*) are: (1) to save all sentient beings, (2) to end all afflictions, (3) to learn all the teachings, and (4) to become a Buddha.<sup>26</sup>

25. For example, see Fazang's *Huayanjing tanxuan ji*, T no. 1733, 35:134b, and Gyeongheung's *Muryangsugyeong yeon uisul munchan*, T no. 1748, 37:0151a.

26. The exact wording of the Bodhisattva vows varies from text to text. Kōmyōshi's vow is not a direct quotation from any canonical sutra but uses original language composed in the pattern of the four universal Bodhisattva vows. For some classic and influential examples of the four universal vows, see *Dasheng bensheng xindi guan jing*, T no. 159, 3:325b; *Mohe zhiguan*, T no. 1911, 46:56a; and *Shichan boluomi cidi famen*, T no. 1916, 46:476b. The standard wording appears to have originated with Zhiyi, the author of the *Mohe zhiguan* and *Shichan boluomi cidi famen*. I have found no evidence that Zhiyi's writings on the four vows were extant in Japan when Kōmyōshi's prayer was written, but the idea was widespread on the continent. Kōmyōshi may have learned

Kōmyōshi uses slightly different wording, but her vow “to broadly save those sinking [in the sea of suffering], to diligently remove afflictive hindrances, to subtly investigate all dharmas, and to quickly achieve *bodhi*” mirrors the four vows taken by Bodhisattvas. Again, the date of the prayer is significant. In China at this time, people often performed Bodhisattva ordination ceremonies on abstinential days.<sup>27</sup> It is likely that Kōmyōshi similarly chose 5/1 as an auspicious day for entering the Bodhisattva path. Here, Kōmyōshi did not simply pray for others but copied the text as a way to advance in her own Buddhist practice. As Stephen Berkwitz has noted, “writing a text came to be seen as a method by which one could transform oneself into a more virtuous and fortunate being.”<sup>28</sup> Although Kōmyōshi did not transcribe the text herself, her commissioning of the canon functioned as a means to cultivate herself and advance on the Bodhisattva path.<sup>29</sup> Patronage itself represented an ethical practice.<sup>30</sup>

The gender implications of this Bodhisattva vow are significant for assessing the role of women in early Japanese Buddhism. As Jan Nattier has noted, many canonical texts limit the Bodhisattva path to “a few good men,” effectively closing off the possibility of full Buddhahood for women.<sup>31</sup> Despite the numerous textual prescriptions that suggest it was necessary to abandon one’s female body and take on male gender in order to achieve Buddhahood, many women throughout Buddhist history ignored this doctrinal misogyny and aspired toward Buddhism’s

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of this particular formulation from a monk such as Genbō, who spent time in China and then became prominent at court.

27. Hureau, “Buddhist Rituals,” 1227–30.

28. Stephen Berkwitz, “Materiality and Merit in Sri Lankan Buddhist Manuscripts,” in *Buddhist Manuscript Cultures: Knowledge, Ritual, and Art*, ed. Stephen C. Berkwitz, Juliane Schober, and Claudia Brown (London: Routledge, 2009), 44.

29. It appears that Kōmyōshi was successful in her goal in the eyes of later generations, as she came to be seen as a Bodhisattva and was worshiped by the nuns at Hokke-ji temple. See Lori Meeks, *Hokkeji and the Reemergence of Female Monastic Orders in Premodern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010), esp. 33–48.

30. In calling this an ethical practice, I am referring specifically to the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics. The relationship between Buddhism and Aristotelian ethics has been explored at length in Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1992), esp. 193–229.

31. Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to the Inquiry of Ugra (Ugraparipṛchā)* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003), 96–102.

most lofty goals. Kōmyōshi in particular seems to have been attracted to the concept of Bodhisattvas appearing as women; she commissioned the transcription of other sutras that feature Bodhisattvas manifesting themselves in female form. Kōmyōshi's prayer, however, does not mention gender at all and simply expresses her religious aspirations. This may represent feigned ignorance; recent scholarship suggests that she was likely aware of the numerous texts denying the possibility of women achieving Buddhahood. Kōmyōshi talked past the discriminatory language of these texts to achieve her goals.<sup>32</sup> She was not alone. Her close friend Fujiwara Bunin also aspired to “surely achieve the superior fruit”—a reference to enlightenment—in a prayer she affixed to the manuscripts of a canon that she sponsored.<sup>33</sup>

The final portion of the prayer contains two concluding sections. The first calls for the teachings to be transmitted widely and upheld in order to prevent disaster and to bring fortune. Kōmyōshi herself contributed to the propagation of Buddhism by copying the canon, which would in turn be copied by others. Again, these prayers responded to real concerns, particularly as this was a time when epidemics raged to the extent that some scholars estimate a third of the population was decimated by smallpox.<sup>34</sup> The final eight characters pray for all sentient beings to achieve awakening. Many texts in this liturgical mode throughout Asia end with similar benedictions for universal salvation.

