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Summary

Early Buddhism in Japan was heavily influenced by Korea and China. This article is a historical timeline of how Buddhism came to be in Japan and was published in the 1980's.

The Introduction of Buddhism into Japan from Korea

Tradition has it that Buddhism was introduced to Japan from Korea in 552 A.D. There is evidence that the Japanese court knew about Buddhism before then.

Korea in the 6th Century was divided into three main states: Koguryo (which the Japanese called Kokuri) in the North, Paikache (which the Japanese called Kudara) in the Southwest, and Silla (which the Japanese called Shiragi) in the Southeast. In 545 A.D, the Paikache King, named Syong-myong, offered a statue of Buddha, sixteen feet high, to the Japanese Emperor, Kimmei. The Japanese records of which we know show no evidence that the statue was received. Later, the Paikache King sent another mission to Japan with a different statue of Buddha and a number of manuscripts of Buddhist Sutras. The Sutras are writings of the dialogues of the Buddha written down many years after he spoke them. Opinions were divided in Japan of how to receive the gifts. It was decided to approve the worship of the Buddha statue as a kind of temporary experiment and watch any sign that native divinities might be offended. Soga no Iname turned his house at Mukuhara into a temple and installed the Buddha image. Hardly had his temple been opened when a disease of plague swept the land, so the temple was burnt and the statue thrown into a canal.

In 577, another mission arrived from Paikache, which included three priests and a nun, a temple architect and a sculptor of Buddhist images.

Soga no Umako, the son of Iname, built the temple as a shrine for the stone image of the future Buddha Mikoku (Maitreya in Sanskrit). Once again a disease broke out and the temple was burnt. In time the plague disease grew worse. People then began to think that the plague was not the fault of the Buddha but rather the result of their rejection of the image. The Sogas received permission to practice the Buddhist religion as a family religion and so Buddhism was formally established in Japan. The Soga family became powerful.

Shotoku Taishi (Prince Shotoku)

Various names are given to Shotoku Taishi. His original name was Prince Umayado, Umayado means "Stable-door". This is explained by a story that he was born unexpectedly while his mother was inspecting the Palace and had just arrived at the stables, his mother was the sister of Soga no Umako and his father was the Emperor Kimmei. He was said to be able to speak as soon as he was born.

A dispute arose on who was to be the next Emperor after the death of

Emperor Kimmei. Soga and Mononobe (the person who had burnt the temple and images of Buddha) went to battle to settle the question. Soga and Prince Umayado (the future Shotoku Taishi) made Buddhist vows before going to battle against those opposing them. They promised to build temples to the four Heavenly Kings if they were successful. Soga promised to spread Buddhism. They won the battle and Killed Mononobe.

The Prince built the temple of Tennoji at Osaka on Mononobe's estate. Soga built the temple of Hokoji near Nara. Soga had the new Emperor assassinated and Soga's niece became Empress Suiko. Umayado became Prince Imperial and Regent.

The Imperial Prince, Shotoku, is considered the founder of Japanese Buddhism. His teachers were Korean Monks. Buddhism flourished and temples and images were built. Students were exchanged with China in 608 to study Buddhism. By 623, there were some 46 Buddhist temples, 816 priests and 569 nuns. Shotoku lectured on the Lotus Sutra and wrote commentaries to explain its meaning.

There was an effort to popularise Buddhism. Although official records show Shotoku following the path of Soga Buddhism, he developed a Buddhism based on his personal study of such Sutras as the Lotus Sutra (Hokke). There are differences between Shotoku's Buddhism and the Soga family Buddhism since the Sogas had overlooked some parts of Buddhism.

Ryobu-Shinno (Twofold Shinto)

Naturally, there was some hostility between the native religious institutions, which were called Shinto. Shinto means "the Way of the Gods" as opposed to Butsudo, "The Way of the Buddha".

Both in China and Japan, it has always been considered natural to follow more than one religion. Early Japanese Buddhism raised no objection to the performance of Shinto ceremonies.

The two religions, although separate, worked together from this time for more than a thousand years.

