

Standing Fast: Fudō Myōō in Japanese Literature

by Richard K. Payne

Fudō Myōō (Sanskrit: Acalanatha Vidyārāja) is a Tantric Buddhist deity who is very popular throughout Japan. His wrathful appearance, black body, crossed eyes and flaming aura make him readily recognized and easily remembered. One description of Fudō is found in the Japanese Tantric Buddhist (Shingon) fire sacrifice (*goma*), where the practitioner performs the following visualization:

Visualize a lotus blossom seat above the heart's moon *cakra*; above the seat is the syllable *ham*; it changes becoming a sharp sword. The sharp sword changes, becoming the Great Sage Fudō Myōō, having a body blue-black in color and very wrathful appearance. He resides in the fire producing *samadhi*. On his head are seven tufted hair knots, and on the left hangs one braid. His forehead is wrinkled like waves. His right hand holds a sharp sword and his left hand holds a snare (*pāśa*). His entire body emits flames, burning every kind of obscuration and affliction of oneself and others throughout the whole of the *Dharmadhātu*.¹

This visualization is based on the descriptions of Fudō found in such works as the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* (T. 848), the *Trisamayārāja Sūtra* (T. 1200), and the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra Explaining How Benevolent Kings May Protect Their Countries* (T. 245 and T. 246).

Although texts mentioning Fudō were present in Japan from the Nara period, his

popularity began only after Kūkai—founder of the Shingon sect in Japan—brought artistic representations back from China to Japan. As Fudō became increasingly popular, his presence began to be found in Japanese literature. The characteristics attributed to Fudō in literature reflect the popular conception of him, and examination of this material can reveal aspects of Japanese popular religion.

One of the earliest literary references to Fudō is found in the *Genji Monogatari*, which was written by Murasaki Shikibu at the beginning of the eleventh century.² It is considered to be one of the greatest works of literature in the world, and as a novel, it predates Cervantes' *Don Quixote* by six hundred years. Set in the Heian court, the work is a lengthy romance and tells the story of Prince Genji, who is one of the emperor's sons. After several liaisons, Genji meets Lady Murasaki, who quickly becomes his favorite.

Later in the tale, however, Lady Murasaki falls ill. Suddenly, she seems to be dying. This is a shock, since she had appeared to be improving for a few days prior to this. Genji is called, and when he arrives, the household is in a uproar:

The confusion was enormous. The women were wailing and asking her (Lady Murasaki) to take them with her (into death). The altars had been dismantled and the priests were leaving, only the ones nearest the family remaining behind. For Genji, it was like the end of the world.³

In the extremity of his desperation, Genji calls exorcists (ascetics known to have worked wonders) to the home and reminds them of Fudō's vow. The vow attributed to Fudō is that he would give six more months of life to any devotee of his who had reached the end of his lifespan. Fudō must have more than lived up to his vow, for the vindictive spirit of Lady Rokujō reveals herself. She has been plaguing Lady Murasaki—Genji's favorite—in order to avenge herself on Genji. Although never in truly good health from that time on, Lady Murasaki survives about a year longer, taking another five chapters.

Edward G. Seidensticker, translator of *The Tale of Genji*, notes in connection with this section: "Early commentaries say that Acala (i.e., Fudō) vowed to give six more months of life to those of the faithful who wished it, but the source in the writ is not known."⁴ In other words, the origin of the tradition of Fudō's vow is uncertain.

The *Genji Monogatari* reveals one aspect of Fudō's popularity: he was thought to be able to grant an additional six months of life to his devotees. In the *Heike Monogatari*, a more personal, devotional connection to Fudō is revealed. The novel tells the story of the decline of the Heike clan and their almost total destruction at the hands of the Minamoto. The authorship and date of the work are obscure, but it seems to have been initially composed about fifty years after the battle of Dan no ura in 1185, the climactic battle which finally broke the strength of the Heike. The story then circulated orally until a definitive text was composed by Kakuichi before his death in 1371.

According to the seventh chapter of the *Heike Monogatari*, entitled the "Austerities of Mongaku," when Mongaku was nineteen years old, he decided to leave behind the life of a warrior and become a priest. Mongaku sets off to practice austerities in midwinter: "Deep snow lay upon the ground, and icicles hung thickly from the trees. Freezing blasts

swept down from the mountain tops. The waterfall's white threads were frozen into crystalline cluster . . .". Mongaku immerses himself up to his neck in the pool beneath the waterfall, vowing "to stand under the waterfall for twenty-one days and repeat the magic incantation to Fudō-myōō three hundred thousand times." On the brink of death after eight days of this austerity, two divine youths rescue Mongaku. Mongaku asks who they are.

"We are Kangara and Seitaka, the messengers of Fudō-myōō, replied the two youths. "We have come here by the command of Fudō-myōō, 'Mongaku has made a fervent vow. He has determined to undertake the most severe austerities. Go and help him.' "

Then Mongaku asked in a loud voice: "Tell me where I can find Fudō-myōō."

