

## HASE-NO-KWANNON

In all the provinces of all the countries in the Ten Directions, there is not even one temple where Kwannon is not self-revealed.'

(Kwannon Sutra.)

At the end of the main street of Hase this ancient temple, with its lofty thatched roof, stands upon an elevated site in the hill-side. From this terrace, and also from the graveyard—which gradually rises to the summit of the eminence—a beautiful picture is gained of the green plain of Kamakura, framed by its ring of hills and the curving bay. This celebrated Hase-Dera, enshrining the mighty golden figure of Kwannon—the Merciful Goddess who looketh down above the sound of prayer'—has been for many centuries the goal and destination of a ceaseless stream of worshippers, dating from the mists of antiquity: the original temple constructed upon this site is said to have been founded by the Empress Genshō, who reigned 715–724. However the present building owes its existence to Yoshimasa, 8th Ashikaga *Shōgun* (1435–1490), the great patron of art, under whose direction the famous *Ginkakuji*, or Silver Pavilion in Kyōto, was constructed. The actual date of the Hase-Dera of today is given as 1459, but some three hundred years ago it was thoroughly repaired under the auspices of the first Tokugawa *Shōgun* Iyeyasu, in the year 1607.

In the lower courtyard, to the left of the entrance gate, stands a small temple wherein is installed a quaint figure of *Daikoku*, the popular god of riches and good luck. The divinity stands upon gilded bales of rice and is said to have been carved by Kōbō Daishi (9th century). This structure originally stood on the plateau above, beside the main temple; but about thirty years ago it was moved below, its former site becoming an orange-grove; the trees were planted at the instigation of the late Prince Itō.

Steps lead upward to another shrine tenanted by another deity of historic antiquity, a huge gilt figure of Amida. This statue is said to have been installed by Yoritomo, and is worshipped especially for warding off calamities that may occur in the *Yaku*, or unlucky ages. According to popular superstition, in the lives of human beings the *Yakudoshi*, or periods especially prone to misfortune, occur twice: in men the ages of 25 and 42, and in women 19 and 33 respectively. Above this shrine stand the belfry containing a specially fine and well-constructed specimen, one of the three ancient large bells of Kamakura. Its rich melancholy boom may constantly be heard from afar, as a reminder to the soul of man that in her shrine upon the hill the merciful divinity 'perceives the world sound' and is waiting to lead troubled spirits to 'the Holy Path and the Pure Land.' The inscription upon one of the panels of this bell is to the effect that when it is sounded all influences of ill-omen disappear; all calamities cease; all prayers will be granted. Nevertheless a notice is affixed stating that to strike it is forbidden. An unusual feature of this inscription is that instead of being carved in the metal, it projects in relief. The name of the maker is inscribed as

*Miconobe Suyeshige*; date—July 15th, 1264.

In addition to the colossal figure enshrined in the dark chamber behind the sanctuary, this temple contains many other effigies of the goddess of Mercy. The centre-piece of the altar is a large gilt statue (eight feet in height) of Kwannon ascribed to the celebrated priest Gyōgi Bosatsu (8th century). On either side are thirty-three carved wooden figures presented by the *Shōgun* Yoshimasa (1449–1471), and representing the *Keshin*, or incarnations—the different forms assumed by the divinity.

“When the love of Kwannon is made concrete it expresses itself in various forms according to the needs of circumstance. In the *Pundarika Sutra* Kwannon is described as incarnating herself in many different personages. For instance when she sees it most expedient to save a certain class of people through a certain mode of expression, she will assume the special mode and exercise all her influence in that capacity. She will be a philosopher, merchant, man of letters, person of low birth, or anything as required by the occasion, while her sole aim is to deliver all beings without exception from ignorance and selfishness. Therefore, wherever there is a heart groping in the dark, Kwannon will not fail to extend her embracing arms.”

