

Japanese Buddhism encompasses a rich tapestry of Mahayana Buddhist traditions that have evolved over 1500 years since Buddhism was first introduced to Japan, via Korea, in the early 6th century. Buddhism has co-existed with pre-existing Shintoism ("Japan is 80% Shinto and 80% Buddhist") and has been a profound cultural force that has shaped Japan's history, philosophy, and art over centuries. Each Buddhist sect offers a different path to the goal of enlightenment, reflecting a diversity that caters to various spiritual inclinations. The Japanese have long been known as 'the great refiners' and this certainly applies to Japanese Buddhism. All of the Buddhist traditions of Japan were imported, and all have been exquisitely refined and have taken on a unique character that makes them distinctly Japanese and differentiates them from their forbears.

Early Buddhism in 6th-century Japan reflected its Korean and Chinese antecedents. It was promoted early on by the powerful Soga clan, which was of Korean origin, and it served a unifying function. The oldest extant Buddhist temple in Japan is Hoko-ji in Asuka near Nara and dates from 588 AD. Buddhism was heavily promoted and consolidated in Japan under the reign of the devout **Prince Shotoku** in the early 600s in the Asuka Period, the first part of Japan's Classical Period. Shotoku was Regent, the power behind the throne of his aunt, Empress Suiko (Japan's 1st of 8 female monarchs). Shotoku promoted Buddhism as the state religion in conjunction with implementing Japan's first constitution in 602. He founded Horyu-ji temple in Nara and Shiteno-ji temple in Osaka, both of which survive to this day and are well worth a visit. Shotoku is considered the founder of the nation-state of Japan, newly named *Nihon* (Source of the Sun) which is often anglicized as Nippon. Shotoku's Buddhism was eclectic, with a mixture of Korean, Chinese and Indian sources. Part of his zeal for Buddhism related to its utility as a tool of the state to bring unity and peace. Shotoku's reign was characterized by increased contact with China and active Sinicization, such that Chinese Buddhist traditions came to dominate over initially strong Korean influences. Religion being highly syncretic in Asia, and Buddhism being the most absorptive of all the world's major religions, Shotoku's Buddhism also incorporated elements of Chinese Confucianism and Japan's own Shinto. The *Nihon Shoki* (an early 8th -century text, part history, part myth) states that in 624AD there were 46 Buddhist temples in Japan.

In the late 600s, Emperor Tenmu - the first Emperor to officially declare himself to be of divine origin - strongly promoted a Chinese-influenced form of Buddhism (**Hakuho**) and helped spread the doctrine throughout Japan's islands. Despite being an avowed Buddhist, Tenmu's claim of divine origin was based on Shinto myth, which framed Japan's first emperor and the entire subsequent imperial line as direct descendants of the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu. Japan's Shinto heritage found ways to syncretize with the newer religion of Buddhism including outright hybridization with one iteration of the Buddha being the Sun Buddha, Vairocana, viewed in Japan as largely a composite of The Buddha and the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. The outright blend of Buddhist and Shinto which began in the Asuka Period and flourished until the it was outlawed in the Meiji Period is known as **Shinbutsu-shugo**.

When the capital and imperial court moved to Nara in 710AD, Buddhism was an established institution of the state and a large network of temples was tightly controlled by the imperial court. Buddhism was codified in 'The Six Schools of Nara Buddhism', also known as the **Rokushu**. The 6 schools were largely academic and esoteric, and each varied by pulling from different Chinese, Korean, or Indian sources. Yet state temples were mostly non-sectarian. The head temple for the entire network is the famed Todai-ji (Great Eastern Temple) in Nara, completed in 752AD and housing the **Daibutsu** (Great Buddha) which was cast in bronze a year prior in 751 prior and still stuns today. The Todai-ji *Daibutsu* is a Vairocana 'Sun Buddha'.

In 794, the Heian Period of classical Japan began when the capital and court moved to Kyoto, then called Heian-Kyo (Tranquility Capital). The Heian Period is considered the height of classical Japan. Buddhist institutions, at least initially, continued to play a major role in the state. Important new and lasting

