

# Vaiśravaṇa, the Heavenly King

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## Key words

Prince Shōtoku, Toupa P'ishamen, Kuramadera, Inujinin, *A-sa-ba-shō*

## 1. Introduction

Vaiśravaṇa is a demigod in Hindu mythology. He is also known by the name Kubera, the guardian of wealth. The Buddhists adopted him as one of the four Mahārajās or Heavenly Kings of the Buddhist pantheon. He was assigned the duty of protecting Buddhism from evil forces. Ensuring peace and prosperity of Buddhist believers was his secondary assignment. He thus acquired a military character as well as a benevolent character. Early Japanese literature highlights his military side. The rulers sincerely believed in him as a protector of state and worshipped him. As his popularity percolated down to the masses, he was seen more as a god of wealth, than a military deity. Even today, people visit his shrines and pray for prosperity.

## 2. The Four Heavenly Kings, the Protectors of the State

An early text to introduce the Four Heavenly Kings to the Japanese is the *Kon-*

*kō-myō-kyō* sutra. It has a number of translated versions, the first of which was made by Donmuseu between 414 and 426. The Shi-ten-nō-bon (The Four Heavenly Kings) chapter of this text projects the divinities as the protectors of Buddhist believers. In it, the Four Heavenly Kings give the following assurance to Buddha. <sup>1)</sup>

If a man possessing this sutra goes to the domain of a king, and the king goes to the man, listens to the sutra, and protects and respects him, the Four Heavenly Kings will earnestly protect the king, his domain and his subjects, alleviate their sufferings, and shower peace on them. If monks, nuns and lay believers possess this sutra and the king also worships it, the Heavenly Kings will ensure peace for the king and his subjects, and free them from their worries. If monks, nuns and lay believers read this sutra and the king worships, reveres and praises it, the Heavenly Kings will make other kings respect and praise this king. When the sutra is read in a king's palace, the Heavenly Kings will go to the palace to hear it with a large host including Brahmā, Indra, Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, Pṛthivī, Maheśvara, Pañcika, Hārītī and her five hundred children, demigods and spirits. Buddha, thereupon, praised the Heavenly Kings and told them to protect the kings who possessed, respected and worshipped the sutra. The Heavenly Kings should protect their palaces, subjects and kingdoms, defeat their enemies, do away with their sufferings, and bless them with peace.

It may be mentioned here that the Four Heavenly Kings are Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Virūdhaka, Virūpākṣa and Vaiśravaṇa, and that they are supposed to protect the East, the South, the West, and the North respectively from evil forces.

In Japan, Vaiśravaṇa did not enjoy any special status in the beginning. He was just one of the Four Heavenly Kings. One of the earliest believers in the Four Heavenly Kings was the crown prince Shōtoku (574-622), who became the regent and headed the administration. Shōtoku took part in the fight against the powerful rebel Mononobe no Moriya when he was only about thirteen years old. During this fight, he took a vow to establish a temple dedicated to the Four Heavenly Kings if he won. He not only built the Shitennōji Temple to discharge his vow, he even installed the idols of the Four Heavenly Kings in the Hōryūji Temple when he built it. The rulers retained this strong faith in the Four Heavenly Kings for a long time.

The imperial edict issued on the twenty-fourth day of the third month of the year 741 can be mentioned in this context. It says that according to the *Kon-kō-myō-sai-shō-ō-kyō* sutra, kings propagating the reading, hearing, worship and distribution of this sutra are protected by the Four Heavenly Kings. The Four Heavenly Kings destroy all calamities and obstructions, eliminate worries and epidemics, fulfill all wishes, and bestow happiness. So, each province is hereby ordered to erect a seven-storey pagoda and copy one set of the *Kon-kō-myō-sai-shō-ō-kyō* sutra. The emperor himself will write (the title) *Kon-kō-myō-sai-shō-ō-kyō* in golden letters for depositing in these pagodas. The sacred law (of Buddha) will prosper and spread in the world. The Four Heavenly Kings are invoked to give their blessings to both the dead and the living. Temples bearing the name *Konkōmyō Shitennō Gokoku no Tera*, literally meaning the Temple of the Golden Shining Four Heavenly Kings for Protecting the Country, shall be built in every province at suitable locations. Each temple shall be allotted fifty households and ten *chō* of wet rice field (for maintenance). Each temple shall have twenty monks, and in case of any shortfall, steps shall be taken immediately to replenish them. The monks shall carry out *tendoku* reading of the *Kon-kō-myō-sai-shō-ō-kyō* sutra on the eighth day of every month. Efforts shall be made to please the Four Heavenly Kings to gain their protection.<sup>2)</sup> These temples were popularly known by the name *Kokubunji*, meaning provincial temples. The *Tōdaiji* Temple of Nara, itself a *Kokubunji* temple, acted as the overall head of these provincial temples.