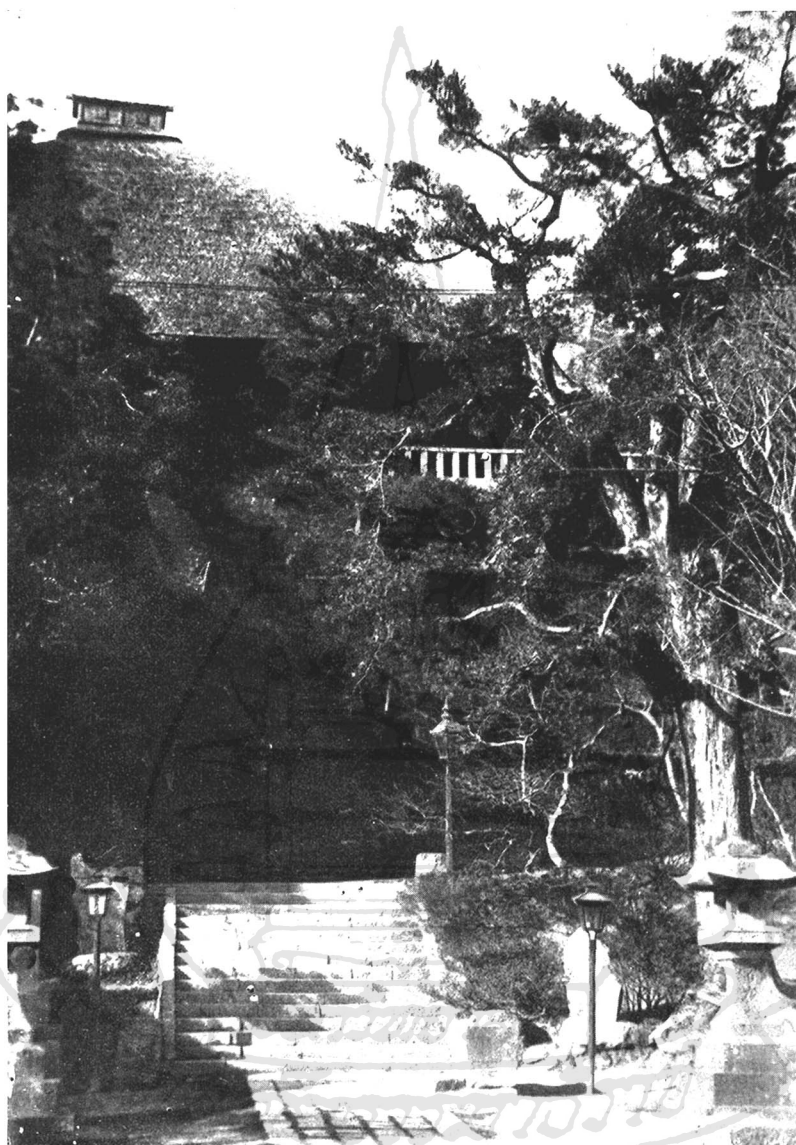
(Essay on Kwannon by Shaku Soyen, Lord Abbot of Engakuji)

Above the altar are two oblong panels whereon clouds are painted the rows of small gilt figures are representations of the thirty-three statues of the Goddess of Mercy in the various temples of the western part of Japan, and which are visited by pilgrims in their prescribed order. The six bronze circular bas-reliefs of Kwannon are valuable ancient relics, said to be of Indian origin. The panel over the entrance was inscribed with the words *Hase-Dera* by the Emperor Go-Tsuchimikado (1465):

while the tablet suspended above the sanctuary was the autograph gift of another Imperial patron, the Emperor Kameyama—date Aug. 8th, 1264; the characters signify 'Worship and Prayer.'

The left-hand aisle contains part of a petrified *Kusunoki* (camphor-tree) hollowed into a font for holy water, and presented to the temple by Yoshimasa in June 1450. Adjoining this relic is a beautiful bronze statue of Kwanon, a thank-offering from an anonymous lady devotee. In the rear corridor is an image of Miroku Bosatsu said to have been originally an object of worship in the household shrine of Hatakeyama Shigetada—the most loyal and trusted of Yoritomo's retainers, and who was treacherously assassinated in 1205 by Tokimasa (father of Masako) after the death of the first *Shōgun*. Miroku is the expected Messiah of Buddhism, who is supposed to appear several thousand years after the death of Sāk-yamuni (the Buddha) to complete the work of the salvation of mankind.