The Nara Period

Japanese Buddhism from early times had a close connection between the government and religion, Buddhist ritual being part of court ceremonies. Provincial temples known as Kokubunji were built. The Kokubunjis were branches of Todaiju at the Capital city of Nara which was a sort of Buddhist headquarters. The temples became cultural centres. In 710, the capital was made Nara, The Hosso sect was established there. The Emperor Shomu (724-748) built roads and bridges throughout the country. The Priest Gyogi of the Hosso sect helped these projects by dividing his time between religion, art and civil engineering and improved irrigation and communications. The Emperor gave him the rank of Daisojo which is like an Archbishop. He promoted harmony between the Shinto and Buddhist religions. After his death, he was given the title Bosatsu, which is Japanese for Bodhisattva.

The Daibutsu, or Great Buddha was built at this time. This is over 53 feet high and can be seen today. It was installed in 749 and dedicated in 752. Many foreign Buddhist Monks came to Japan for this occasion. Many sects were founded in this period. The seventy-five years or so during which the court was at Nara (710-784) form a well marked period of the history of

Buddhism when it was most prosperous.

THE INTRODUCTION OF BUDDHISM INTO JAPAN FROM CHINA

The T'ang Dynasty (618-907) in China had an empire covering the whole of China and part of Central Asia. The T'ang emperors had a policy of religious tolerance. As a result, since Buddhism was widespread, it became very popular. The translations of Buddhist writings were the basis of Chinese Buddhism. Buddhism served all classes of people. The Buddhist festivals provided entertainment for all. Some of the Chinese Buddhist Schools, such as T'ien-t'ai and Ch'an became Chinese in nature.

The T'ien T'ai School

The School of Buddhism was established in China by Chin-i (538-597). At the age of seven he remembered all the words of a Sutra after hearing it but once. He became a Monk and lived his life at a mountain called Mt. T'ien-T'ai in modern Chekiang.

The School he established is called T'ien-t'ai. He lectured on the Lotus Sutra, which teaches that the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, was an earthly manifestation of the eternal Buddha. The T'ien-t'ai theory is that there were five periods in Sakyamuni's teachings. He explained that the elementary ideas were taught first and in later periods the higher truths were taught. The T'ien-t'ai slogan is: "In every particle of dust, in every moment of thought, the whole universe is contained". He taught that all persons could become the Buddha, since all possessed the Buddha-nature.

This is put as; i-nien-san-ch'ien (one thought in the three thousand worlds). It means the everyday life of the layman is part of the life of the Buddha. The T'ien-t'ai scripture tells the story of a Monk who asked a person to imagine a single hair pore, and then a distant large city. When the person did so, the Monk drew the lesson that the hair pore and the large city are integrated in the absolute mind. The theory is that everything is a manifestation of the absolute mind therefore, the Buddha-nature is found everywhere.

The doctrines of the Chinese school of T'ien-t'ai or Tendai was formally introduced to Japan in 800, when the Monk Saicho ordained some 100 followers near Heian.

Method of Naming Temples

There is a double title system of naming Buddhist temples. The original centre is a honzon or honji (original yama, also san or zan) or tera (also ji or in). The offshoot centre is a matsu-ji (a branch tera). A matsu-ji as a rule is smaller than the honji and is under the orders of the original honzan. Sometimes a matsu-ji may, in turn, produce another matsu-ji of the third degree, and this can be continued. In fact, there are some tera of the fourth or fifth degree. All the sections are called shu. The word shu is usually translated "sect" although this is misleading. The word "branch" or "church" might be a better word.

The Shingon School

The Word Shingon means "True (Shin) Word (Gon)". Like the Tendai, the Shingon School established its independence from the "Nara" sects and established its centre on Mount Koyo. Shingon is a branch of "right-handed" Tantrism and places great emphasis on ritual imagery and ceremony. Of

equal importance was the use of particular word formulae known as Mantra. The Shingon beliefs were worked out by Kukai. He used secret rites of Indian origin that he learnt in China.

Mantra - Sacred Words of Power

Mantra is a Sanskrit word meaning "instrument of thought". Mantra is a set of sounds or words or part of a Buddhist book (Sutra) which, when chanted, produces good effects for the user. It does not appear that the sound in itself produces the good effects. It is probably something to do with the state of mind of the user.

Some teachers of Mantra attach immense importance to the correctness of sound and vibration. When Mantra is sounded out loud, it can be called "outer" Mantra. Other teachers say it is better to "think" the Mantra silently without saying the words. This method can be called "inner" Mantra. Which system is best is a matter of opinion, but both an inner Mantra are considered to produce good effects.