The relation of Japan with the kingdom of Silla in the Korean peninsula became strained in the latter half of the eighth century. The order of the prime minister's office, *Daijō Kanpu*, issued on the third day of the third month of the year 774 carries instructions for installing idols of the Four Heavenly Kings. It says that according to reliable information, villainous Silla, without even thinking once of the mercy shown to it, is harbouring evil designs and performing magical rites to harm us. The buddhas and the gods cannot be deceived. There will be retribution for these

evil designs. In view of the threat from Silla, the government headquarters in Kyushu shall take steps to overcome this calamity by installing idols of the Four Heavenly Kings in temples. Pious monks shall recite the Shi-ten-nō-go-koku-bon (The Four Heavenly Kings, the Protectors of the Country) chapter of the *Kon-kō-myō-sai-shō-ō-kyō* sutra before each idol more than once during the daytime, and chant mantras during the night. Apart from this, special worship for them shall be performed for seventeen days once in autumn and once in spring. <sup>3)</sup>

Again, the Daijō Kanpu of the twenty-sixth day of the fifth month of the year 866 mentions that five sets of idols of the Four Heavenly Kings were made and given to the five districts facing Korea. It says that these districts constitute Japan's western border and are closer to Silla. The defensive measures shall differ with the district. The idols shall be worshipped with great devotion, any desire to harm others shall be suppressed, and disasters shall be averted. Temples located in auspicious sites and having a good view of the enemy territory shall be selected. If such temples are not available, auspicious sites shall be selected, shrines shall be built, the idols of the Four Heavenly Kings shall be installed, and four monks observing the monastic rules strictly shall be sent from Kokubunji temples to carry out *tendoku* reading of the Shi-ten-nō-go-koku-bon chapter of the *Kon-kō-myō-sai-shō-ō-kyō* sutra during the daytime and chant mantras at night in front of each idol. Again, worship shall be offered for seventeen days each in spring and in autumn. <sup>4)</sup>

However, as will be seen below, Vaiśravaṇa became paramount of the Four Heavenly Kings with the passing of time. Even then, the basic equality of the Four Heavenly Kings was not forgotten. *Azuma Kagami*, an official record of events between 1180 and 1266, says, in the entry dated the twenty-sixth day of the third month of 1188, that an order was issued to install and worship the idols of the Four Heavenly Kings all over the country. It also records that Minamoto no Yoritomo, the military dictator, made a pilgrimage to the Shitennōji Temple, dedicated to the Four Heavenly Kings, on the twentieth day of the fifth month of 1195. Other events like

a fight at the Shitennōji Temple on the thirteenth day of the eighth month of 1237 have also been mentioned in this book. <sup>5)</sup>

*Jaku-shō-dō-kok-kyō-shū* written by Unshō in 1689 gives the following description of the idols of the Four Heavenly Kings. <sup>6)</sup>

- a) Dhṛtarāṣṭra : The idol is one cubit tall. It is clad in heavenly robes. The left arm extends downward, holding a sword. The right hand is bent at the elbow, the arm is extended forward, and the palm is turned upward. It has a shining jewel. Some texts say that the face is of bluish colour. The left hand rests against the waist. The right hand holds a three-pronged vajra. The idol has an attacking posture.
- b) Virūḍhaka : The size and dress of this idol are the same as above. The left hand is similar to that of the above idol. The right hand holds a cavalry spear. The spear rests on the earth. Some texts say that he has a reddish complexion. He is clad in armour.
- c) Virūpākṣa : The size and dress are the same as above. The left hand is also the same as above. The only difference is that it holds a cavalry spear. The right hand holds a red rope. Some texts say that he has a white complexion. The left hand holds high a scripture. The right hand holds a writing brush. Another text says that he is clad in red armour. He holds a trident in his right hand. His left hand rests against his waist.
- d) Vaiśravaṇa : The size and dress are the same as above. The left hand holds a cavalry spear that rests on the earth. The right hand is bent at the elbow, and holds a pagoda. The idol in the Kuramadera Temple shows him clad in armour. The left hand holds a trident. The right hand rests against the waist. Most idols show a yakṣa and a rākṣasa under his feet. His complexion is shown as golden or bluish-black or white.