32. The idea that women must first become men before achieving Buddhahood is most dramatically portrayed in the Devadatta chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. Recent research suggests that this doctrine and the Devadatta chapter as a whole had limited influence in early Japanese Buddhism, although it did become more prominent in later periods. In English, see Yoshida Kazuhiko, “The Enlightenment of the Dragon King’s Daughter in *The Lotus Sutra*,” in *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*, ed. Barbara Ruch, translated and adapted by Margaret H. Childs (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), 297–324. In Japanese, Katsuura Noriko provides a useful overview of scholarship on the Devadatta chapter. She also looks at other sutra copying projects sponsored by Kōmyōshi to suggest that she was aware of misogynist texts that deny the possibility of achieving Buddhahood in female form, but at the same time took interest in the concept that Bodhisattvas could appear as women. See Katsuura Noriko, *Nihon kodai no sōni to shakai* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2000), 269–80.

33. *Nara ibun*, 616.

34. See William Wayne Farris, *Population, Disease, and Land in Early Japan*, 645–900 (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1985), 50–73.

Prayer remains a topic that is thoroughly under-theorized in the study of religion, but a common feature in definitions of prayer focuses on its orality.<sup>35</sup> This is not the case for the 5/1 prayer, which was inscribed on paper and has a decidedly material character.<sup>36</sup> Kōmyōshi's prayer and other texts like it are part of a genre called *ganmon* in eighth-century Japanese sources. These texts encompass a wide variety of forms, ranging from requests or wishes to vows. Kōmyōshi's prayer is recorded on each manuscript copied for the 5/1 canon. For pre-740 texts, it was pasted on the ends of already completed manuscripts. The process of affixing prayers is called *kechigan* in eighth-century scriptorium documents, a term that literally means tied or bound prayers and implies that a close bond or connection was formed between the prayer and the manuscript.

For post-5/1/740 manuscripts, the prayer was copied at the same time as the rest of the text. Through documentary records, GM 220 can be accurately dated to 742, so the prayer would have been written at the time the manuscript was produced and was transcribed by the copyist responsible for *Discerning Myriad Things*. The fact that the prayer was repeatedly transcribed onto new manuscripts that post-date the "original" colophon date suggests that the dedication of merit was reenacted with each copy. Each act of transcription was a performance of the prayer that would ensure the merit created in copying the text would be bestowed in accord with Kōmyōshi's wishes.

These material qualities force us to consider the economics of prayer and patronage in eighth-century Japan. As I will describe in detail in the next section, copying sutras, particularly on the scale of a canon, required significant manpower, material resources, and institutional organization. Even a modest copying project would demand access to

35. For example, see Marcel Mauss, *On Prayer*, ed. W. S. F. Pickering (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), 56. This work, originally entitled "La priere" and first published in French in 1909, was intended to be part of Mauss's longer, but never completed doctoral thesis.

36. This is not to say that the 5/1 prayer was never recited orally. However, the continued reproduction of the prayer on thousands of manuscripts transcribed after the original 5/1/740 date suggests that the writing of the prayer itself constituted a dedication of merit.

an exemplar text; material goods such as paper, glue, ink, and brushes; and laborers who were knowledgeable in methods of scroll assembly and transcription. Moreover, many prayers, including Kōmyōshi's, employed Chinese literary devices such as carefully constructed parallel prose. The ability to write in this manner required a great deal of erudition and access to literary texts. Composing prayers, therefore, required material, human, and literary resources.<sup>37</sup>

In this context, prayer cannot be seen as a private activity equally available to all. Rather, certain members of society would have had more resources at their disposal to allow them to perform prayers and achieve their spiritual goals. Kōmyōshi, for example, copied the canon multiple times and constructed numerous temples on behalf of her parents. Many of these activities would have been beyond the means of a large portion of the population. To some extent, the ability to pray was mediated by material and literary abilities.

