

A NOTE ON SOME SANSKRIT WORDS IN THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

by

S. Weeratunge

Associate Professor, Dept. of Sanskrit, University of Kelaniya

The Japanese language is not directly related to any major language family and its most significant fact, both in its archaic and modern forms, is, as observed by Philippi, "its quasi isolation from all surviving language groups".¹ However, this language, which forms the medium for a rich and voluminous literature, extending over twelve centuries, came under the strong influence of Chinese, from which it borrowed the script and a large vocabulary. "The adoption of the Chinese script", says Sansom, "was certainly a landmark in Japanese history, and shaped the subsequent development of nearly every Japanese institution".² In fact, as Aston observes, "there is no department of Japanese national life and thought, whether material civilisation, religion, morals, political organisation, language or literature, which does not bear traces of Chinese influence."³ In modern times, words from European languages, foremost among them being English, entered the Japanese vocabulary, and the Japanese have very cleverly adapted them to their own language by giving them a 'syllabic twist', so to say, and writing them in *Katakana*.⁴ Such, for instance, are words like *rajio*, *kamera*, *basu*, *arubaito*, adapted from the words radio, camera, bus and arbeit (German) respectively.

Another important factor that influenced Japan in moulding her culture in the earlier period was the introduction of Buddhism. "If, in regard to Japan, China takes the place of Greece and Rome", observes Aston, "Buddhism, with its softening and harmonising influences, holds a position similar to that of Christianity in the Western world".⁵ Buddhism was first introduced to Japan through Korea in 538 A. D. according to one early tradition.⁶ In later centuries (i. e. from the latter part of the 6th century onwards) knowledge of Buddhism was acquired directly from China. In as much as Buddhism came to Japan through the northern route, Japanese Buddhism is generally classified as *Mahāyāna*.⁷ It is, therefore, not surprising that Sanskrit, being the vehicle of this form of Buddhism, exercised considerable influence in the enrichment of the Japanese vocabulary in the earlier period. In this brief study, it is proposed to examine some of these Sanskrit words, mostly Buddhistic in character, that entered the Japanese vocabulary, paying attention to their semantic and morphological changes.

Most of the Sanskrit words that entered the Japanese vocabulary underwent morphological changes in varying degrees. Some words, which retained their original form, or most of it, underwent considerable semantic changes and those that retained their original meaning have changed morphologically, at times, with slight traces of their original form. The number of words which retain both their original form and meaning, is, on the whole comparatively small. Japanese being a language characterised by the preponderant use of compounds,⁸ some of these borrowed Sanskrit words were found to be much productive in the formation of new compound words. The Sanskrit word *buddha* appears in Japanese as *butsuma*⁹ with the same meaning. The stem *butsu*, which corresponds in meaning to Sanskrit *bauddha*, and in some contexts to *buddha*, forms the base for a number of compounds like *butsu-dō* 'Buddhism' (lit. the Buddha's / Buddhist path), *butsu-dan* 'Buddhist altar,' *butsu-ga* 'Buddhist picture', *butsu-gu* 'Buddhist (altar) fittings,' *butsu-ji* 'Buddhist mass (ceremony),' *butsu-metsu* 'Buddha's death', which has the extended meaning of 'ill-omened day', *butsu-mon* 'Buddhist priesthood' and so on. The commonest Japanese word used to denote 'Buddhism' is *bukkyō* (lit. the teaching of the Buddha), which is a combination of the words *butsu* and *kyō*¹⁰. The Sanskrit word *śākya (muni)*, 'sage of the śākyan clan', appears in Japanese as *shaka*, with the same meaning and often with the honorifics *o* and *sama*¹¹ added, giving *o shaka sama*. The word *shakamuni*,¹² which is much closer to the Sanskrit *śākyamuni* in form, also appears in some contexts. There is, however, another word, *muni* in Japanese, which has to be distinguished from the *muni* in *shakamuni*.

Since the *bodhisattva* ideal plays an important role in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, the Sanskrit word, *bodhisattva*, assuming the form of *bosatsu*¹³ in Japanese, is of common occurrence in religious texts. In this context, reference may be made to such words as *jizō bosatsu*, the Japanese rendering of the Sanskrit *kṣitigarbha bodhisattva*. Furthermore, the *Mahāyāna* concept of the Buddha as 'of infinite lustre', evident from the Sanskrit *amitābha buddha*, has its counterpart in the Japanese *amida butsu* and the concept of the Buddha as the 'Great Physician', as seen from the Sanskrit *bhaiṣajyaguru* also appears in Japanese as *yakushi nyōrai*, particularly evident from archaeological remains of the Heian period (12th century). The latter, however, differs altogether from the Sanskrit original in form, although agreeing with it in meaning.

