The Religious Traditions of Japan, 500–1600

The Religious Traditions of Japan, 500–1600, describes in outline the development of Japanese religious thought and practice from the introduction of writing to the point at which medieval attitudes gave way to a distinctive pre-modern culture, a change that brought an end to the dominance of religious institutions. A wide range of approaches using the resources of art history, social and intellectual history, as well as doctrine, is brought to bear on the subject. It attempts to give as full a picture as possible of the richness of the Japanese tradition as it succeeded in holding together on the one hand Buddhism, with its sophisticated intellectual structures, and on the other hand the disparate local cults that eventually achieved a kind of unity under the rubric of Shintō. Much of this book is concerned with the way in which Buddhism used the local cults to consolidate its position of hegemony while at the same time offering an example against which Shintō could slowly invent itself. An understanding of this process of constant and at times difficult interaction is essential to a deeper appreciation of Japan’s history and its cultural achievements.

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The Religious Traditions of Japan, 500–1600

Richard Bowring
Contents

List of illustrations ix
Preface xi
Glossary of commonly used Buddhist terms xiv
A note on dates xvi
Abbreviations xvi

Introduction
Terminology 1
Shintō 3
Buddhism 4
Preview 6

Part I The arrival of Buddhism and its effects (c.538–800)
Chronology 12

1 The introduction of Buddhism 15
1.1 Gifts from Paekche 15
1.2 Patronage at court 19
1.3 The ‘Beetle-wing’ cabinet 23

2 Creating a dynasty 36
2.1 The problem of succession 36
2.2 Native beliefs 38
2.3 The Jingikan 41
2.4 Inventing the past 46

3 Buddhism and the early state 54
3.1 The emergence of a religious organisation 54
3.2 Sūtras to protect the state 64
3.3 The Medicine King and the Pensive Prince 68

4 Monuments at Nara 77
4.1 Kōfukuji 77
4.2 Tōdaiji 78
4.3 The question of ordination 86
4.4 Explaining anomalies 88
4.5 Hachiman 91
Part II From Saichō to the destruction of Tōdaiji (800–1180)

Chronology 110

5 The beginnings of a ‘Japanese’ Buddhism: Tendai 113
5.1 The situation in 800 113
5.2 Saichō 115
5.3 The Tiantai tradition 119
5.4 The Lotus sūtra 125
5.5 The creation of Tendai 129

6 The beginnings of a ‘Japanese’ Buddhism: Shingon 135
6.1 Kūkai to China 135
6.2 Fundamental characteristics of tantric Buddhism 141
6.3 Kūkai returns 146
6.4 The creation of Shingon 148
6.5 The Shingon tradition after the death of Kūkai 151

7 Buddhism and the state in Heian Japan 153
7.1 Tendai politics 153
7.2 Tantrism triumphant 162
7.3 Religious aspects of life at court 168

8 Shrine and state in Heian Japan 179
8.1 Kasuga 179
8.2 Cataloguing the native gods 184
8.3 The Ise and Kamo shrines 191

9 The rise of devotionalism 196
9.1 Turning to face west 196
9.2 Amitābha’s vows 198
9.3 Early Pure Land Buddhism 200
9.4 Covenanting for salvation 204
9.5 Visions of heaven and hell 212

10 In a time of strife 217
10.1 Prophecies of doom fulfilled 217
10.2 Pilgrimages to Kumano 222
10.3 Japanese monks in Song China 226
10.4 The spread of tantric modes of thought 229
Part III  From the destruction of Tōdaiji to the fall of Go-Daigo (1180–1330)

Chronology  242

11 For and against exclusive practice of the nenbutsu
11.1 Hōnen  245
11.2 Myōe  253
11.3 Shinran  262

12 Religious culture of the early ‘middle ages’  267
12.1 Baking the cake  267
12.2 Tōdaiji and Ise  268
12.3 Of deer and monkeys  274
12.4 A dream of swords and sheaths  280

13 Chan Buddhism  287
13.1 The early development of Chan  287
13.2 Chan meditation techniques  293
13.3 Chan after the end of the Tang  295
13.4 Chan in the thirteenth century  301

14 Zen Buddhism  304
14.1 The beginnings of Zen in Japan  304
14.2 Eihei Dōgen  308
14.3 Official patronage  317

15 Reform from within and without  321
15.1 The Saidaiji community  321
15.2 Dancing to salvation  328
15.3 Worshipping the Lotus  332