At the same time, merit, which is the basic unit bestowed on others in prayer, was only vaguely quantified. In some tales, officials in the underworld weigh out good deeds versus bad deeds on scales, but explicit values are rarely assigned to specific practices.<sup>38</sup> Kōmyōshi would have presumably had more access to good deeds based on her material wealth, but limited means did not stop members from other segments of society from banding together to engage in merit-making activities. In fact, individuals frequently pooled their resources to copy texts on

37. Although some material resources were absolutely necessary for performing any type of merit-making ritual, simple prayers could be composed with minimal literacy. The most basic prayers follow the set form of “on behalf of [name of beneficiary]” and could be composed by someone with little training in classical Chinese. Many prayers, however, employ sophisticated allusions and syntactical structures. It seems reasonable to assume that at least a part of the population would value these literary prayers more highly and that there was some cultural capital at stake in composing prayer.

38. There are a few tales in the early ninth-century collection *Records of the Numinous and Strange from Japan* (*Nihon ryōiki*) that suggest some vaguely defined value was applied to merit making. In one story, copies of sutras are weighed in purgatory at a rate of one iron weight for an undedicated copy and two iron weights for a dedicated copy. For this tale, see *Nihon ryōiki*, *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikai* 30 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1996), 159–61 [tale 3:22]. In English, see Kyoko Nakamura, trans., *Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition: The Nihon ryōiki of the Monk Kyōkai* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 250–51. In another tale, the officials in purgatory first weigh the number of a man's sins against the number of scrolls copied and then against the number of characters copied. See *Nihon ryōiki*, 185–86 [tale 3:37], and Nakamura, *Miraculous Stories*, 274–75.



behalf of deceased ancestors or to secure blessings for themselves.<sup>39</sup> It may have been impossible for a local Buddhist devotee to keep up with the Kōmyōshis of the world, but the ambiguous way that merit functioned allowed many people with few means to participate in the religious economy of Nara Japan.

#### MATERIAL RESOURCES AND THE PROCESS OF PRODUCTION

The materiality of Kōmyōshi's prayer reminds us to consider the process of a manuscript's production. Transcribing the 6,500 scrolls of the 5/1 canon was an impressive feat. Altogether, it took Kōmyōshi and her employees at the Office of Sutra Transcription (Jpn. *shakyōjo*), which was the bureau that handled Kōmyōshi's sutra copying, a total of twenty-four years to complete the project. In short, the 5/1 canon required substantial human and material resources as well as strong organizational and administrative skills.

In order to transcribe scripture, one would first need to secure an original exemplar from which to copy. Prior to the late seventh century, Buddhism had little textual basis in Japan. Many texts had yet to be imported from the continent, and the texts that had been imported were available in limited number. Part of the reason the 5/1 canon took so long to complete was that many of the texts deemed canonical by Chinese catalogs were either not extant in Japan or difficult to find. Documents from the imperial treasure house known as the Shōsōin suggest that GM 220 was copied from a manuscript brought to Japan from China by the monk Dōshō (629–700) in the late seventh century.<sup>40</sup> Many other texts copied in the 5/1 canon were also based on manuscripts recently imported from the continent.

Once the source text was acquired, the paper needed to be prepared for copying.<sup>41</sup> The Office of Sutra Transcription did not produce its

39. See Kitō Kiyooki, *Nihon kodai toshiron josetsu* (Tokyo: Hōsei daigaku shuppankyoku, 1977), 128–51.

40. DNK 8:110–12 (ZSS 28:31). This document records sutras borrowed for copying the 5/1 canon. The sutras listed are from the chapel known as Zen'in, which is where Dōshō stored the manuscripts he imported from China. For this reason, it is highly likely that GM 220 is based on a copy that Dōshō imported directly from the continent.

