

UNFOLDING ENLIGHTENMENT

A SHORT PRIMER ON THE HISTORY JAPANESE BUDDHISM

story and photo by Skye Hohmann

Buddhism first arrived in Japan via the Korean Peninsula in the 6th century CE, and prompted immediate controversy at the Imperial court. Its proponents (those with connections on the continent) advocated the strengths of Chinese government, culture, and Confucianism. Its detractors (notably military clans, and those involved with Shinto rituals) opposed the alien religion. Despite the controversy, however, the new religion gained a solid foothold under the devout regent Prince Shotoku, and spread throughout the court.

Nara

By the time the capital moved to Nara in 710, a half-dozen sects had taken root, and in the small world of the court, Buddhism and politics quickly grew intertwined. Temples were founded, monks ordained, and priests prayed on behalf of court and country. The Great Buddha at Todai-ji, which tourists flock to even today, was commissioned by Emperor Shomu in 745 in an effort to alleviate a virulent plague. It took seven years to complete and nearly bankrupted the government.

Power gradually shifted away from nobles and the imperial family, and towards the Buddhist church. In the 8th century, the Empress Shotoku's obsession with the faith allowed the ambitious monk Doko to effectively rule on her behalf. After her death, Doko was banished, monks were barred from holding political office, and women were excluded from the imperial succession – a decision which remains in force today.

Heian

This was only a setback, however, and Buddhism remained so influential that a generation later, the Emperor Kammu, finding that the power of the monasteries rivaled his own, decided to leave Nara behind and moved his capital to Heian-kyo (Kyoto). To counter the Nara Buddhists, he founded his own temples in the new capital - Toji and Sai-ji - and sent young monks to China to bring back a faith strong enough to rival the Buddhists at Nara.

The returning monks, Kukai and Saicho, subsequently founded the Shingon and Tendai schools and their respective mountain temples at Mount Koya and Mount Hiei. (Saicho is also credited with bringing tea to Japan.) The new monasteries became increasingly popular, and increasingly powerful. Soon, temples had popularized Buddhism nation-wide.

Much of Japanese history has been a three-way tug-of-war. As the Heian period descended increasingly into civil war, with emperors wresting power from the noble families, only to lose it again, the Buddhist temples began to arm themselves. In turn, Emperors began turning to the temples, and taking monastic vows.

In an increasingly unstable age, new Buddhist schools brought salvation

to the worried masses. Pure Land Buddhism taught that enlightenment could be achieved through faith and prayer, while the slightly less pragmatic Zen Buddhism offered enlightenment through meditation. Later came Nichiren Buddhism, which emphasized the Lotus Sutra, and made the shocking claim that women, too, could obtain enlightenment.

Under the Shoguns

Buddhism was never quite free from worldly interests, however. Monks were beginning to fight. They fought each other. Monks fought samurai warlords. Monks fought for samurai warlords. When Emperor Go-Daigo

staged a briefly successful coup against the Kamakura shogunate, he was backed by the warrior monks of the Tendai sect at Mount Hiei.

When the Ashikaga shoguns in turn seized power in 1336, they favored Zen. Fighting subsequently broke out between Tendai and Zen temples. Finally, Oda Nobunaga sacked Mount Hiei in 1571, and though the temple was later rebuilt, the fighting heart had been cut out of the warrior monks.

When Tokugawa Ieyasu solidified his power in 1603, Buddhism was named as official state religion, but there its power ended. It was absolutely clear that in matters of morality and state Buddhism came second to Confucianism and Shinto.

Forming new sects and founding temples was strictly regulated. Temples once again became places of learning and culture. Zen thrived, and Rinzaï Buddhism, and its unanswerable koan riddles, was restored.

Modern Times

By the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Buddhism and Shinto, had naturally fused together. The new nationalism

of the Meiji State favored the native Shinto, however, and mandated a splitting of the two faiths. Shrines and temples were separated, and the rules changed. In 1872 monks (though not nuns) were allowed to marry, bringing to a final end the long reign of the powerful monasteries. Family-run temples, often passed down from father to son, became the norm.

During Japan's imperial expansion, which culminated in the Second World War, Buddhism was strictly controlled. To suggest that the Buddha might in any way be above the Shinto deity that was the emperor was heresy.

In the religious freedom of the post-war era, Japanese Buddhism has adapted and carried on. Old sects and ancient temples decline, but new sub-sects and fusion-sects spring up with regularity and persistence. Zen has followers worldwide.

As Japan urbanizes and ages, many prematurely lament the loss of traditional Buddhism. It seems clear, however, that Buddhism in Japan has never been static, and that it will once again evolve, and thrive.