### 3. Ascendancy of Vaiśravaṇa

The account given above shows that Prince Shōtoku and subsequent rulers did not give Vaiśravaṇa any precedence over the other three Heavenly Kings. The Shiten-nō-bon chapter in the *Kon-kō-myō-kyō* sutra of Donmuseu also accords equal status to the Four Heavenly Kings. It mentions the names of the Four Heavenly Kings once, and following this, the expression 'Four Heavenly Kings' has by and large been used. However, *Gen-gu-kyō*, the Chinese translation of the *Damamūkhāsūtra* made by the monk Ekaku and others in 445, singles Vaiśravaṇa out of the four,

and mentions his episodes a number of times, ignoring the others. This text also introduces him both as a yakṣa and their lord. In the beginning of this text, there appears a story of a previous life of the Buddha. He was a king and searching for a person to enlighten him on dharma. Wanting to test the king, Vaiśravaṇa appeared before the king in the form of a yakṣa with greenish-black appearance, bloodshot eyes, protruding fangs and hair standing like flames, and offered to enlighten the king. But, he demanded a queen and a prince as the price, which the king readily paid. Vaiśravaṇa ate both of them and then enlightened the king about dharma. The king, extremely pleased, wrote down the teaching and distributed it to all countries. After some time, Vaiśravaṇa appeared before the king in his real form, praised him and gave him back his queen and prince. This same text also narrates the following incident involving a woman. She was reading a sutra when Vaiśravaṇa happened to pass through the sky overhead with one thousand yakṣa followers. Vaiśravaṇa praised her and said : “Sister, even if I give you treasure, it will be no match. Go to Śāriputra and Moudglyāyana and pay your respect. Mention my name also.” Then he disclosed to the woman that he was Vaiśravaṇa, the lord of spirits. Again, *Zoku-is-sai-kyō-on-gi*, a T'ang period (618-907) lexical work of Buddhist expressions, says that Vaiśravaṇa has a lot of treasures. This is why a lot of people know about him. He is the lord of yakṣas and rākṣasas. Yakṣas can harm people. <sup>7)</sup>

It seems that Vaiśravaṇa acquired a special status in China around the eighth century. There is a legend saying that during the reign of the T'ang emperor Hsüan Tsung (685-762), the administrative centre of the western districts came under a siege of barbarian forces. The Indian tantric monk Amoghavajra recited the *Ninn-ō-gyō* sutra to save the situation. Suddenly, a colossal figure of Vaiśravaṇa appeared in the sky and swept away the barbarian forces. He became known as Toupa P'ishamen and gained much popularity. An old wood block picture found in Tung Huang shows him clad in armour and standing on the palms of a female figure. He holds a pagoda in one hand and a spear in another. <sup>8)</sup> *Keiran Shūyōshū*, compiled

by the Tendai Sect monk Kōshū, between 1311 and 1347, also mentions Toupa P'ishamen. It says that he is clad in armour and has a big sword. He appeared in this form in the Toupa country of the east. The Vaiśravaṇa idol in the Bishamondō sanctuary of the Hieizan monastery has this form. The deity has a pagoda in his left hand and a jewel rod in his right hand. He is a member of the retinue of Indra.<sup>9)</sup> The Vaiśravaṇa idols in Japan, by and large, have retained all these features.

The interesting coincidence here is that Vaiśravaṇa appears to have acquired a special status in Japan also around this time. *Shoku Nihongi*, the second official history of Japan, records an interesting miracle under the entry dated the twentieth day of the tenth month of 766. It says that on this day, a relic appeared from the body of the Vaiśravaṇa idol in the Sumidera Temple. Young, handsome members of various clans, twenty-three members of the fifth rank and above, and one hundred and seventy-seven members of the sixth rank and below, clad in brocade dresses and carrying banners and umbrellas, took the relic out in a procession round the city. An imperial order was issued to officials to worship the relic. Shortly afterward, a temple dedicated to Vaiśravaṇa was built north of Kyoto. Fujiwara no Isehito, an important personality of this period, constructed this temple, Kuramadera Temple, in 796. *Fusō Ryakuki*, compiled towards the end of the Heian period (794-1185), contains a record of historical events up to 1094. It gives the following story about the construction of the Kuramadera Temple. Fujiwara no Isehito was seriously thinking of building a temple dedicated to Bodhisattva Kannon. One night Kannon showed him the place in his dream. In his dream, he saw a small valley with mountains to the east and the west. There was a small brook flowing in the valley. An old man appeared and told him to build a sanctuary. Asked about his identity, the old man replied that he was the protective deity of the capital. After waking up, Isehito mounted a horse and proceeded northward. Presently he came to place he had dreamt. Overwhelmed with emotion, Isehito got down from the horse and prayed. When he looked around, he saw an idol of Vaiśravaṇa in a patch of grass.