The Sanskrit word *nirvāṇa* appears in Japanese, in a slightly modified form, as *nehan*¹⁴ and means 'a state of emancipation'. This is clear from, such common expressions as *nehan ni hairu* 'enter *nirvāṇa*'. In some contexts the word *nehan* also corresponds to the Sanskrit *parinirvāṇa*, as evident from such compounds as *nehan-e* 'an anniversary of the death of the Buddha' or *nehan-zō* 'an image of the Buddha, immediately after his death'. Somewhat related to this word in certain contexts, is the Japanese word, *bodai*,

which is a modified form of the Sanskrit *bodhi* 'enlightenment'. The Japanese word preserves faithfully the meaning of the original Sanskrit and means 'spiritual awakening'.

The Sanskrit word *stūpa* has also undergone some morphological change and appears in Japanese as *sotoba*,¹⁵ the combination *s-t-u* of the Sanskrit word not being phonetically possible in Japanese. This and other euphonic requirements within the language have, therefore, necessitated the changing of the word *stūpa* into *sotoba*. Semantically, the Japanese word, *sotoba* does not correspond exactly to the Sanskrit *stūpa*; it means 'a wooden tablet with a holy text, set up by a grave'. It also has the general meaning of a grave-marker. The meaning of 'a dome-shaped monument containing sacred relics,' which is the usual meaning of the Sanskrit *stūpa* appears to be absent in the Japanese word.

A Sanskrit word which has undergone a considerable semantic transformation in the later Japanese language is *dharmā*. It is well known that even in Sanskrit, the word *dharmā* has a variety of meanings. In Japanese, although it has not changed much in form - appearing as *daruma* - it has changed considerably in meaning. In earlier contexts,¹⁶ it retains the original meaning of 'truth', 'law' etc., and the word *bodhidharma*, appearing as *bodaidaruma* in Japanese is given as the name of the founder of the Zen sect of Buddhism. Its connection with the Zen sect is further attested by the use of such words as *daruma-shū* (*shū* means a sect), which is another name for the Zen sect in China and Japan. In the later language, however, this word gave rise to a variety of meanings. One of the commonest is, perhaps, its meaning of a kind of toy made of papier-maché, representing the figure of *darumadaishi*¹⁷ in religious meditation; its body, except the face, is painted red and, with a heavy bottom, it is specially balanced to stand up immediately after being knocked down. In many compound nouns, with *daruma* as the base, it sometimes acquired a meaning totally unconnected to the original. Such, for instance, are *daruma-bune*, 'a lighter, barge'. *daruma-ito* 'a kind of thread made in farmhouses', *daruma-inko*, 'a kind of macaw' etc. It is also interesting to note how the word *daruma* gained a derogatory sense in some contexts, as evident from such uses as *daruma* meaning, 'a low prostitute' and *daruma-jaya*, 'a tea - house of a questionable character'.

There are also some Japanese words which have gained a developed or extended sense from their Sanskrit counterparts. Such, for example, is the Japanese word, *danna*, 'master', 'husband', 'patron'. This word is connected to the Sanskrit *dāna*, 'giving', and its original meaning, namely 'patron', developed from this sense of 'giving', and signifies 'a person who bestows various things'. This meaning becomes clear from such compound words as *danna-dera* (*danna* + *tera*), which means, 'a Buddhist temple, one supports (by bestowing gifts)'. The word *danna* is often used with the honorific suffix, *sama* (referred to earlier), and denotes the 'husband', in

common parlance, a sense that developed from his role as the 'master of the house'. Another Japanese word which developed from the sense of *dāna* (giving), is *danka*, which corresponds to the Sanskrit word, *dāyaka*. The Japanese word does not mean 'a giver in general', as the Sanskrit word denotes, but has the specific sense of 'a supporter of a Buddhist temple', thus, strongly resembling the meaning usually attached to this word in Sinhala. This word is of fairly common occurrence even now.¹⁸

It is well known that the Sanskrit word *dhyāna*, 'meditation', appears in Japanese as *zen* and forms the name of an important sect of Buddhism in Japan. This word came to Japanese through the intermediate Chinese word *ch'an*. The Sanskrit word, *samādhi*, which is closely connected semantically to *dhyāna*, also entered the Japanese vocabulary in the form of *sammai/sanmai*.¹⁹ It preserves the original Sanskrit meaning of 'concentration, absorption', and is often used in such contexts as *sanmai ni hairu*, 'enter into a perfect state of spiritual concentration'. Due to phonetic requirements, there is no possibility of the *-dh* being retained in Japanese, and in such cases, it is either changed into the corresponding unaspirate (of. *dharma* > *daruma*) or is dropped altogether; the word *sanmai* is the result of such phonetic modifications.