Beside this relic of the early days of Kamakura stands another ancient memorial—a coloured effigy of the famous priest Tokudo, the first priest of the temple and whom tradition connects with the origin of the great Kwannon. Of the remaining statues in the corridors, many are various representations of the patron deity. The gilt effigy at the back of the sanctuary is an eleven-faced Kwannon by the famous Gyōgi Bosatsu, to which unexpected attributes are accredited—petitions to this divinity being considered efficacious in exorcising the hindrances and obstacles that prevent the course of true love from running smooth! The picture of a large black horse is suspended on the outer wall of the sanctuary.



**Hase-no-Kwannon.**

**Enshrining the colossal golden figure of the Goddess of Mercy.**

The merciful goddess is held to be the divine protectress of horses (*Batō Kwannon*): consequently when the farmers are troubled with sickness or vicious tendencies in their animals they present to the temple a votive picture (*Ema*) with special prayers: this accounts for the effigies and representations of horses that are constantly in evidence wherever there is a temple dedicated to Kwannon. The huge carved fish that hangs on the right side of the altar is a *Mokugyo*, one of the temple instruments; when struck it emits a musical note, and in former times was used during the services.

The famous statue of the Goddess of Mercy is preserved in the solitary obscurity of her chamber behind the altar; however in the spring of every year for the space of one week, from the 12th to the 18th day of March, the doors above are thrown open and the golden face of the divinity is manifest by the light of day. But at less auspicious seasons, to obtain a glimpse of the mighty figure it is necessary to penetrate the gloom of her sanctuary and to view the goddess in sections by the dim light of glimmering candles.

This process is thus described by Lafcadio Hearn:—

“ Then the old priest lights a lantern and leads the way through a low doorway on the left of the altar into the interior of the temple, into some very lofty darkness. I follow him cautiously while discerning nothing whatever but the flicker of the lantern; then we halt beside something which gleams. A moment, and my eyes, becoming more accustomed to the darkness, begin to distinguish outlines; the gleaming object defines itself gradually as a Foot, an immense golden Foot, and I perceive the hem of a golden robe undulating over the instep. Now the other foot appears; the figure is certainly standing. I can perceive that we are in a narrow, but also very lofty

chamber, and that out of some mysterious blackness overhead ropes are dangling down into the circle of lantern-light illuminating the golden feet. The priest lights two more lanterns, and suspends them upon hooks attached to a pair of pendent ropes about a yard apart; then he pulls up both together slowly. More of the golden robe is revealed as the lanterns ascend, swinging on their way, then the outlines of two mighty knees; then the curving of columnar thighs under chiselled drapery, and as with the still waving ascent of the lanterns the golden Vision towers ever higher through the gloom, expectation intensifies. There is no sound but the sound of the invisible pulleys overhead, which squeak like bats. Now above the golden girdle the suggestion of a bosom. Then the glowing of a golden hand uplifted in benediction. Then another golden hand holding a lotos. And at last a Face, golden, smiling with eternal youth and infinite tenderness, the face of Kwannon.

So revealed out of the consecrated darkness, this ideal of divine feminity—creation of a forgotten art and time—is more than impressive. I can scarcely call the emotion which it produces admiration; it is rather reverence.

But the lanterns, which paused awhile at the level of the beautiful face, now ascend still higher with a fresh squeaking of pulleys. And lo! the tiara of the divinity appears, with strangest symbolism. It is a pyramid of faces,—charming faces of maidens, miniature faces of Kwannon herself.

For this is the Kwannon of the Eleven Faces,—Juichiren-Kwannon."