It was neither a wooden idol, nor an earthen idol. He was very happy and prayed to the idol. He returned home with the idol. Since his original intention was to build a Kannon temple, he didn't know what to do with the idol. Again, a handsome child appeared in his dream and told him that Kannon and Vaiśravaṇa were the same. When asked about his identity, the child said that he was a member of the retinue of Vaiśravaṇa. Isehito built a sanctuary for Vaiśravaṇa here. This sanctuary, later on, became known by the name Kuramadera Temple. It was supposed to protect the north side of the capital, Kyoto. <sup>10)</sup>

*Kuramafutadera Engi*, written around 1340, however, gives a slightly different version of the origin of the Kuramadera Temple. It says that the monk Kantei dreamt of a holy site in the year 770. When he went to the site, he again dreamt of a white horse with a saddle inlaid with jewels standing on the site and covering it like a lid. He found a standing idol of Vaiśravaṇa there, and built a sanctuary for it. Fujiwara no Isehito was a high official in the capital Kyoto and a devotee of Kannon. He was searching for a holy site for building a temple for Kannon. In 796, he dreamt of a white horse with jewel-studded saddle leading him to the sanctuary of Vaiśravaṇa. As he found the idol of Vaiśravaṇa installed there, he returned without doing anything. That night he was told in dream that Vaiśravaṇa was an incarnation of Kannon. Thereupon, he built a hall and shifted the idol of Vaiśravaṇa there as the main deity. He also installed an idol of Kannon there. This temple came to be known by the name Kuramadera. <sup>11)</sup>

Terajima Ryōan gives yet another version of the temple in his encyclopaedic work *Wakan Sansai Zue* completed in 1712. Fujiwara no Isehito was searching for a suitable site to erect a Kannon temple. He learnt in a dream that the site was located somewhere to the north of the capital. He saddled his personal white horse, ordered one of his boy servants on it, and told him to let the horse go wherever it wished. The horse went into hills and suddenly stopped inside a patch of tall grass. The boy reported the matter to his master. Isehito went to the place and found an

idol of Vaiśravaṇa inside the grass. He erected there a temple for the idol and named it Kuramadera. However, he was unhappy because his original intention of erecting a Kannon temple remained unfulfilled. Kannon told him in a dream one night that she and Vaiśravaṇa were the different names of the same deity. Later, Isehito built a separate temple for Kannon close by.<sup>12)</sup>

#### 4. Vaiśravaṇa, the God of War

As discussed above, all the Four Heavenly Kings were treated as protectors of Japan in the early stages. The Toupa P'ishamen incident mentioned above appears to have projected Vaiśravaṇa as the paramount of the four gods of war to the Japanese. His status enhanced after the establishment of the Kuramadera Temple. As the threat from Korea receded, he got involved more in domestic power politics rather than in protecting Japan from external enemies. In the eighth century, the Japanese were fighting to annex the land of the Ainus, who inhabited northern Japan. In this struggle, the most notable victory was achieved by Sakanoue no Tamuramarō (758-811). He is said to have earnestly prayed for victory to Vaiśravaṇa of the Kuramadera Temple before setting out, and eventually won. On his return, he thanked the deity for protecting him, and presented his sword as a token of gratitude. This sword is a temple treasure at present. *Azuma Kagami*, mentioned above, says in the entry of the twenty-eighth day of the ninth month of 1189 that Sakanoue no Tamuramarō defeated the Ainus in northern Japan and established a temple dedicated to Vaiśravaṇa in the land he conquered. The idol he installed here was a copy of that in the Kuramadera Temple. He donated vast tracts of rice field to this temple. Minamoto no Yoritomo visited this temple on his way home after his campaign in northern Japan. *Mutsu Waki*, a work of the latter half of the eleventh century, says that Yoritomo subdued all the barbarians of the six prefectures, and that he is an incarnation of the god of the north, namely, Vaiśravaṇa. It will be seen

that this work associates Vaiśravaṇa with an important personality. Such association has been recorded in other works of the period. For instance, *Ookagami*, a literary work of the late Heian period, narrates an incident of a monk with good fortune-telling skill who was taking part in a Buddhist ceremony. Curious ladies present there asked him about the fortunes of various leading figures. The fortune-teller said that nobody could match Fujiwara no Michinaga (966-1027). His appearance and disposition were like those of Vaiśravaṇa. Michinaga, in due course of time, became the prime minister and virtual ruler of Japan. <sup>13)</sup>