There is a large number of Sanskrit words in Japanese, also connected with some aspect of Buddhism, like the words already examined, that have, preserved their original form more faithfully than others. In some cases they have also retained their original meaning to a rather large extent, while in others the meanings of the original Sanskrit have been changed considerably. For instance, the Japanese word *naraku*²⁰ having the meaning of 'hell' retains much of the Sanskrit word *naraka*, both in form as well as in meaning. A shade of the Sanskrit word *māyā*²¹ appears in such compounds as *maya-kashi*, having the sense of 'make-believe', 'shady imitation', and in such verbs as *mayakasu* 'cheat', 'swindle'. It would appear that out of the many meanings of the Sanskrit *māyā*, the Japanese word retains only the sense of 'deceit', 'fraud'. The Japanese word *muni* (referred to earlier), which is identical with the Sanskrit word *muni* in form, has the meaning of 'peerless', 'matchless'. However, the original Sanskrit meaning of a 'sage', 'one who has taken the vow of silence' seems to be absent here, and it would appear, therefore, that the Japanese word could be connected more with the word *muhi*, 'incomparable', rather than with the Sanskrit *muni*.

The word *mara*,²² and more particularly the word *ma*, in Japanese, having the meaning of 'a devil, an evil spirit' appear to have been derived from the Sanskrit *māra*. It forms the base of some interesting compound words in Japanese as, for instance, *ma-ike* 'a haunted pond', *ma-fumikiri* 'an unlucky (dangerous) level crossing'. Somewhat connected to this word, in meaning, is the Japanese *yasha*, which appears to be a modified form of the Sanskrit *yakṣa*. However, the Japanese word, unlike the Sanskrit original,

denotes a 'female demon'. It should be noted here that *yasha*, as one of the group of eight divine beings', (*hachibushū*),²³ occupies an important place in Japanese Buddhism and is reminiscent of the *yakṣas* in *Theravāda* Buddhism. There are also subdivisions of *yasha* like *tenyasha* (*yasha* of the heavens), *chiyasha* (*yasha* of the earth) and *kokūyasha* (*yasha* of space), which are reminiscent of a similar classification of the Vedic gods in relation to the three divisions of the universe, namely, heaven, earth and air.²⁴

Another interesting word which is found in the earliest phase of the Sanskrit language and which appears in Japanese, is *yama*, which corresponds to the Avestan²⁵ *yima*. This word appears in a modified form in Japanese as *enma*²⁶ and preserves largely the meaning found in the original Sanskrit. The word *yama* appears in the 10th Maṇḍala (Book) of the *Rgveda* and generally means the 'god who rules the dead'. It is interesting to note that the Japanese word *enma* preserves this meaning to a large extent and generally means 'the king, ruler or judge of hell'. It also has the meaning of 'the lord or prince of Hades'. The original concept of *yama* as 'king' found in the *Rgveda*,²⁷ is further evident from such Japanese compounds as *enma-ō* 'Enma, the King', having the identical meaning of the *yamarāja* in Sanskrit, and *enma-daiō*, 'the great king Enma', an honorific form of the earlier word. The word *enma* is also used in such compounds as, *enma-dō* 'Enma's shrine'. The Japanese concept of Enma, the king, sitting in judgment over the dead reminds one of the popular Sinhala belief of *yamarajjuruvō*, and the reference to his seat, *enma no chō* is reminiscent of the seat of Yama in the *Rgveda*.²⁸

There are also some Sanskrit words connected, with the Buddhist clergy, which have entered the Japanese vocabulary from very early times. Two such interesting words are *śrāmaṇera* and *ācārya*. The word *śrāmaṇera* has undergone considerable morphological change and appears in Japanese as *shami*²⁹. It, however, retains the meaning of the original Sanskrit and generally means 'a novice'. In certain contexts, however, the word carries the meaning of 'a Buddhist acolyte'. The Sanskrit word *ācārya* has not undergone much change morphologically, and appears in Japanese as *ajari*.³⁰ But the meaning of the Japanese word is more restricted than its Sanskrit counterpart. Thus, while the Sanskrit word has the meaning of a teacher in general (except in specific contexts), the Japanese word carries the meaning of 'a master of esoteric Buddhism'. In certain contexts, it can also mean 'a high priest'.