41. In the following discussion of the process for making manuscripts, I have relied heavily on the work of Kurihara Haruo, "Sōron," in *Nara chō shakyō*, ed. Nara kokuritsu hakubutsukan (Nara: Nara kokuritsu hakubutsukan, 1983), 6–12, and idem,

own paper. Instead, paper was usually allotted from other governmental agencies and was occasionally bought at city markets.<sup>42</sup> Paper was made of a variety of natural fibers, but paper mulberry was the most common material used for sutra manuscripts.<sup>43</sup> After the paper was sent to the scriptorium in wooden boxes, single sheets would be glued together by special workers known as “assemblers” (Jpn. *sōkō* or *sō’ō*). These workers would use a soy-based starch glue to connect single sheets into a long scroll close to 10 meters in length. In some cases, the assemblers would create scrolls consisting of the same number of sheets used for the source text, but in other cases they would simply start with twenty sheets and cut or add as necessary. With a few exceptions, the fourteen sheets<sup>44</sup> of GM 220 are each roughly 45

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“Nara chō shakyō no seisaku tejun,” in *Zoku Nihon kodaishi ronshō*, ed. Sakamoto Tarō hakushi koki kinenkai (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1972), 633–52. Also see Sakae-hara Towao, “Shōsōin monjo no sekai,” in *Kodai Nihon moji no aru fūkei*, ed. Kokuritsu rekishi minzoku hakubutsukan (Tokyo: Asahi shinbun, 2002), 142–81.

42. The paper came from a staggering number of sources. The various means through which the Office of Sutra Transcription secured paper is detailed in Naka Yōko, “Shakyō yōshi no nyūshu keiro ni tsuite,” *Shiron* 33 (1980): 19–47.

43. It is impossible to determine the specific type of plant fibers used for GM 220 without scientific testing. For a useful overview of the paper found in eighth-century sutra manuscripts and other documents, see Shōsōin jimusho, ed., *Shōsōin no kami* (Tokyo: Nihon keizai shinbunsha, 1970). Some of the conclusions of this study should be viewed cautiously, as many of the findings have been called into question by subsequent research. More recent data can be found in a special issue of the *Bulletin of the Shōsōin Treasure House (Shōsōin kiyō)*. See *Shōsōin kiyō* 32 (2010). In English, see Regina Belard, “The May 1st Sutra: Conservation of a Nara Period Handscroll,” *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 33, no. 1 (2010): 95–96.

44. An itemized document that records the number of sheets per scroll suggests that GM 220 originally consisted of twenty-five sheets, but the first eleven sheets have been lost. See DNK 8:94 (zsz 1:2). It is clear that this is not simply a scribal error in the document, as there is also a gap in the content between GM 220 and the previous scroll in the sutra, which is extant in the Imperial Household’s Shōgozō collection. The gap covers three and two-thirds pages in the modern printed edition of the Taishō. The original ending point of scroll eleven can be found at T no. 1541, 26:685a in the modern printed edition, and scroll twelve picks up at T no. 1541, 26:688c. Each page in the modern edition is broken up into three registers of a, b, and c, with each register preserving the length of a page, so this textual gap corresponds to the discrepancy between GM 220 and the documentary record. Because GM 220 starts cleanly at the beginning of a chapter, it seems possible that the text was cut at a later time to start at this new section. This treatment suggests that although *Discerning Myriad Things* was of relatively little scholastic importance, it was still used and read on occasion.

衆事分阿毗曇擇品第八

色法十一界十一入一陰攝八智知除知他  
心智及滅智六識識欲色二界一切遍使使  
及備斷使使即色法十界十一入一陰攝非智  
知五識識非使使

非色法八界二入四陰攝十智知一識識一  
切使使即非色法七界一入四陰攝二智知  
謂知他心智及滅智非識識无色界一切欲  
色二界二身見苦集斷不一切遍使使

可見法一界一入十陰攝七智知除知他心  
智及滅道智二識識欲色二界一切遍使使  
及備斷使使即可見法一界一入非陰攝非  
智知一識識非使使

不可見法十七界十一入五陰攝十智知五  
識識一切使使即不可見法十七界十一入四  
陰攝三智知謂知他心智及滅道智四謂謂  
无色界一切欲色二界二身見苦集斷不

The beginning of GM 220, showing that preceding sheets were removed, perhaps to start the scroll at the beginning of a chapter.

centimeters wide and 26.2 centimeters high.<sup>45</sup> After the paper was glued together, assemblers beat (Jpn. *utsu*) the paper. This process, which is still poorly understood, likely gave the paper a luster and enabled it to better receive ink.<sup>46</sup>

45. All of the sheets of paper fall within a range of 44–46 centimeters, except sheets one and eight. The first sheet is only 28.5 centimeters long, probably because it was cut at a later date, as outlined in note 44. As I will discuss below, the eighth sheet was likely removed and replaced during the initial transcription process, which accounts for its smaller size. Other than these exceptions, the average sheet length is 45.3 centimeters.