16 The emergence of Shintō  344
16.1 Japan in 1280  344
16.2 The mañḍalisation of Japan  345
16.3 Watarai Shintō  351
16.4 New myths of origin  354
16.5 The literal reading of metaphor  358

17 Taking stock  363
17.1 Buddhist historiography  363
17.2 Metropolitan Zen  368
17.3 Zen in the countryside  371
# Contents

## Part IV From the fall of Go-Daigo to the death of Nobunaga (1330–1582)

### Chronology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 Two rival courts</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.1 Class as a factor</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.2 Go-Daigo’s legacy</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.3 Saving the souls of warriors</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.4 The growth of Pure Land congregations</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.5 The Lotus sects</td>
<td>397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Muromachi Zen</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.1 The five mountains</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.2 ‘Those below the grove’</td>
<td>404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.3 Three men of Zen</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 The end of the medieval</td>
<td>419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.1 Yoshida Shintō</td>
<td>419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.2 The rise of Honganji</td>
<td>423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.3 Playing with fire</td>
<td>426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.4 Jesuits</td>
<td>430</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Appendices: Reading Shingon’s two maṇḍala

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Diamond World maṇḍala</td>
<td>436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Womb World maṇḍala</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maṇḍala in use</td>
<td>445</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### References

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>448</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>462</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Head of Yakushi Nyorai: Kohfukuji National Treasure Museum.</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Gilt-bronze Šākyamuni triad: Hōryūji Kondō; photo: Asukaen</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>‘Beetle-wing’ cabinet: Hōryūji; photo: Asukaen</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>‘Casting away the body’, cabinet panel: Hōryūji; photo: Asukaen</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>‘The worship of relics’, cabinet panel: Hōryūji; photo: Asukaen</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>‘Indra as a devil’, cabinet panel: Hōryūji; photo: Asukaen</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>‘Mt Sumeru’, cabinet panel: Hōryūji; photo: Asukaen</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bhaiṣajyagururāja: Yakushiji; photo: Asukaen</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Yakushiji pedestal: Yakushiji; photo: Asukaen</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Nikkō: Yakushiji; photo: Asukaen</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Gekkō: Yakushiji; photo: Asukaen</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Gandhāran Bodhisattva: © Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Maitreya: Chiḥūjū; photo: Asukaen</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Tōdaiji in the late eighth century. Drawing courtesy of Joan R. Piggott</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Shinra Myōjin: Onjōji (Miidera); photo: M. Sakamoto</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Mahāvairocana in the form of a bodhisattva: Seattle Art Museum, Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection; photo: Paul Macapia</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>A six-pronged, double-ended vajra: Seattle Art Museum, Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection; photo: Paul Macapia</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The main Inner Shrine at Ise, side and front elevations. Courtesy of Ise jingū</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Aerial view of the Inner Shrine at Ise. Courtesy of Ise jingū</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Gorintō grave markers</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Kūya: Rokuharamitsuadera; photo: Asukaen</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Myōe meditating in the forest: Kōzanji</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>A Kasuga ‘deer mandala’, late fifteenth century: Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection; photo: James Austin</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>‘Acalanātha’s sword’: Seattle Art Museum, Margaret E. Fuller Purchase Fund; photo: Paul Macapia</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Aizen myōō: © Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Japan in the shape of a vajra: Seattle Art Museum, Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection; photo: Paul Macapia</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Reaching the Pure Land through the ten worlds: © Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
x  List of illustrations

28  A portrait of Ikkyū by Bokusui: Tokyo National Museum  413
29  The eccentric Fenggan: Tokyo National Museum  416
30  A winter scene, Sesshū Tōyō: Tokyo National Museum  418
31  Diamond World maṇḍala, Tōji. Heian period; photo: Benridō  438
32  Diamond World maṇḍala (diagrammatic outline)  439
33  Womb World maṇḍala, Tōji. Heian period; photo: Benridō  442
34  Womb World maṇḍala (diagrammatic outline)  443