The origin of this famous figure is shrouded in the mysteries of tradition. By command of the Emperor Uda a detailed account was written of the legend by the famous scholar and statesman Sugawara Michizane, and which bears the date Feb. 10th, 896. A condensed version of this work is issued by the temple and may be briefly translated as follows:—

Many centuries ago, in the reign of the Empress Genshō (715-724) there lived a holy priest in the province of Yamato known as Tokudo Shōnin. This worthy was not only famed for his piety and learning, but was also considered to be the reincarnation of a great saint of former times, Hōki Bosatsu, who had been reborn into this world for the salvation of souls. It happened that one night Tokudo Shōnin was passing through a valley in Yamato, and there he beheld upon the ground the fallen trunk of a mighty camphor-tree over one hundred feet in length. From the tree a soft radiance, suggesting a halo, was diffused; moreover the air was filled with a strange unearthly fragrance. Convinced by these manifestations that this tree was designed for some holy purpose, the priest fell upon his knees, reciting the scriptures and praying that the sacred wood might be consecrated and immortalised in the form of the Goddess of Mercy.

Suddenly there appeared two mysterious and venerable figures who averred they had come to execute his desire, and the holy tree should be fashioned into the likeness of Kwannon. For three days Tokudo Shōnin continued to fast and pray, and for the space of that time the strangers laboured without ceasing: the mighty trunk was hewn in twain, and at the end of the third day it was transformed into two majestic statues of *Kwanzeon*, the beloved Goddess of Compassion and Mercy.

Aware that this marvel had not been achieved by mere human agency, the priest besought these aged visitors to reveal their origin. They replied that they were the gods *Tensho-Daijin* and *Kasuga-Myojin* who had



thus assumed earthly forms in order to execute the pious aspiration of Tokudo, and carve these representations of the Merciful One, which would be of great and special benefit in answering the prayers and saving the souls of mankind. Their labours ended, the mystic deities disappeared in a cloud, and were seen no more. It is recorded that this event took place in the third month of the year 721, a report thereof being laid before the Empress. An Imperial Messenger was promptly despatched to Yamato to do reverence, and to present offerings to the divinities that had originated in so mysterious a manner; moreover the holy priest Gyōgi Bosatsu was requested to preside at the consecration ceremony. The temple for their reception was duly constructed at Hase, Yamato, and the dedication was celebrated amidst great rejoicings. When the ceremonies were ended, Gyōgi Bosatsu solemnly addressed the newly consecrated figures, decreeing that the statue framed from the base of the tree should dwell within its shrine at Hase for all eternity. But the twin form, that had been carved from the upper half of the sacred camphor-tree, he commanded to be reverently committed to the ocean, that the waves might bear the goddess to whatever spot that destiny might decide, and where its influence might be most potent in rescuing the souls of men from destruction.

For sixteen long years nothing was heard of the fate of the statue. However one summer night (June 18th, 736) the fisherfolk of Kamakura received the tidings that in the Bay of Sagami a strange object was floating in the deep, from which gleams of light were radiated: the long-lost goddess had arrived! With profound demonstrations of joy the sacred image was conveyed to

the shore, and found a temporary shelter within a shed of straw and rushes, where all the neighbourhood thronged to worship, and to acclaim with offerings the newly-arrived divinity from the sea. From this circumstance that spot received the name that it bears even to the present day of *Kariya-ga-saki*, or 'Promontory of the Temporary Shed.

This intelligence soon reached the Imperial ear: again a messenger was despatched with instructions that a suitable temple should be constructed for the reception of the mighty image. This edifice received the name of *Shin* (new) *Hase-Dera* after the original temple of Kwannon in Yama'o; it also bears the title of *Kaiko-San*, or 'Temple of the Radiance of the Sea.' According to Imperial desire the holy Tokudo Shōnin became the first priest to preside over the new foundation. From that remote age this famous statue of mystic origin has been worshipped and hallowed by the devotion of myriads of the faithful, who have derived manifold benefits, and preservation from malign influences, from the compassion and charity of this merciful goddess—the incarnation of loving-kindness who is said to have renounced the joys of Paradise in order 'to guide the feet of countless weary pilgrims to the Heaven of Eternal Peace in Nirvāna.'

"O Thou Pure One, whose radiance is without stain, whose knowledge is without shadow—O Thou forever shining like that Sun whose glory no power may dim,—Thou Sun-like in the course of Thy Mercy pourest Light upon the world!"

(Invocation to Kwannon,  
Hokke Sutra.)