

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF JAPANESE BUDDHISM

### THE EARLY PERIOD (ca. 500-800 CE)

#### **THE YAMATO PERIOD (ca. 500-645)**

Japanese civilization was young and relatively undeveloped, so Buddhism (and associated elements of continental Asian civilization) offered the Japanese much that was impressive and valuable.

Korean immigrants brought their Buddhism (and other Korean religious traditions) to Japan; they were not given much attention in the historical sources.

#### **The "Official" Introduction of Buddhism (538 CE):**

Buddhist texts and images were sent to the Yamato king by the ruler of the Korean kingdom of Paekche, who was seeking a military alliance.

Buddhism was championed at the Yamato court by the parvenu Soga clan; leaders of other clans (e.g., the Mononobe, and those associated with the indigenous religious traditions, like the Nakatomi and Imibe) opposed the imperial acceptance of Buddhism. After a prolonged political struggle, Buddhism won official acceptance.

**Prince Shōtoku (574-622):** the most famous early patron of Buddhism; credited with texts, temples, etc.; sought to employ continental traditions (Buddhism and Confucianism) in the consolidation of his government.

#### **THE NARA PERIOD (710-784)**

Buddhism was practiced almost exclusively by priests at the Nara court.

The great Tōdai-ji temple was constructed (752).

The "Six Schools of Nara Buddhism":

1. Ritsu: texts on monastic discipline (Vinaya)
2. Kusha: systematic philosophical analysis (Abhidharma)
3. Jūjitsu: abstract philosophy (Satyasiddhi)
4. Sanron: anti-philosophical philosophy (Madhyamika)
5. Hossō: philosophy of "Buddha-ness in all things" (Yogacara)
6. **Kegon:** the Chinese Hua-yen school; philosophy of "interrelatedness of all things"

Only the Kegon, Hossō, and Ritsu schools officially survive; none have any lay adherents.

## THE PERIOD OF INDEPENDENT GROWTH: THE HEIAN PERIOD (794-1185)

### **Tendai Buddhism** (based on the Chinese *T'ien-t'ai* school)

Founded by **Saichō** ("Dengyō Daishi"; 767-822) at Mt. Hiei (805)

Based upon the *Lotus Sutra* (*Saddharma-pundarika/Myōhō-rence-kō*□/*Hokekyō*)

Comprehensive approach: unity of teachings and practice

Teachings: Unity of the Buddha and all sentient things; *hongaku* ("original enlightenment").

Practices: Morality; meditation; *nembutsu* (devotional meditation focussed on Amida).

**Ennin** (794-864): went to China; brought back *mikkyō* ("the secret teachings")

Enchin (814-ca. 890): a rival of Ennin; his followers established new center at Miidera

10th century: violent schism between the Hiei branch and the Miidera branch

### **Shingon Buddhism** (or "Esoteric Buddhism"; based on the Chinese *Chen-yen* school)

Founded by **Kūkai** ("Kōbō Daishi"; 774-835) at Mt. Koya (806)

Strong esoteric emphasis: requires true knowledge of special rituals that are conveyed privately to the initiate.

Teachings: Our physical being is a vital element of our true reality. Correct performance of the rituals unites the initiate with the cosmic unity represented by the Buddha Vairocana (Japanese: Dainichi).

Practices: secret ritual use of *mandalas* (sacred diagrams of true reality), *mantras* (vocal expressions of true reality), *mudras* (gestures expressing true reality).

A few Westerners have become Shingon priests.

## THE SHINTŌ-BUDDHIST SYNTHESIS

10th century (Late Heian period): Buddhists identified the many Shintō *kami* as manifestations of the various Buddhas and bodhisattvas:

Tendai: "the *honji-suijaku* theory"

Shingon: "the *kenmitsu* theory"

12th-13th century: Theorists of the Ryōbu school of Shintō inverted those notions, identifying the Buddhas and bodhisattvas as manifestations of the Shintō *kami*.

Buddhism and Shintō remained completely intertwined until the 14th-15th centuries, and remained closely linked until the Meiji period (1868).