46. In Japanese, see Sugimoto Kazuki, *Nihon kodai monjo no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2001), 73–79. For an English-language assessment, see Belard, “The May 1st Sutra,” 94–95.

Next, the paper would be lined using a deer-hair brush. Stiff deer hair was ideal for creating the fine margin lines characteristic of Nara manuscripts.<sup>47</sup> First, horizontal lines would be drawn from left to right across the top and bottom. These margin lines run the length of the scroll. In GM 220, they are placed 3.3 centimeters from the top and bottom of the paper. Next, vertical lines would be drawn from the top margin to the bottom margin. These lines form columns measuring 1.85 centimeters in width.<sup>48</sup> Again, the regularity of the margins and the fine brushwork reveal the precision of the assemblers. Finally, the assembler would add a half-sized sheet of paper and roller to the right-hand side of the scroll; the paper would function as a temporary cover during the copying process. These would be removed when the transcription was complete.<sup>49</sup>

After the paper was prepared in this manner by the assembler, the scroll would be returned to an administrator and then passed to a scribe who would begin transcribing the text. Documents from the Office of Sutra Transcription make it possible to identify the copyist of *Discerning Myriad Things* as Karakuni no Hitonari.<sup>50</sup> Hitonari served in various roles at the scriptorium, including proofreading texts, transcribing sutras, and performing administrative tasks. He would have used a rabbit-hair brush to copy the text, because it was softer than deer hair and better suited for calligraphy. Sutra copyists would transcribe seventeen characters in each vertical column, progressing from right to left. The average scribe copied 8.6 sheets a day, with the fastest scribes copying more than 13 sheets. This rate of production

47. Some sort of device was used to ensure that the lines were straight, but no records remain that describe what type of tool this may have been.

48. The fact that the top and bottom lines are almost perfectly aligned from one sheet to the next is one of the keys for showing that the sheets were first glued together and then lined. In GM 220, there is a place between sheets eight and nine where the lines do not match up. I will discuss this anomaly in greater detail below, but it is related to the shorter size of sheet eight. Overall, a total of twenty-four lines per sheet seems to have been the standard, but some sheets in *Discerning Myriad Things* contain twenty-three or even twenty-two lines.

49. Sugimoto Kazuki, *Nihon kodai monjo no kenkyū*, 141–49.

50. Several clues allow us to identify the scribe. The most convincing pieces of evidence are the documents that connect Hitonari to GM 220. For these see DNK 8:94 and 112 (ZS 1:2 and 28:31). In addition, the slightly idiosyncratic calligraphy matches Hitonari's hand, and his name appears on the verso of other extant scrolls of *Discerning Myriad Things* found in the imperial Shōgozō collection.

corresponds to a total of 4,000 to 6,000 characters.<sup>51</sup> There was incentive to copy quickly—Hitonari was paid for his work by the sheet.<sup>52</sup>

He would start his workday at sunrise and complete daytime and evening shifts. Records indicate that Hitonari often labored more than twenty-eight days and nights a month, sometimes working on every day of the month.<sup>53</sup> Scribes copied sutras at a low table while seated on the floor. Long hours in this position led some to submit complaints about health problems.<sup>54</sup> Although scribes sometimes used guides to space the characters evenly, the quality of the calligraphy in the manuscript suggests that Hitonari wrote freely without the use of any aids for spacing.<sup>55</sup>

Speed was important, but there was also great incentive for careful copying. Designated proofreaders would check each manuscript twice against the exemplar after the sutra was transcribed,<sup>56</sup> record the mistakes, and pass the paper back to the scribe for corrections. Regulations stipulated that scribes be docked pay for each mistake. When scribes noticed errors on their own, they would often make corrections by erasing their mistakes and rewriting them. In some cases, when the mistakes were severe, the scribe would remove the entire page and exchange it for a new sheet. This is probably the case for sheet eight of GM 220, where the margins do not align. Documentary records show that Hitonari removed two sheets while copying the twelve scrolls that constitute this text.<sup>57</sup>

51. I take this data from the chart in Sakaehara Towao, “Heijōkyō jūmin no seikatsushi,” in *Tōjō no seitai*, ed. Kishi Toshio (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1987), 203. As Yamada Hideo has noted, scribal production is significantly more intense than the sutra copying required of monks as punishment for violating the monastic code. Monks were forced to copy five sheets a day as a penalty for their transgressions. Yamada Hideo, “Shakyōjo no fuse ni tsuite,” *Nihon rekishi* 208 (1965): 4–5.