foundations of Japanese Buddhism were laid in the early 9th century when two of Japan's most notable Buddhist monks visited China and then introduced 'new' schools of Buddhism to Japan. A monk named Saicho, aka Dengyo Daishi, introduced the **Tendai** school (and is also credited with introducing tea to Japan). Another revered monk named Kukai, aka Kobo Daishi, introduced the **Shingon** school. Both emerged in the very early 800s and both sects are still widely practiced in Japan today (see the pie chart on page 4). Saicho developed a monastic order and governing system which for the first time allowed Buddhism to function largely independent of the state. The Shingon school followed suit in achieving more independence from state control. The mountainous **Koyasan** area south of Kyoto was the traditional site of Kobo Daishi's Shingon temples and is a beautiful place to visit to this day, with over 115 temples, many of them (known as **shukubo**) offering overnight lodging and meals. Both Tendai and Shingon are 'esoteric' schools of Buddhism which require lengthy study and years of spiritual mentoring, thus largely restricting their practice at the time to the upper echelons of the court-based society. In the late Heian Period (900s-1100s), popularity of the **Lotus Sutra**, a revered text of Buddhist teachings renowned for its poetic narrative style and populist tone, grew as the 'core' of Buddhism and made the *dharma* (Buddhist teachings) accessible to non-aristocrats. This trend toward popularization was greatly accentuated in the later Heian Period with the growth of **Jodo** aka **Pure Land** aka **Amida Buddhism**. Pure Land had Indian, Chinese, and Korean antecedents and had been present in Japan for over 200 years before it became highly popular - which it remains to this day. Pure Land Buddhism more adherents than any other school of Japanese Buddhism (see pie chart). It offers anyone - regardless of class, literacy, intellectual capacity, or previous transgressions - a chance to achieve Buddhahood. Its populist appeal lay in the simplicity of worship and its soteriologic (salvation-oriented) message: by simply worshipping and reciting the name of the Pure Land Buddha who rules over a 'Western Paradise' aka 'Pure Land', anyone could achieve *nirvana* and escape the endless cycle of *samsara* (rebirth). The Japanese version of the Buddha that presides over the Pure Land is called **Amida** (*Amitabha* in Sanskrit). The ritual of reciting the name of the *Amida* or Pure Land Buddha is known as **nembutsu**. A major figure and popularizer of Pure Land Buddhism was the Heian Period monk, Genshin (942-1017AD). Pure Land with its vision of Paradise inspired celestial and ethereal art in the Heian period. The beautiful Byodo-in temple outside of Kyoto in Uji is a magnificent example of the artistic and architectural influence of Pure Land Buddhism. Of interest is that the soteriologic teachings of Pure Land Buddhism spread throughout Japan centuries before the first Christians arrived (in 1543) with their salvation-oriented religion.

The Kamakura Period which began in 1195 marked the beginning of Japan's 700-yr Feudal Period, the age of shoguns and samurai. This period saw 2 major 'new' schools of Buddhism arrive in Japan: **Zen** and **Nichiren**. **Zen** arrived in the early 1200s and has had a profound influence on Japanese culture, art, and aesthetics ever since. It is the most well-known form of Japanese Buddhism in the West but is only the 3rd largest school of Buddhism in Japan, after Pure Land and Nichiren. Zen has Indian origins like all Buddhism and had long been rooted in China (as Ch'an) and Korea (as Seon) before arriving in Japan. The monk who brought Zen from India to China in the 5th century is known as **Bodhidharma** aka **Duruma** and is widely revered in Japan - rounded red Duruma dolls are widely sold in Japan and said to bring good luck. The two major schools of Zen, **Rinzai** (introduced by Eisai) and Soto (introduced by Dogen) share a common emphasis on meditation (**zazen**). The essence of Zen is sometimes summed up in Seven Principles:



While all of these elements are inherent to all Buddhist thought, Zen places a heavy emphasis on meditation and also on consciously acknowledging the impermanence (*anitya*) of life and of all things. It thus had a strong influence on the samurai warrior code of *bushido*, which embraced and emphasized the ever-looming presence of death. Concepts of *shoshin*, 'the beginner's mind', can be traced to foundational Buddhist teachings but its most explicit development is in Japanese Zen. *Shoshin* involves openness, lack of preconception, curiosity, and humility. Shunryu Suzuki in his classic book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* put it like this: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few." Rinzai Zen is known for its *koans*, paradoxical questions, statements or stories which contribute to *shoshin* by provoking doubt and favoring insight and intuitive thinking over dualistic, logical thinking. Koans can also aid in meditation. In the arts, the quintessential Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* is derived from Zen principles, especially *anitya* and *shoshin*, though there clearly is a strong Shinto influence in the emphasis on nature.