"His abode is in the Tusita Heaven." Having spoken these words, the two youths ascended into the sky and disappeared among the clouds. Mongaku, joining his palms, gazed toward heaven and exclaimed: "Now my austerities are known even to Fudō-myōō!"

His heart made light with hope, he again plunged into the pool of the waterfall and resumed his vigil. And now that the god watched over him, the freezing winds no longer pierced his body and the water that fell upon him felt warm and soothing. This time Mongaku completed the twenty-one days as he had vowed.⁶

In counterpoint to Fudō's assistance to this warrior-turned-ascetic is the assistance he provides to women suffering from difficult childbirth. Another part of the *Heike Monogatari* tells such a story.

The Emperor's consort is pregnant, but

the text tells us that she "suffered as the dying flowers of the passing seasons. And she was possessed by evil spirits. The secret invocation of Fudō-myōō was performed by the priests, and children were used as mediums, the evil spirits being invited to take possession of their bodies so that they could be identified."⁷ Although the pregnancy and labor were difficult, the consort does give birth to the Emperor's first male heir.

Other references to Fudō in the *Heike Monogatari* are for divination⁸ and for bringing peace to the country—the populace carving images of Fudō as offerings for the pacification of revels.⁹

Fudō's assistance to women in labor is also found in *The Confessions of Lady Nijō*, which was written about 1307 by one of the Emperor's concubines. In passing, Lady Nijō recalls the following story concerning a particular temple image of *Fudō*:

There is a tale told about the god Fudō of the Jōjō Hall in Mii Temple. When the priest Chiko was at death's door, his disciple Shokū prayed: "My debt to my master is heavy. Please take my humble life instead of his." When Shokū offered his life for his teacher's, Fudō intervened: "Since you would give your life for your teacher's, I will give mine for yours." Chiko recovered from his illness, and Shokū also lived a long life.¹⁰

Lady Nijō surmises that this same picture of Fudō was brought by an exorcist when, in the eighth month of 1271, the Empress Higa-shi-Nijō was about to give birth. According to Lady Nijō, the exorcist recited a phrase from the *Fudō Sūtra*: "He who serves Fudō will have the virtues of a Buddha; he who utters a single secret incantation will have Fudō's protection forever."¹¹

According to Richard Dorson,¹² there is a folktale version of this story about the image

of Fudō. In this version, "the painting of Fudō, the God of Fire, shed bloody tears and took to itself the sickness of his young worshiper Shokū, in the thirteenth century; the painting was later placed in Mii-dera, Otsu, Shiga-ken."¹³ Both versions point to a folktale motif of divine beings substituting for humans in distress.

Fudō has also found his way into Japanese drama. The Nō play *Funa-Benkei* by Kwanze Kojirō Nobumitsu (1435 to 1516) draws on another portion of the *Heike Monogatari*, supplemented by the *Gempei Seisuiiki*. The play refers to the flight of Yoshitsune to escape the suspicions of his brother Yoritomo, who has become Shogun only through the assistance of his brother Yoshitsune, who led the forces which finally crushed the Heike. Yoshitsune is accompanied in his flight by the famous, giant warrior monk, Benkei.¹⁴

In the second part of the play, Yoshitsune and Benkei are aboard a boat crossing Dai-motsu Bay.¹⁵ The ghost of Tomomori—one of the drowned Heike chiefs—attacks the boat, seeking revenge on Yoshitsune for his role in the defeat of the Heike. Yoshitsune, drawing his sword, engages the ghost as if he were a man.

... but Benkei thrusts between, saying:
"Swords are of no avail,"

And rubs the beads between his hands.
From the east he evokes Gozanze Myōō,
From the south Gundari Yasha Myōō,
From the west Dai Itoku Myōō,
From the north Kongō Yasha Myōō,
And in the center Fudō Myōō
And he calls upon that Great King
To bind the evil spirits with his sacred
rope.

As one by one they all fall back,
Benkei aids the rowers
To speed his master's boat
And bring it safe to shore.
The still-pursuing spirits are put to flight
By Benkei's prayers;
Then on the tide they drift away

Leaving no trace upon the foaming waves.¹⁶

The breadth of Fudō's popularity has given him a permanent place in Kabuki as well. In 1832 Ichikawa Danjūrō VII compiled a collection of the eighteen most popular Kabuki plays of his lineage. With only one exception, all of these plays have humans as their heroes. The sole exception is a play called simply "*Fudō*."¹⁷ In the play, Prince Hayakumo attempts to usurp the throne. Fudō appears and, restraining the prince, restores peace.