Maps

1  The provinces of Japan in the eighth century  14
2  Japan and Korea: early sixth century  18
3  Japan and Korea: late sixth century  18
4  The home provinces in the early Heian period  112
5  Sea routes taken by Saichō and Kūkai  117
6  Route taken by Ennin during his travels  155
7  Hieizan and the surrounding area  157
8  Shrines according to the Engishiki (927)  187
9  Route of the pilgrimage to Kumano  223
10  The travels of Ippen and Nichiren  333
11  Areas of Christian influence in Japan, late sixteenth century  433
Preface

This book began life as something different. As my own interests shifted from Heian to medieval literature, where religious matters play a far larger role, I found myself handicapped by my ignorance of Japanese Buddhism. Faced with such a dilemma, one's first instinct is to turn to a survey in an accessible Western language. A number of works suggested themselves – *Japanese Buddhism* by Charles Eliot (1935), *Japanische Religionsgeschichte* by Wilhelm Gundert (1935), the work of Hartmut Rotermund, Kitagawa’s *Religion in Japanese history* (1966), and Daigan and Alicia Matsunaga’s *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism* (1974) – but all of them needed updating and none of them was quite what I had hoped for. There was clearly a need for a new history of the subject. Having now become sidetracked into matters religious, and intent, as usual, on running before I could walk, I devised a grandiose plan for a book on the history of one particular temple. The temple I chose was Daigoji. Soon after, I was awarded a two-year British Academy Readership (1995–97), which gave me the freedom to start on the necessary groundwork. I owe the Academy a great deal for allowing me to retool myself at what I fondly, but probably misguidedly, thought of as mid-career.

It did not take me long to realise four things. Firstly, that the choice of Daigoji had been a good one. Secondly, that the sources for such a study were not in a usable state and that obtaining access to them (never mind reading them) would take years. Thirdly, that such was the state of the field that I really needed to write a history of Japanese Buddhism first, and only then try and deal with the history of a single temple. And fourthly, that it would be impossible to treat Buddhism in isolation from what we think of as the ‘native tradition’, namely Shintō. A good outline of this latter subject has been available in German for some time (Naumann 1988, 1994), and we now have an excellent short introduction in English (Inoue et al. 2003), but there is nothing that attempts an overall picture of Buddhism, let alone both traditions. There is certainly room for a wide-ranging history of Japanese religion as a whole, and that is what now lies before you. I trust that those who put their faith in me will not be disappointed by the results. It is not what was first proposed; it is only the first of a projected two volumes; it has taken far too long; but it does fill an important gap, of that I am quite sure.
The title, if I may borrow a phrase from Basil Hall Chamberlain, cost me much cogitation. Can there be such a thing as a history of religion, as distinct from, say, a history of politics or social movements? If it were not simply to be a history of doctrine, what would it look like? Should I dare to impose the concept of ‘religion’ on a culture that did not have an equivalent of that overarching term until modern times, presumably because it never felt it necessary, or indeed possible, to compartmentalise that particular area of human desire and experience, isolating it from other forms of activity (McMullin 1989b)? Would a balanced history of Japanese religion not end up as nothing more or less than a history of Japan, tout court? Perhaps, in the end then, it is simply a matter of emphasis: there are always choices to be made, and the choice made here is to focus on how a series of religious ideas and organisations affected the life and development of the nation. This is not, however, a history of doctrine, nor a history of institutions, for I have allowed the material available to dictate the approach. Some readers may, in their turn, think the results rather too scattergun, since they will find themselves being shuttled between art history, doctrine, institutions, and social and political history as and when it seems fitting. One of the most difficult tasks has been to try and treat Buddhism and the local cults together, because although for most of Japanese history they were inseparable, their stages of development have not always interlocked as neatly as one might hope.

An author who tries to cover such a wide span of history must, of necessity, make difficult choices. This book is not for the general reader, in the sense that it presumes a knowledge of at least the outlines of Japanese history. If this were not assumed, then the book would indeed have been a history of Japan rather than of one aspect of it, and it would have been twice as long. The reader should also be aware that much has been left out and that topics for further research lie on almost every page. On the other hand, it may be that I have attempted too much. The question of doctrine was a difficult one, because this was an area in which initially I had almost no expertise. I toyed with the idea that doctrine could be safely ignored, but was soon disabused of this notion: too much of what happened had doctrinal roots. I remain somewhat unsure of my ground in this area and would like to thank in particular Professor William M. Bodiford, who, as a very careful reader of the initial typescript, pointed out numerous areas where I had been either slipshod or mistaken. I hasten to add that the second half of the book has not had the advantage of his eagle eye.