Some of the good effects claimed by the use of Mantra are such things as curing illness, protecting the user from wild animals and bringing peaceful feelings to the mind. By reciting a Mantra, sinners can avoid the consequences of their evil doings. In addition, Mantra is said to allow the mind to understand some of the nature of the universe.

Mudra - Symbolic Hand Positions

Mudra, like Mantra, has an important part in some Buddhist rituals. Mudra is a way of holding the hands. There are 295 hand positions listed in the Shingon manual. (In Japanese this manual is called Si-do-in-dzou).

The priest uses these during religious ceremonies. Since they are often made under his robe and done rapidly, those present may, not be aware the priest is using them. The Sanskrit word "mudra" is equivalent to the Chinese word "Yin". This became the word "in" in Japanese and means "seal". Just as a seal guarantees documents to be true, so mudra eliminates the possibility of error. The mudra used by the Shingon school is called Kai-in and that used by the Tendai is called So-in.

KUKAI (Koho Daishi)

Kukai was born in 774 A.D. and was the son of a noble. He went to university to prepare for an official career. He was not satisfied with what he learnt about Confucianism or Taoism and went to live in a Buddhist Monastery. When he was about twenty-one after many years of Buddhist meditation, he saw a vision of a Buddhist saint and became a Buddhist.

He followed Saicho's example and went to China. He studied the form of Buddhism known as Shingon. He learnt the mysteries of mantra and mudra in China. In 719, Vajrabodhi, accompanied by his Ceylonese disciple Amoghavajra, travelled to China from India and introduced the Esoteric system. The word "esoteric" means "designed for an inner circle of disciples". Esoteric teachings can only be communicated or understood by those persons who have been initiated into the secret part of the teachings. In the years 801 and 805, Kukai studied under Hui-kuo (Kei-ka Ajari) who was a disciple of Amoghavajra. So it can be seen that the esoteric teachings that Kukai learnt were relatively new in China at that time, compared to the teachings known in Japan. When he returned to Japan, he founded a

Monastery on Mount Koya. He trained a group of disciples. When his rival Saicho died, Kukai was appointed Abbot of a State Temple, Toji in Miyako. Later, he was made a priest of the Inner Sanctuary (called Nai-dojo in Japanese) of the Imperial Court. At the height of his fame, aged 61, it is said that he had himself buried alive while he was in a state of deep meditation. (This state is called Samadhi in Sanskrit). His disciples taught the mysteries of mantra and mudra of this form of Buddhism. These are still practiced today in Japan. The title Daishi (meaning Great Teacher) was given to Kukai and he is known as Koho Daishi.

There are two lines of transmission of teaching; those teachers who propagated the doctrine, and those who handed down the secret rites.

Kukai was a miracle worker, writer, painter and sculptor. He had a number of successors who were to play important roles in Japan. Today in Japan, there are over 18,000 terra and chapels of Shingon and its branches. There are over 22,000 Shingon priests, nuns and novices at the present time. Over 10,000,000 Japanese persons practice Shingon. This means Shingon is the largest school of Buddhism in Japan

Mandala - mystic circle or cosmogram

Shingon believers hold that art was a means of revealing the essence of the Divine. According to the Shingon concept, the universe was divided into "two parts" (Ryobu) upon which the two mandalas were based.

Closely associated with mantra and mudra is the mandala. This is a diagram that shows the gods in their mystic connections, usually painted on cloth or paper, or drawn on the ground. The gods are pictured in their visible forms or as Sanskrit letters. Tantrists divide the Buddhist ideas into groups, such as for example male and female, peaceful and dreadful aspects.

Entry into the mandala is called abhisheka or initiation into the secrets of the School. According to the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, the mandala image is merely a temporary form with no reality at all to be abandoned whenever the viewer becomes aware of the Buddha essence within him. The esoteric Buddhist symbol of the mandala is the circle which expands from the core. Some mandalas are of mathematical construction. Mandalas are still painted by Buddhist priests in Japan. Some of these mandala paintings are exhibited at art shows throughout the world. A famous living Japanese artist who paints mandala is the Buddhist Monk Sengai Ato who toured Australia in 1977 and exhibits regularly in America.