Vaiśravaṇa was also worshipped for keeping personal enemies at bay. *Azuma Kagami*, mentioned above, has the following entry for the twelfth day of the fifth month of 1191. An official by the name Kōgen said that an idol of Vaiśravaṇa had, sometimes back, been installed in Takashima county of Oomi district following the wish of a retired emperor. Proper worship should be conducted in this sanctuary in the near future. Hearing this, the monk Zenshin remarked that this idol was made by a monk named Inson in 1181. After this remark, Minamoto no Yoritomo, the military dictator, said that he also had heard rumours about the idol. Since it was made when Taira no Kiyomori was in power, the obvious object was to crush the Minamoto clan. So he did not feel happy about the worship. At this time, various clans, especially the Minamoto clan and the Taira clan, were fighting for the supremacy of Japan. It is obvious that the latter worshipped Vaiśravaṇa with the sole purpose of keeping its enemies at bay. *Azuma Kagami* also records worship of Vaiśravaṇa's picture on the third day of the eighth month of 1194, and lectures on the deity on the third day of the ninth month of the same year in the camp of Minamoto no Yoritomo. <sup>14)</sup>

All these developments enhanced the popularity of Vaiśravaṇa among the common people. This is attested to by stories related to him appearing in *Konjaku Monogatari*, a collection of folk tales of the twelfth century. This collection has a story on the establishment of the Kuramadera Temple by Fujiwara no Isehito. It also

has a story of a monk who found a stone chest with the letters 'Merciful Vaiśravaṇa, the Protector of the World' inscribed on it in a hill, and built a temple for Vaiśravaṇa there. This hill was the site of a castle built in the days of Emperor Tenchi (626-671). So it is likely that there was a temple of the Four Heavenly Kings here, which fell into ruins. The curious fact is that only the name of Vaiśravaṇa was inscribed on the chest. The monk rebuilt the temple, and, following the trend of the time, dedicated it to Vaiśravaṇa.<sup>15)</sup>

## 5. Vaiśravaṇa, a God of Fortune

In China, Vaiśravaṇa had an image of a god of fortune also. As already mentioned above, the T'ang period work *Zoku-is-sai-kyō-on-gi* says that Vaiśravaṇa has a lot of treasures. This is why a lot of people know about him. The texts like *Dai-nichi-kyō* and *Bi-sha-mon-gyō* say that Vaiśravaṇa is Kubera. In Indian mythology, Kubera is the guardian of wealth. These writings projected the image of Vaiśravaṇa as a god of wealth to the common Japanese, in addition to that of protector of the country. Thus he became a god of fortune. *Uji Shūi Monogatari*, a collection of folk tales compiled between 1212 and 1221, testifies to such a picture of Vaiśravaṇa. It carries the story of a man who fasted and prayed to Vaiśravaṇa for help. A woman visited him and gave him a bowl with some rice in it. Any rice taken from it was replenished immediately. For some unknown reason, the bowl became empty after a few months. When he prayed to Vaiśravaṇa again, the woman appeared once again and gave him a letter. She told the man to deliver it to a certain person. This person turned out to be an ogre. The ogre gave the man a bagful of rice. In this case also, the rice bag never emptied. The governor of the locality came to know about the bag and demanded it. The man couldn't refuse. But, the bag became empty in no time. When the embarrassed governor returned the bag, it regained its miraculous power. *Kokon Chomonjū*, a collection of folk tales, compiled by a minor official around

1254, mentions the popular practice of monthly visits to the Kuramadera Temple to worship Vaiśravaṇa for happiness. In this particular story, however, the wish of the worshipper was not fulfilled.<sup>16)</sup>