Though the Sanskrit word *homa*, derived from the root *hu* 'to offer an oblation', and meaning, 'sacrifice, oblation', is essentially connected with Hinduism, its Japanese counterpart *goma*³¹ is clearly Buddhistic in character and is connected with the Buddhist practices prevalent in ancient Japan. The word *goma* refers to the Buddhist rite of burning cedar sticks on the altar. In some contexts, it also means a holy fire used for invocation. There are also some Japanese words denoting the names of Hindu gods and

other celestial beings, which bear clear traces of their Sanskrit counterparts and which have undergone modifications in keeping with the phonetic requirements of the language. Such, for instance, are the words *bishamon*³² and *magoraka*, derived from the Sanskrit originals *vaiśravaṇa* and *mahoraga*, respectively. The word *bishamon* usually appears as *bishamon-ten* (*ten* being the equivalent of *deva*, 'god' in Sanskrit) and means 'the god of treasure'. There are other Japanese words like *kendatsuba*,³³ *karura*, *ashura*, and *kinnara*³⁴ derived from the Sanskrit originals, *gandharva*, *garuḍa*, *asura*, and *kinnara* respectively. Of these, the words *ashura* and *kinnara* appear to have preserved the phonetic structure of the Sanskrit originals faithfully.

The word *kusa* appears in Japanese with the meaning, 'grass, herb' and there is the possibility that it is connected with the Sanskrit word *kuśa* meaning 'sacrificial grass'. There is, however, another word *kusha* in Japanese, which is derived from the Sanskrit word *kośa*, and which forms the name of a Buddhist sect in Japan. The tenets of this sect are based on the *Abhidharmakośa*, the encyclopaedic treatise of Vasubandhu, which is accepted by most Japanese sects as an authoritative exposition of the metaphysical thought of the earlier schools of Buddhism.³⁵

Reference has already been made to certain Sanskrit words undergoing considerable semantic changes, when appearing in Japanese. *Dharma* was one such word which, though preserving its original meaning in earlier contexts, changed considerably in meaning, in the later language. Another, of such words, is the Sanskrit *sabhā*, 'assembly', which appears in Japanese as *shaba*,³⁶ with the completely different meaning of 'this world'.

The words examined so far are representative of some of the significant semantic and morphological changes that the Sanskrit words underwent in the process of being adapted to the Japanese vocabulary. There are also a few Japanese words which have given rise to much speculation among linguists regarding their possible connection with Sanskrit words. One such notable instance is the word *tera* (usually used with the honorific prefix *o*, and appearing as *o-tera*), meaning 'Buddhist temple'. It has been suggested that this word is related to the Sanskrit *sthavira*. 'elder', 'senior monk', probably because the temple is the abode of such monks. The Pali equivalent of this word, *thera*,³⁷ bears a closer resemblance to the Japanese word and, therefore, any possible connection might have been through this Pali word. However, this is still a matter of conjecture, in the absence of conclusive evidence.

There is a considerable number of other words in the Japanese language which, though not directly connected with Buddhism, bears a close resemblance in form and meaning to Sanskrit words. Such, for instance, are words like *muda*, 'futile', 'in vain', *kusa*, 'grass' (referred to earlier), which could be compared with the Sanskrit words, with the same meaning, *mudhā* and *kuśa* respectively. A study of such words, with a view to determining any possible connection between them, would be of much linguistic significance.

