A CONSIDERATION OF THE ICONOGRAPHIC IMAGES ON THE NIMBUS OF THE JÚICHIMEN KANNON OF THE NIGATSUDÔ AT TÖDAIJI, IN LIGHT OF THE ENGRAVED IMAGES ON THE LOTUS-PETAL BASE OF THE GREAT BUDDHA

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Various splendidly engraved images cover the front and back of the bronze nimbus (entrusted to Nara National Museum) that was once attached to the Ōgannon, the Greater Kannon, a statue of Júichimen Kannon (Sks., Ekádasamukha), the utmost secret main worship object of the Nigatsudô (Hall of the Second Month) at Tôdaiji (the Great Eastern Temple). The nimbus, which is thought to have been produced around the year 760, has great significance in the history of art and of Buddhism as it is one of the very few extant Buddhist images from the Nara period. Nevertheless, a comprehensive study that would elucidate the meaning of its complex imagery has yet to be produced.

The author indicated in a previously published study (“The Image of the Fifty-two Buddhist Divinities and Sashasra-bhuja-sahasra-netra’ on the Nimbus of the Main Worship Object of the Nigatsudô at Tôdaiji: The Intersection of the Interpretation of the ‘Entering the Dharma Realm’ Chapter of the Avatamsaka-sutra and Nara-era Faith in Avalokitesvara’” that there is a high probability that the iconographic images on the face of the nimbus are a composite, representing the contents of the Nyûhkkai chapter of the Kegonkyô (Avatamsaka-sûtra) and the Senju sengan bosatsu kôdai enman muge daihishin daranikyo, popularly called the Senjukyô. This article is a sequel to the previous study, treating the various iconographic images on the front and back of the nimbus that had not been fully addressed in the earlier article and offering a complete, reconsideration of them in light of the most appropriate objects of comparison, the engraved images on the lotus-petal base of the Great Buddha. The following are the results of this new study.

First, the iconographic images of the thirty-four attendant deities of Senju Kannon represent the deities who protect those who uphold the Daihishin darani (the dharani of the great benevolent heart) expounded in the Senjusengenkyô. The deities include Bonten (Sks., Brahma), Taishaku (Sks., Indra) and the Four Guardian Kings (Jpns., Shitenno) and the remaining twenty-eight, which are not directly related iconographically to the Niju-hachibù-shu, but the number twenty-eight suggests some link to this later type.

Second, it can be confirmed that the composition of the iconographic images of the Buddhist heavens depicted in registers on the front and back of the nimbus and the lotus-petal base of the Great Buddha and the names of each Buddhist heaven conform to the wording describing the radiant light of the Buddha that is found in the Kegonkyô, and the description of the heavenly realms in both the Bonmôkyô and Kegonkyô are derived from Nara and Silla period Buddhist interpretations of these sutras.

These and several new facts have been revealed by this study, and the meaning of the nearly all the motifs has been elucidated.

The iconographic images depicted in the Nigatsudô nimbus are an organic whole; all represent transformations of Kannon expounded in the Senjukyô. It is undoubtedly the case that behind the composition of iconography are the Kegonkyô, the Bonmôkyô and a profound understanding of the two sutras found in Kegon teachings developed in China, Silla and Japan. Further research is required to determine the place of the images in the history of Buddhism, but the author is confident that this study brings to a conclusion much of the long-standing debate over the interpretation of these iconographic images and those on the lotus-petal base of the Great Buddha.