52. For the pay records, see DNK 8:94, 101, and 158–59 (ZS 1:2 and 3:2).

53. DNK 7:411–18 (ZS 24:5).

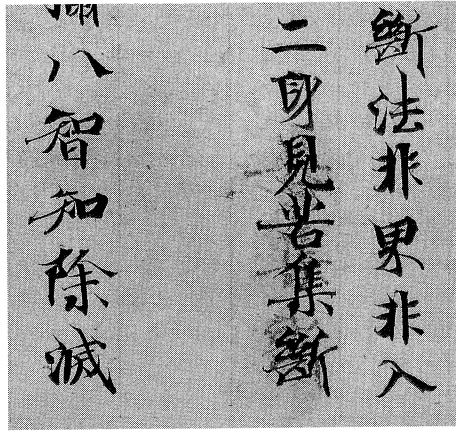
54. For example, see DNK 24:117 (ZS 46:8).

55. For more on this tool, known as a *shitamaki*, see Sugimoto Kazuki, *Nihon kodai monjo no kenkyū*, 149–57.

56. The names of two proofreaders are listed on the back of other scrolls of *Discerning Myriad Things*. Because the proofreaders appear to have worked on texts as they became available, there is no way to know whether these two proofreaders were also assigned to scroll twelve (GM 220).

57. Another reason that the margins do not line up can be a result of later repairs. Also, sometimes scrolls were pre-produced to contain twenty sheets. In these cases, the margins do not line up for sheet twenty-one. Removed sheets were often replaced

An erasure by the  
scribe on sheet seven  
of GM 220.



After proofreading was completed, the scrolls would be returned to the assemblers, who would glue the entire scroll to wooden rollers. They would also affix a permanent cover sheet that protected the sutra. A title copyist with a particularly fine hand would write the title on the cover sheet. The cover sheet was then tied with ribbon to keep the scroll from unrolling. Neither cover sheet nor ribbon are extant for GM 220.

The process of copying a canon, therefore, required skilled workers and adequate material resources. For Kōmyōshi's prayers to be answered, it was necessary to employ a large workforce and administer a complex institution. Transcribing scripture properly in eighth-century Japan, however, was not merely a material endeavor; scribes at the scriptorium also obeyed strict ritual protocol. The ritual aspects of sutra transcription helped further determine the success of the patron's prayers and also represented a form of religious practice for the scribe.

#### SCRIBES AND THE RITUAL OF WRITING

Numerous tales from medieval China and Japan describe how a sutra could take on numinous powers and answer the prayers of a patron when copied by someone who abstains from meat, wears special robes, and performs water ablutions before transcribing scripture. These practices share a common concern with what tales describe

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with slightly smaller sheets. I suspect this has to do with the process of cutting out damaged sheets. Many of the cases of sheets containing fewer than twenty-four lines also show slight inconsistencies in the alignment of the margins.

現在法亦如是

非過去未來現在法一界一入陰所不攝六

智知除知他心智及苦集道智一識識使所

不使即非過去未來現在法非界非入非陰

攝一智知謂滅智非識識非使使

苦諦所攝法廣說如苦諦即苦諦所攝法

非界非入非陰攝非智知非識識非使使

如苦諦集諦所攝法亦如是

The margin lines of sheet eight (right) do not align with those of sheet nine, indicating that it is a replacement.

as “upholding purity,” a term that refers to the removal of potential defilements from the body and mind of the scribe. In some stories, scribal impurity causes the scripture to lose its powers and can even bring a karmic death sentence onto the scribe as punishment for his transgressions.