During the Muromachi period (1336-1573), people eagerly sought money, and to cater to this demand, there arose the popular cult of Shichifukujin or the Seven Deities of Fortune. Vaiśravaṇa was inducted as one of them and worshipped widely. A spurious sutra of Vaiśravaṇa titled *Bi-sha-mon-kō-toku-kyō* was also written around this time. It says that if a person purifies his body, puts on clean cloth, faces north-east, and chants the name of Vaiśravaṇa on the first three days of the month, there is no doubt that he will get enormous wealth and happiness. It was widely believed that reciting the *Bi-sha-mon-gyō* sutra, would bring fortune. So, a popular custom of begging by reciting this sutra in front of house gates by a professional group called Shōmonji, who belonged to the lower social strata, came into vogue. In Kyoto, this group was known by the name Inujinin. *Shokoku Zue* says that on the New Year day, Inujinins carried out brief reading of the *Bi-sha-mon-gyō* sutra in front of the imperial palace gate. They belong to the group called Shōmonji. Another text *Zatsudanshō* also has a similar record. It says that in former days, in the early morning of new year, Inujinin came in front of the imperial gate and carried out ceremony of felicitation by briefly reciting of the *Bi-sha-mon-gyō* sutra. So people called this group as Shōmonji. This custom was very popular in the middle ages. However, the custom has died out at present. It was also believed that Vaiśravaṇa drove away the gods responsible for poverty. A story *Umetsu Chōja Monogatari* says that if prayers are offered to Vaiśravaṇa, he will assume his evil subduing form, appear with his followers, and shoot arrows and throw spears in such profusion that the gods responsible for poverty will scatter like leaves blown away in a storm. He will catch hold of these gods and torture them to the extent that they will promise not to remain in the vicinity. Only then will Vaiśravaṇa let them go. The popularity of Vaiśravaṇa worship during the Muromachi period is also attested to by *Inryōken*

*Nichiroku*, which records events between 1435-93. It has entries on pilgrimage to Kuramadera Temple. For instance, the entry of the third day of the sixth month of 1489 says that more than twenty thousand men and women of all classes from top to bottom came to Kumadera and returned with idols of Vaiśravaṇa. Again, the entry of the twenty-second day of the ninth month of 1493 says that a monk named Shūtei returned with an idol of Vaiśravaṇa and five pears from the temple. This second entry suggests that, at that time, the pilgrims obtained the idol of Vaiśravaṇa, installed it in the family altar, and prayed for prosperity. The association of pears with prosperity in the context of Vaiśravaṇa is very interesting. *Renga Bishamon*, a Kyōgen drama of the period, also mentions the Kuramadera pilgrims receiving this fruit of prosperity.<sup>17)</sup>

Vaiśravaṇa had a benevolent dimension also. *Fusō Ryakuki*, mentioned earlier in connection with the Kuramadera Temple, records such a picture of Vaiśravaṇa. It says that once a Zen monk was staying in the Kuramadera Temple. At night, he lit a fire because it was dark. Presently, an ogre in female form came and settled near the fire. The frightened monk struck the breast of the ogre with a burning iron rod, and ran and hid himself under a dead tree. The ogre came near and opened its mouth to eat him. He prayed to Vaiśravaṇa. A branch of a tree fell on the ogre and killed it. Also, in a Noh drama, *Kurama Tengu*, written in the fifteenth century, Vaiśravaṇa is mentioned as a merciful deity by the hero in the course of the dialogue.<sup>18)</sup>

The environment, thus, became fertile for inventing stories of the birth of Vaiśravaṇa. *Bishamon no Honji*, an anonymous work of this period, carries such a story. To narrate the story in brief, the childless king of Kuru, a weak kingdom, had a beautiful daughter through divine blessing in his ripe old age. She grew up into a beautiful maiden. The king of the mighty kingdom of Maya was also childless. This king of very advanced age demanded the princess as his wife. On being refused, he decided to invade Kuru, and take the princess by force. The king of Kuru decided to fight knowing well that the situation was hopeless. To avoid any bloodshed, the

princess decided to go to the king of Maya. On her way, she met the handsome prince of the kingdom of Yuiman. It was love at first sight. This prince had a magic sword and horse that could fly through the air. The prince assured her that he would take care of the king of Maya, and told her to return home. Of course they vowed to marry each other, and the prince promised to meet her after three years. The prince then flew to the kingdom of Maya and showed the king his power. By his one sweep of his magic sword, one thousand heads rolled to the ground. By another sweep, three thousand heads rolled. The frightened king made peace, erected a palace for the prince and provided him with one thousand wives. Even then, the prince kept on thinking about the princess. Three years passed in this way. After waiting for three years, the princess thought that the prince was dead, and died in grief. One day, the prince dreamed of her walking all alone at the foot of Mount Sumeru. He hurried to Kuru, only to learn the death of the princess. The grieving prince saw the princess again in a dream only to learn that she was in a golden well in the palace of Brahmā. After many adventures, he succeeded in finding her in the golden well. The princess arranged a meeting of the prince with Brahmā, where the prince was told to go to a mount in the east, appear as Vaiśravaṇa there, and guide people. Brahmā also said that the princess was Lakṣmī, and that she would always be by his side. Since then, Vaiśravaṇa and Lakṣmī have been fulfilling the wishes of people. In the end, the story says that those who believe in Vaiśravaṇa will, without fail, be blessed with wealth and happiness. To obtain these blessings, people should chant the mantra of Vaiśravaṇa *On Heishiramanaya sowaka (Om vaiśravaṇāya svāhā)* three times. <sup>19)</sup>