NOTES

1. Philippi, D. L., *Kojiki* translation, Tokyo, 1959. Introduction, p. 20.
2. Sansom, G. B., *Japan-A Short Cultural History*, Tokyo, 1985, p. 44.
3. Aston, W. G., *A History of Japanese Literature*, Tokyo, 1975, pp 3, 4.
4. In everyday writing, the Japanese use a combination of *Kanji*, characters of Chinese origin, *Hiragana* and *Katakana*. *Kanji* characters are used for the stems of nouns and adjectives and the roots of verbs, while *Hiragana* is used for the endings of verbs and adjectives, particles, auxiliary verbs and the like. *Katakana* is usually used in writing words adapted to Japanese from foreign languages.
5. Aston, *op.cit.*, p.4.
6. *Vide* Japanese Religion - A Survey by the Agency for Cultural affairs. pp 47 ff.
7. However, it is important to note that the Buddhism which came to Japan over the years, includes not only *Mahāyāna*, but various forms of *Theravāda* as well - forms ranging from some of the earliest examples of Indian Buddhism to the developments of much later centuries.
8. The tendency to form compounds, which is a characteristic of most Indo European languages, is also a marked feature of the Japanese language, although it falls outside this language group. In fact, the Japanese language has a greater variety of compounds than most Indo European languages. This is particularly evident in the formation of verb-compounds.
9. This word appears in historical works like the *Heike-Monogatari* of the *Kamakura* Period, but is not as common as some of the other words used when referring to the Buddha (See note 12)
10. In Japanese, the euphonic combination of *-tsu + k* results in *kk* -e.g *betsu + ka = bekka* ; *ketsu + kon = kekkon* ; *hatsu + ken = hakken*.
11. Japanese is a language which has a unique system of honorifics. The particles, *o* and *go* are the usual honorific prefixes while *san* and *sama* are the suffixes, which correspond to English Mr., Mrs., Miss. See also - Weeratunge, S., 1986 *Some conceptual affinities between the Japanese and the Sinhalese, as borne out by linguistic evidence*. Silver Jubilee Commemoration Volume of the University of Kelaniya: pp.67,68,
12. The word *shakamuni* is commonly used when referring to the Buddha in well known works like the *Genji Monogatari*. It appears from works like the *Heike Monogatari* that this word and works like *shakuson*, *shaka*, *shakamunibutsu* are more often used in Japan, than *butsuda* when referring to the Buddha.
13. c. f. the Sinhala word, *bōsat*. The word *bosatsu* occurs mostly in the works of the *Heian* Period, like *Utsubo Monogatari*.
14. c. f. *nivan/nivana* in Sinhala and *niva* in Marāṭhi. See Turner, R.L.A. *Comparative Dictionary of Indo Aryan Languages.*, VI. The word. *nehan* occurs in works like *Sanbōekotoba*, *Eigamonogatari* etc.
15. This word also occurs as, *sotōba*, as evident from works like *Nihonki-ryaku*, *Sanbōekotoba* etc.

16. As in the early Buddhist *sūtras*.
17. The spritual guide considered as the founder of the Zen Buddhist sect in China.
18. c. f. *dankaseido* - the system relating every household to a temple, which continued until recent times.
19. As evident from instances in works like *Sanbōekotoba*.
20. This word occurs in historical works like *Genpeijōsuiki*.
21. See also Iwamoto, Y., *Nichijōbukkyōgo*, pp 225, 226.
22. See Iwamoto, *op. cit.* p. 226.
23. The Sanskrit names of the divine beings in this group are *deva*, *nāga*, *yakṣa*, *gandharva*, *asura*, *garuḍa*, *kinnara*, and *mahoraga*. Their Japanese counterparts would be referred to later in this paper. (See also note 34)
24. c. f. also the reference to the *devas* and the *nāgas* of the earth and the space in Pali *suttas* (*ākāsatthā ca bhummatthā/ devā nāgā mahiddhikā*)
25. Avestan is the ancient Iranian language in which the *Avesta* the collection of sacred writings preserved by the adherants of the Zoroastrian religion, is written. See Burrow, T., *The Sanskrit Language*, London, p. 4.
26. The word *enma* occurs in works like *Hokkehyakuzakikigakishō*.
27. See *Rgveda* X. 14. 1. *yamaṃ rājānaṃ haviṣā duvasya* - 'Offer an oblation to Yama, the King'.
28. c. f. *Rgveda* X 135. 7. *idaṃ yamasya sādanaṃ* - 'This is the seat of Yama'.
29. The word *shami* occurs in works like the *Sanbōekotoba*.
30. The word *ajari* occurs in works of the *Heian* period like the *Genji Monogatari*.
31. The Buddhistic character of this word is evident from its occurrence in the Buddhist anecdotes of *Tsurezuregusa* of the *Muromachi* period and in historical works like the *Heike Monogatari*.
32. cf. the Sinhala word *vesamuṇi*. The word *bishamon* is of fairly common occurrence in works like *Genpeijōsuiki*.
33. c. f. the Pali word *gandhabba*.
34. These four along with *yasha* and *magoraka* (referred to earlier) constitute six out of the group of eight divine beings (*hachibushū*) in Japanese Buddhism. The other two are *ten* and *riyu* (Sanskrit *deva* and *nāga* respectively).
35. See Sansom, *op. cit.* p. 123.
36. The word *shaba* is of fairly common occurrence in historical works like *Heike Monogatari* and also in *Irohajiruishō*.
37. c. f. also the Sinhala word *tera*, which is derived from the Sanskrit word, *sthavira* and has the same meaning. This word has a marked resemblance to the Japanese word, in form.