This discourse on upholding purity shaped sutra copying practices at the Office of Sutra Transcription. Although Hitonari and other scribes at the scriptorium were low-ranking lay officials, they observed a vegetarian diet, performed water ablutions, and wore ritual vestments known as “pure robes” (*jōe*) while copying sutras. Moreover, they lived on the grounds of monasteries and chapels, which were considered to be pure spaces in Japan, and were required to avoid defilements stemming from contact with sickness and death. These assorted practices purified the body of the scribe so that his transcription could be efficacious.<sup>58</sup>

Calligraphy itself functioned as a ritualized scribal practice, in the sense that the calligraphy used for sutra copying differs in form from other types of writing. I use the term “ritualized practice” following Catherine Bell, who defines the process of ritualization as “the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions ... a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities.”<sup>59</sup> For example, by looking at the calligraphy of Hitonari in diverse settings, it is clear that the hand he used for writing sutras differed from the one he employed in other genres, such as official documents or poetry. His sutra copying hand represents a specific mode of calligraphic practice that was both formalized and repeated over time. It seems plausible that the controlled hand of a sutra copyist not only served the function of legibility but also increased the overall aura of a text to set it apart from other forms of writing. The ability not only to write well but also to write in different modes would presumably have been valuable for a scribe such as Hitonari, and it would have helped him create an empowered text capable of answering the patron’s prayers. Altogether, the practices aimed at purifying the body and the calligraphy itself

58. I have studied the relationship between purity and sutra copying in depth elsewhere. See Bryan Lowe, “The Discipline of Writing: Scribes and Purity in Eighth-Century Japan,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (forthcoming).

59. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 74.





Pure robe (*jōe*) of hemp cloth. Shosoin Treasure, Middle Section 202, cloth no. 2. Courtesy of the Shosoin Treasure House, Nara, Japan.

served to set apart sutra transcription as a particularly efficacious and ritualized form of writing.

The ritualized nature of copying Buddhist scripture suggests that the answer to Kōmyōshi's prayer depended in part upon the actions of Hitonari. As mentioned above, numerous tales describe how texts lose their efficacy when a scribe is unable to uphold purity. In a colorful story from twelfth-century Japan, angry patrons summon a scribe to hell. Upon arriving in the underworld, the scribe learns that his constant consumption of meat and his sexual excursions while copying scripture resulted in a ritual failure that sent the patrons to hell instead of heaven.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the strict purity regulations that Hitonari upheld at the Office of Sutra Transcription were aimed to ensure the ritual efficacy of the canon copying project and to prevent the benefactors from falling into dark paths. The prayers of the patron were dependent upon both the materiality of the manuscript and the ritual actions of the scribe. Maintaining purity protected the patron and the scribe from penalties incurred through impure copying.

60. *Konjaku monogatari shū*, *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikei* 35 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1993), 333–38 [tale 14:29].

These practices tied to producing ritually empowered texts also helped Hitonari advance toward his own religious goal of becoming a monk. After eight years of labor at the Office of Sutra Transcription, Hitonari was recommended for ordination on 8/1/745.<sup>61</sup> It appears that the recommendation was approved and that he took the tonsure sometime shortly after. His time at the scriptorium helped facilitate his entrance into the monastic path. In Nara Japan, the most important criterion for becoming a monk was the ability to maintain purity and master certain bodily techniques. For example, an 11/20/734 edict sets the following standards for those wanting to become a monk or nun: the ability to recite the *Lotus* or *Golden Light Sutra*, knowledge of the proper means for performing Buddhist ritual services (*raibutsu*), and a three-year requirement of pure conduct (*jōgyō*).<sup>62</sup>

A close look at Hitonari's recommendation for ordination makes it clear that his employment at the scriptorium served as a training period that enabled him to fulfill the ordination requirements. In line with the 734 edict, Hitonari lists on his application both the sutras he can recite and his ability to perform ritual services. The scriptorium would have given him access to texts that would facilitate his memorizing of sutras for recitation. Moreover, records suggest that some scribes performed Buddhist ritual services as part of their work duties at the Office of Sutra Transcription.<sup>63</sup> Most applications from this time also contain a section that records the applicant's total number of years of "pure conduct," which was presumably listed to meet the minimum three-year requirement set out in the 734 edict. Hitonari's application does not use the term "pure conduct," but instead lists the number of years spent performing "labor" (*rō*).<sup>64</sup> Labor represented a form of pure conduct because the Office of Sutra Transcription required its employees to observe a vegetarian diet, perform ablutions, don purified garments, and live sequestered away from society on temple grounds. All of these practices functioned to remove potential defilements from scribes. At the Office of Sutra Transcription, Hitonari was able to study

61. DNK 24:297–98 (ZS 37:9 verso).

62. *Shoku Nihongi*, *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikei* 13 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1990), 283. Recommendation letters show that at least through 745, potential ordinands were judged by their ability to fulfill these three requirements. Such recommendation letters, known as *ubasoku kōshin ge*, can be most conveniently found in *Nara ibun*, 508–34.