Since the time of their founder (Danjūrō I, who established the line during the Genroku Period, 1688-1704), the Danjūrō line have been particularly devoted to Fudō, going so far as to use the name of the Narita Fudō temple as their stage name—Naritaya. Even the exaggerated style (*ara-goto*) of performance, make-up and costume of this line may have its origin in the iconography of Fudō, for Danjūrō I is said to have spent a week at the Narita Temple in order to acquire the same facial expression as that of Fudō.¹⁸ Interestingly, one element of this exaggerated style is a cross-eyed glare (*niramī*) very reminiscent of Fudō.

The term for the exaggerated style—"*ara-goto*"—is also known as "*aragami-goto*," meaning fierce deity, and as "*arahitogami-goto*" which means a deity appearing in human form.¹⁹ These concepts, which are central motifs in many of the plays, together with Danjūrō I's apparent attempts to identify with Fudō, in order to properly portray him on stage, demonstrate a point of interaction between the practices of Tantric Buddhism, which employ the identification (Skt., *adhiṣṭhāna*) of the practitioner with the deity, and popular religious concepts of possession.

Fudō continues to play an important role in Japanese religion. Almost any tourist in Japan is likely to have seen Fudō at one time

or another, particularly since the main international airport has been established at Narita where a major temple is devoted to Fudō. The temple there dates from the revolt of Masakado in 940.²⁰ The Heian court sent troops and a Shingon priest against the rebellious Masakado, the priest carrying with him a famous sword called Amakuni no Tsurugi and an image of Fudō. Two stories are related about the image. One says that Kūkai, the founder of Japanese Shingon, carved the image from an oar during his return voyage from China. The other story is that the image had been transported to China from India. When Kūkai was studying in China, the image informed him by means of a dream that it desired to travel farther east. In either case the image was brought to Japan and enshrined in a temple near Heian Kyō.

The image's desire to travel east, however, seems not to have been quite fulfilled. Having assisted in the suppression of the rebels, it was to be returned to Heian Kyō. But it had become so heavy that it could not be moved. By means of another dream, it announced its desire to remain in the eastern provinces, helping to civilize them. At the emperor's direction, the image was then enshrined at Narita.²¹

The popular conceptions of Fudō found in Japanese literature include a wide variety of benefits to humans. Fudō's assistance in times of illness and childbirth, and his role in divination and in dispelling vengeful spirits reveal an aspect of Japanese thought. Illness, including difficulties in childbirth, was considered in many cases to be produced by vengeful spirits. Divination was needed in order to determine the identity and motivation of the spirit, thereby leading to a cure. In addition, Fudō is thought to prolong the life of a devotee by six months, assist a devotee with successfully completing a vow to austerities, pacify the country—suppressing rebels, and he will substitute himself for a human being who is in distress.

Other figures in the Buddhist pantheon have the same powers attributed to them. For example, Yakushi Nyorai is specifically known as the Healing Buddha, Kanzeon Bosatsu is known as the Bodhisattva of Compassion, appealed to by expectant mothers, and Jizō Bosatsu is thought to protect small children and travellers. So why should Fudō have become so popular? Three factors appear to have been particularly important in Fudō's rise in popularity. First, his associations with fire and water—his flaming aura and the cold water austerities of his devotees—made Fudō a favorite with Shugendō practitioners. Shugendō, with its close tie to the ancient Japanese reverence for mountains, spread widely throughout Japan. As it did so, the cult of Fudō would have spread with it. Second, since Fudō is not one of the high Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, he may be felt to be much more approachable. Ordinary people need not feel as much awe and fear in coming to him with their requests. And third, he has the appearance of someone you can really count on to succeed when events have reached a crisis. Vigorous, strong, young, wreathed in flames, carrying a dragon sword—these all give clear, tangible evidence of his power.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Iwahara Taishin, *Private Directions for the Śāntika Homa, Offered to Acala*, p. 25. For a full discussion of the *goma* ritual, see Richard K. Payne, "Feeding the Gods, The Shingon Fire Ritual," *passim*.
2. Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, 1:vii.
3. *Ibid.*, 2:617. Parenthetical notes added.
4. *Ibid.*, note.
5. *The Tale of the Heike*, 1:xv-xvii.
6. *Ibid.*, 1:312-4.
7. *Ibid.*, 1:158.
8. *Ibid.*, 1:388.
9. *Ibid.*, 1:365.

10. *The Confessions of Lady Nijō*, pp. 246-7.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 13, and p. 17. At the same time rituals directed toward the Seven Healing Buddhas, the Five Great Guardian Kings, Fugen Bodhisattva, *Kongō Dōji*, and *Aizen-ō* were also being performed.

12. Dorson cites Mock Joya, "Weeping Buddha," *Japan Times*, March 9, 1957.

13. Richard Dorson, *Folk Legends of Japan*, p. 38.

14. Kuwai Genyoku, et al., *The Noh Drama*, pp. 163-5.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 164, n. 3. Daimotsu Bay is to the southwest of Amagasaki, Settsu Province.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

17. Kawatake Toshi, *Kabuki*, p. 4.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

20. George Sansom, *A History of Japan, to 1334*, p. 145.

21. Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince*, p. 101.

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