As a member of the Seven Deities of Fortune, the popularity of Vaiśravaṇa remained high during the Edo period (1603-1867) also. *Edo Meisho Zue*, a guidebook of Edo, the present day Tokyo, written in 1836, attests to the popularity of the divinities of Hindu origin among the populace of Edo. There were a large number of shrines dedicated to these divinities in and around the city attracting a large

number of devotees. The accounts of two of the Vaiśravaṇa shrines recorded in the guidebook are given below.

One is Bishamondō located in Minato Ward of Tokyo. The idol is said to have been carved by the monk Saichō. It was later worshipped by the monk Nichiren. For a long time, it was in a forlorn, rural temple. Very few people visited it. The monk Nisshin brought it to the present location. Because of miracles associated with the idol, many people visit it. Its festive day is the day of the tiger, when a large number of people assemble here. <sup>20)</sup>

The other is Bishamonten, also located in Minato Ward of Tokyo. Legends say that the idol was carved out of camphorwood by the crown prince Shōtoku, mentioned earlier. It was carried by Minamoto no Mitsunaka (? - 997), a general in the army. It became a protective deity of his descendants. It was worshipped by the mother of Minamoto no Yoritomo, the founder of the Kamakura Shogunate in 1185. <sup>21)</sup>

Even today, the Japanese have a tradition of visiting the shrines of the Seven Deities of Fortune on the New Year's day. The popularity of these deities can be easily guessed from the fact that Asakusa area of Tokyo alone has three pilgrimage courses for three different sets of the seven deities on this day. Needless to say, Vaiśravaṇa is one of the seven. <sup>22)</sup>

Natural objects bearing some resemblance with Vaiśravaṇa were also worshipped. The case of a stone has been recorded in *Shinpen Sagaminokuni Fudokikō*, an official gazetteer of the locality around Kamakura prepared around 1828. It says that this stone has the appearance of Vaiśravaṇa. The villagers have established a shrine by building a structure over the stone. <sup>23)</sup>

I would like to end this study with an interesting piece of information on Vaiśravaṇa, given in the fourteenth century work *Keiran Shūyōshū*, mentioned earlier. It says that Vaiśravaṇa has a dark woman as his companion. Her function is to create obstruction. She symbolises ignorance and desire. Both her appearance and

disposition are ugly. She perpetrates all inauspicious things. Disasters befall wherever she goes. She claims that she is the elder sister of Lakṣmī, and that they always remain together. Wherever Lakṣmī goes, she accompanies. In short, these two represent Good and Evil, and so, they are never invited together. <sup>24)</sup>

## 6. Temple Rituals

Echoing the popularity of Vaiśravaṇa among the masses, the two influential tantric sects of the day, Tendai and Shingon, held elaborate rituals for the deity in their temples. A very brief outline of the ritual as given in *A-sa-ba-shō*, a work of around 1275 by the Tendai monk Shōchō, will be given here. <sup>25)</sup>

*A-sa-ba-shō* introduces the deity as Bishamon Tennō. Next, it gives the name Vaiśravaṇa in Siddham script.

An altar is made for carrying out the ceremony. Things like lamps, butter oil and honey, good incense; lamp etc., are assembled for the worship. A priest carries out the ceremony with the help of one assistant and three attendants. The worship is performed on the first day and the fifteenth day of the month.

A number of texts dedicated to the deity appeared in due course of time. The appearance of the deity given in these texts varies slightly. According to one, the picture of Śākyamuni Buddha is drawn at the centre. The picture shows him in the preaching pose. The picture of Lakṣmī is drawn on his right. Her right hand is held in the pose of bestowing of wishes. She holds a blooming red lotus in her left hand. The picture of Vaiśravaṇa is drawn on the left side of Śākyamuni. Vaiśravaṇa holds a pagoda in his left hand. His eyes are fixed on the pagoda. He holds a club in his right hand.

Vaiśravaṇa has a large number of retinue. Prominent among them are the eight yakṣa generals Maṇibhadra, Pūrṇabhadra, Pāñcika, Śatagiri, Himavata, Viṣaka, Āṭavaka, and Pāñcāla. They are placed on his left and right. Some texts say that

Hāritī and Lakṣmī are also his retinue.