63. For example, see DNK 3:495 (ss 6).

64. DNK 24:297–98 (ZS 37:9 verso).

texts, learn how to conduct ritual services, and uphold purity in a way that enabled him to pursue a monastic path.

#### EMPOWERING TEXTS

The above discussion has shown how texts were at once empowered by the patron and the scribe, and at the same time served to empower each party. *Discerning Myriad Things* became empowered initially by being deemed canonical in Chinese catalogs. As a canonical text, the scripture was viewed as one that could potentially bestow blessings. This is the reason Kōmyōshi sponsored its transcription.<sup>65</sup> The manuscript became further empowered through the ritual practices of the scribe and the dedicatory prayer, which dated to an auspicious day on the liturgical calendar. In describing a text as empowered, it is important to note that empowerment needed to be ritually enacted and was not intrinsic to the scripture itself.<sup>66</sup>

The copying of scripture also empowered the patron and the scribe by enabling them to pursue their own religious goals. For the patron, transcribing the canon created blessings that she could bestow on her parents and the court, and it also helped her advance on the Bodhisattva path. For Hitonari, a scribe with monastic ambitions, sutra copying provided the opportunity to engage in a devotional act and to further cultivate himself through studying texts, upholding purity, and performing ritual services. Such practices functioned as monastic training for Hitonari. Each unit in the triad of text, scribe, and patron depended on the other two parts.

In short, sacred texts in the Japanese Buddhist tradition were at once *empowered* and *empowering*. Ritualized practices empowered texts by transforming a manuscript composed of paper and ink into a revered object capable of answering prayers. These same practices empowered

65. A widely circulated medieval Chinese tale describes how non-canonical Chinese works lack the efficacy of Buddhist texts. For one version, see *Fahua zhuanji*, T no. 2068, 55:83b–c.

66. This point is made most dramatically in a medieval Chinese tale that was known in Nara Japan. In this story, a nun hires a scribe to copy a sutra while upholding purity. When a vain monk borrows the manuscript from the nun to use for his own personal gain, the characters disappear from the manuscript. They reappear only in response to the nun's fervent prayers. For one version of this tale, see *Fahua zhuanji*, T no. 2068, 51:85b.

the scribe and the patron in the sense that textual reproduction enabled both parties to achieve specific goals.

Although the evidence presented in this essay has aimed to provide a narrow discussion of the individuals who created GM 220, the findings can also help us reassess eighth-century Japanese Buddhism as a whole. One of the most common characterizations of Nara Buddhism reduces it to a scholastic tradition tied to the exegetical study of specific texts. This narrative focuses on the activities of the so-called Six Nara Schools, each of which was associated with a single text or set of texts.<sup>67</sup> Although scholasticism was not entirely absent from the Nara period, it is important to note that exegetical activities from the late seventh and early eighth century reveal a relatively limited awareness of Buddhist textual sources compared with commentaries authored in later periods. By the late Nara and early Heian (794–1185) periods, however, monks began to write more academic treatises, and these writings display a heightened familiarity with the textual tradition.<sup>68</sup> This increased scholastic activity in the second half of the Nara period required a more developed manuscript presence in the archipelago. It was the devotional activities of figures such as Kōmyōshi and the ritual labor performed by scribes such as Hitonari that made texts available to academically inclined monks. Early Japanese scholasticism rested on the foundation of devotional and ritual acts. It was only through these non-hermeneutic practices that textual exegesis was ever able to flourish in Japan.

67. Nara Buddhism has long been defined in terms of schools centered on the scholastic study of texts. Schools began representing themselves this way in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. Medieval historians such as the monk Gyōnen (1240–1321) further developed this model, which has remained influential in modern-day depictions of eighth-century Japanese Buddhism. For a good overview of these historiographical issues, see Mark Blum, *The Origins and Development of Pure Land Buddhism: A Study and Translation of Gyōnen's Jōdo Hōmon Genrushō* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 101–32.

68. For the development of scholasticism in Nara Buddhism, see Inoue Mitsusada, “Tōiki dentō mokuroku yori mitaru Nara jidai sōryo no gakumon,” in *Nara Bukkyō no tenkai*, ed. Hayami Tasuku (Tokyo: Yūzankaku, 1994), 9–48. Inoue suggests that the number of texts authored by monks remained relatively few until the late Nara and early Heian periods. Also see Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 34–41.