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978-0-521-85119-0 - The Religious Traditions of Japan, 500–1600

Richard Bowring

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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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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 Rotermond, 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 a 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.

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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

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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

<i>abhiṣeka</i>	An act of anointing or consecrating, typically used in tantric rituals.
<i>bija</i>	A Sanskrit syllable representing a particular buddha or bodhisattva, typical of tantric practice.
<i>bodhicitta</i>	The awakening of intent to seek enlightenment.
<i>bodhisattva</i>	An awakened being who aspires to become a buddha by dint of practising compassion for all sentient beings.
<i>buddha</i>	A fully awakened one, who has experienced <i>nirvāṇa</i> and will never be subject to rebirth again. Śākyamuni 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.
<i>dharma</i>	The physical and mental elements or events that constitute existence (distinguished from the following by being in lower case).
<i>Dharma</i>	The teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha.
<i>Hīnayāna</i>	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.
<i>jātaka</i>	A story illustrating an event in one of Śākyamuni's previous lives.
<i>Mahāyāna</i>	The Greater Vehicle. The name adopted by those who considered that the achievement of <i>nirvāṇa</i> was not enough and should be seen as merely one stage on the greater path of striving for full buddhahood.
<i>nirvāṇa</i>	That state of liberation which comes about when one has fully extinguished the desire that leads to the cycle of birth and rebirth.
<i>samādhi</i>	Concentration, meditation.
<i>saṃsāra</i>	The cycle of birth, death and rebirth from which the Buddha's teaching seeks to liberate us.
<i>saṅgha</i>	The assembly of monks and nuns.
<i>śrāvaka</i>	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
T. Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaigyoku (eds.), *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, 100 vols. (Tōkyō: Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Kankōkai, 1922–33).