During the worship, the idol faces south. The worshippers face north. Hills and stones are drawn in the lower level of the altar. Lotuses are drawn in the upper level. Seas are drawn in the four corners. There is a canopy above and colourful flags around the deity. Foods and drinks are offered. Cymbals and drums are played.

During the ceremony, the priest makes many symbolic gestures, usually known by the name mudrā. Many steps in the ritual, for instance, inviting the deity to come to the place of worship, sending vehicle to receive him, etc., are expressed by mudrās. The priest also chants mantras, the esoteric formulas that are supposed to please the deity and produce supernatural effects.

Finally, the homa ceremony or fire sacrifice for Vaiśravaṇa is carried out in six steps. It is carried out on the altar.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

The rulers worshipped the Four Heavenly Kings for stabilising the political situation with their blessings. The royal family sincerely believed that their position could be strengthened by the divine favour of the deities. With the introduction of texts showing the importance of Vaiśravaṇa, he became the most important of the four deities. The clans eagerly worshipped him. The military leaders worshipped him for success in their campaigns. The focus was naturally on the military side of his character. As his popularity increased among the masses, the focus automatically shifted to benevolence. He became a god of wealth and prosperity, an image he has retained ever since. The popularity of the deity among the masses prompted the two influential tantric sects, Shingon and Tendai, to hold elaborate rituals for the deity in their temples.

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## Chinese Characters of Japanese and Chinese expressions used in the paper

*A-sa-ba-shō* 阿娑縛鈔 Bishamon 毘沙門 Bishamondō, temple 毘沙門堂 *Bi-sha-mon-gyō* 毘沙門經 *Bi-sha-mon-kō-toku-kyō* 毘沙門功德經 Bishamonten, temple 毘沙門天 Bishamon Tennō 毘沙門天王 chō 町 Donmusen, monk 曇無讖 (Ch. T'an Wu Ch'en) Daijō Kanpu 太政官符 *Dai-nichi-kyō* 大日經 Ekaku, monk 慧覺 (Ch. Hui Chueh) Fujiwara no Isehito 藤原伊勢人 Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 *Gen-gu-kyō* 賢愚經 Hieizan, monastery 比叡山 Hōryūji, temple 法隆寺 Hsüan Tsung, emperor 玄宗 (Jp. Gen Sō) Inson 院尊 Inujinin 犬神人 Jōnen, monk 静然 Kakuzen, monk 覺禪 Kannon 觀音 Kantei, monk 鑑禎 Kōgen 広元 Kokubunji, temple 国分寺 *Kon-kō-myō-kyō* 金光明經 *Kon-kō-myō-sai-shō-ō-kyō* 金光明最勝王經 Konkōmyō Shitennō Gokoku no Tera, temple 金光明四天王護国寺 Kōshū, monk 光宗 Kuramadera, temple 鞍馬寺 *Kuramafutadera Engi* 鞍馬蓋寺縁起 *Kurama Tengu*, 鞍馬天狗 Kyōgen 狂言 Minamoto 源 Minamoto no Mitsunaka 源満仲 Minamoto no Yoritomo 源頼朝 Mononobe no Moriya 物部守屋 Nichiren, monk 日蓮 *Nin-nō-gyō* 仁王經 Nisshin, monk 日親 *Renga Bishamon* 連歌毘沙門 Saichō, monk 最澄 Sakanoue no Tamuramarō 坂上田村麿 Shichifukujin 七福神 Shingon, sect 真言 *Shi-ten-nō-bon* 四天王品 *Shi-ten-nō-go-koku-bon* 四天王護国品 Shitennōji, temple 四天王寺 Shōchō, monk 承澄 *Shokoku Zue* 諸国図会 Shōmonji 唱門師 Shōtoku, crown prince 聖徳太子 Sumidera, temple 隅寺 Shūtei, monk 集禎 Taira 平 Taira no Kiyomori 平清盛 Takashima county of Oomi district 近江国高島郡 T'ang 唐 Tenchi, emperor 天知天皇 Tendai, sect 天台 *tendoku* 点読 Tōdaiji, temple 東大寺 Toupa P'ishamen 兜跋毘沙門 (Jp. Tōbatsu Bishamon) Tung Huang 敦煌 *Umetsu Chōja Monogatari* 梅津長者物語 Unshō, monk 運敞 *Zatsudanshō* 雑談抄 *Zenshin*, monk 善信 *Zoku-is-sai-kyō-on-gi* 統一切教音義