Readers with some knowledge of the subjects being treated will undoubtedly find favourite topics treated too lightly or not at all. This is in
the nature of the exercise and cannot be helped. Perhaps of rather more concern, however, will be the noticeable lack of reference to ongoing historiographical debates in Japan: terms such as kenmitsu taisei, Kamakura New Buddhism and hongaku shisō are not used. Although one cannot in all conscience ignore these debates, since they inform almost everything one reads, I have decided against referring to them overtly, primarily because I did not wish to burden the reader with matters of academic discussion that would not only need a great deal of background explanation to make sense, but that draw their lifeblood more from present-day sectarianism (both academic and religious) than from the past itself. The reader who knows Japanese may also be dismayed to find almost no Japanese references, but this has been deliberate. Since this book is intended mainly as an introduction to an audience that does not read Japanese, or may be only in the middle stages of that daunting enterprise, a Japanese inventory would have been out of place. It is in fact a tribute to the quality of research on Japan now being produced in languages other than Japanese that the bibliography looks as impressive as it does. If I have managed to present an adequate synthesis of present scholarship and so provide a reliable background against which future work can proceed, then I will have done my job. My debts to the whole community of scholars in this field will be obvious; debts I owe to the friendship and support of colleagues in both faculty and college are no less for being personal; and for one in particular: shiru hito zo shiru.

Selwyn College
Cambridge
Glossary of commonly used Buddhist terms

**abhiṣeka**  
An act of anointing or consecrating, typically used in tantric rituals.

**bija**  
A Sanskrit syllable representing a particular buddha or bodhisattva, typical of tantric practice.

**bodhicitta**  
The awakening of intent to seek enlightenment.

**bodhisattva**  
An awakened being who aspires to become a buddha by dint of practising compassion for all sentient beings.

**buddha**  
A fully awakened one, who has experienced *nirvāṇa* and will never be subject to rebirth again. Sākyamuni is the historical buddha of our age but there have been buddhas before and will be buddhas in the future. In Mahāyāna Buddhism these buddhas are seen as co-existing and eternal.

**dharma**  
The physical and mental elements or events that constitute existence (distinguished from the following by being in lower case).

**Dharma**  
The teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha.

**Hinayāna**  
The Lesser Vehicle. A pejorative term used by followers of the Mahāyāna to refer to all other Buddhist traditions, in particular those that use the Pāli canon.

**jātaka**  
A story illustrating an event in one of Śākyamuni’s previous lives.

**Mahāyāna**  
The Greater Vehicle. The name adopted by those who considered that the achievement of *nirvāṇa* was not enough and should be seen as merely one stage on the greater path of striving for full buddhahood.

**nirvāṇa**  
That state of liberation which comes about when one has fully extinguished the desire that leads to the cycle of birth and rebirth.

**samādhi**  
Concentration, meditation.

**saṃsāra**  
The cycle of birth, death and rebirth from which the Buddha’s teaching seeks to liberate us.

**saṅgha**  
The assembly of monks and nuns.

**śrāvaka**  
One of those who actually heard Śākyamuni’s teachings and
reached nirvāṇa as a result. Mahāyāna Buddhists often looked down on them as being incapable of reaching the higher levels of bodhisattvahood.

Tathāgata The ‘Thus-come One’. Another term for a buddha.

vajra A ‘diamond-hard’ sceptre used in tantric ritual, adopted from the thunderbolt weapon used by the Vedic god Indra. It symbolises the absolute state of emptiness towards which the adept is striving. In tantric Buddhism, the vajra often has a sexual connotation.

vinaya The body of rules that govern the behaviour of the saṅgha.
A note on dates

The order of dates follows Japanese usage: year-month-day. The month and day are given according to the Japanese calendar, but the year date is Western and should therefore be regarded as a guide rather than an exact equivalent. Because the Japanese New Year usually started in what we think of as early February, for dates in the first and twelfth months one would probably have to add or subtract one year to obtain the correct figure. For more details on the Japanese calendar, see §7.3.

Abbreviations

Ch. Chinese
Jp. Japanese
Kr. Korean
Sk. Sanskrit