## THE FLOWERING OF JAPANESE BUDDHISM: THE KAMAKURA PERIOD (1185-1333)

Japan was ruled by a series of *shōguns* (generals) at Kamakura.

Many believed that we are now living in the age of *mappō* ("the final days of the Dharma").

Three important new forms of Buddhism arose:

1. Pure Land (and Shin) Buddhism
2. Nichiren Buddhism
3. Zen Buddhism.

Common elements among the new schools founded in the Kamakura era:

- 1) roots in the Tendai traditions of Mt. Hiei;
- 2) a simple method of salvation;
- 3) a belief that salvation is accessible to all people (even laity);
- 4) a belief that the ultimate ideals can be attained and practiced within everyday life.

### **Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdo)**

Several Tendai forerunners in the late Heian period (Genshin, et al.)

Founded by Hōnen (1133-1212)

Teachings: Since we live in the age of *mappō*, our hope for salvation rests upon the grace of **the Buddha Amida (Amitābha)**, who long ago created **the Pure Land**.

Practice: the *nembutsu* devotional meditation; no other practices are effective any more.

### **Shin Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū)**

A special branch of Pure Land, founded by **Shinran** (1173-1263), a disciple of Hōnen

Teachings: "We are saved by faith, and that by grace." Humans are too corrupt ever to be able to earn salvation; we are totally dependent upon the saving grace of the Buddha Amida, who long ago saved us all through his 18th Vow.

Practice: Allowing *shinjin* ("sincere faith") to develop fully from within us.

Shinran broke with all earlier Buddhist tradition by marrying, raising a family, and living among the ordinary people: "neither monk nor layman." His daughter established the Hongan-ji temple, where Jōdo Shinshū is still centered.

Jōdo Shinshū remains extremely strong in Japan, and has been brought to the U.S. by Japanese-Americans ("The Buddhist Churches of America"; mostly on the West Coast).

### **Nichiren Buddhism**

Founded by **Nichiren** (1222-1282)

Teachings: Salvation rests in the *Lotus Sutra*

Practice: Chanting a formula of praise to the *Lotus Sutra*

Nichiren and his followers denounced all other schools of Buddhism.

Activist, evangelical, and confrontational, Nichiren hailed the virtue of martyrdom.

20th-century: Extended into a nationalist movement called Soka Gakkai (brought to U.S.).

## **Zen Buddhism** (Chinese "Ch'an")

### **Rinzai Zen** (Chinese *Lin-chi*)

Introduced from China by **Eisai** (1141-1215), who is credited with bringing tea to Japan. Rejected at capital; found acceptance among the warrior class (*samurai*) at Kamakura. Eisai believed in *mappō*, and accepted both the esoteric *mikkyō* practices and the devotional *nembutsu* meditation practiced at Mt. Hiei.

Emphasized disciplined meditation (*zazen*) under the guidance of a teacher.

Goal: *kenshō*, "seeing into one's true nature"—a repeatable experience.

Rinzai temples operated schools that transmitted Neo-Confucianism; credited with inspiring many developments in Japanese culture, including the Tea Ceremony, Nō drama, *haiku* poetry, and other famous elements of art and literature.

Developed a curriculum of *kōan* study under disciples of **Hakuin** (1686-1769).

Popularized in the West by D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966).

### **Sōtō Zen** (Chinese *Ts'ao-tung*)

Introduced from China by **Dōgen** (1200-1253).

Rejected by the authorities at Mt. Hiei, Dōgen established a new center (the Eihei-ji) in the distant north; he had several women disciples.

Dōgen criticized other schools (even Eisai's Zen) as "impure Buddhism": "the true intention of the Buddha can be found only in the sūtras."

Teachings: "all existence is Buddha-ness"; later: "Zen is everyday life."

Practice: "sitting (*zazen*) only."

Goal: none. Since we already have "original enlightenment" (*hongaku*), we need only sit like the Buddha sat.

Dōgen stressed the necessity of monastic practice; the later Sōtō tradition did not.

Accepted among the peasantry, not the *samurai*; not widely popularized in the West.