7 ELEMENTS OF *WABI SABI*:

FUKINSEI: ASYMMETRY / IRREGULARITY

KANSO: SIMPLICITY

SHIZEN: EMBRACING NATURE

KOKO: AUSTERE, UNALTERED

SEIJAKU: TRANQUILITY

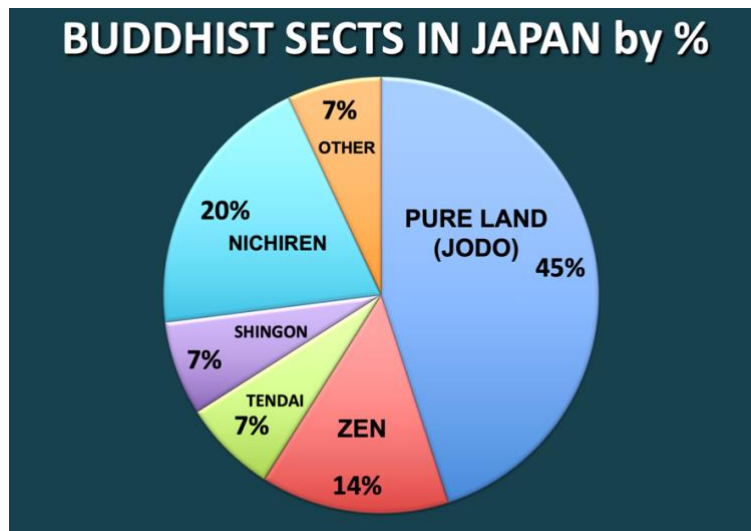
YUGEN: SUBTLE, MYSTERIOUS, INDIRECT PROFUNDITY

The last of Japan's major schools of Buddhism was introduced later in the Kamakura Period (late 1200s) by a monk named Nichiren and is eponymously known as *Nichiren* Buddhism. Nichiren elevated the Lotus Sutra even further as the central and essentially sole source of Buddhist teaching. While he was criticized and then banished for his views, Nichiren Buddhism's focused simplicity caught on with the populace and it remains the second most popular Buddhist sect in Japan today.

Japan's capital was moved to Tokyo (Edo) during the period of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1600-1868) that is known as the Edo Period and was the last and longest phase of Japan's 700-year Feudal Period. Populist forms of Buddhism (Pure Land and Nichiren) were actively discouraged by the strong and controlling state apparatus of the period. A new form of Zen was introduced to Japan in 1654 by a Chinese monk, Ingen, who fled China after the Manchu conquest of China. In reality this 'new' form of Buddhism, *Obaku* Zen, was a hybrid of Zen and Pure Land, with emphasis on both *zazen* and *nembutsu*. *Obaku* Zen had a distinctly Chinese character and brought in Chinese traditions which further influenced Japanese art and architecture as well as calligraphy, the tea ceremony, and other traditions. *Obaku* is a prime example of the powerful **cross-cultural fertilization aspect of Buddhism** that has influenced Japanese culture and all cultures throughout Asia.

The Meiji Period which ushered in modern industrial (and militarized) Japan began in 1868 and was notable for the state-sanctioned embrace of Shintoism and rejection of Buddhism. Shinto myths of the divine origins of the Japanese people were tragically twisted into a master race ideology. Buddhism's external origins and decidedly pacifist philosophy were inimical to the ideology of conquest that was the hallmark of Imperial Japan. Shinto-Buddhist syncretism was not only discredited, it was forbidden by the laws of *Shinbutsu bunri* which actively and effectively sought to extricate any threads of Buddhism from Shinto.

After the fall of Imperial Japan and the outlawing of Shinto as the state religion in Japan's new democratic constitution, Buddhism naturally underwent a resurgence. It is alive and well in Japan today, with over 90 million Japanese identifying with at least some elements of Buddhism (and an approximately equal number embracing elements of Shinto). More than half of homes in Japan have a *butsudan* Buddhist altar shelf (and many have a *kamidana* Shinto spirit altar shelf as well). Japan has the world's second largest Buddhist population after China. Buddhism permeates Japanese culture today in many ways that have little to do with actual religious practice. To many Japanese the 'practice' of Buddhism is not explicitly religious but rather represents an appreciation of Buddhism's major role in Japan's historical and cultural heritage as well as a respect for Buddhism's spiritual teachings. Buddhist traditions tends to be prominent at funerals, quite fittingly in that the fate of the human soul is a focus of Buddhist thought. Shinto elements tend to be more prominent at weddings and birth ceremonies, where nature and its miracles are celebrated and pageantry is more accepted. Many social and cultural activities in Japan revolve around Buddhist temples. And important aspects of the Japanese psyche derive to a significant extent from Buddhist teaching. This would include the Japanese capacity to accept suffering with equanimity - very much a core Buddhist teaching. A famous Japanese saying in times of loss and great difficulty is "*Shikata ga nai*" - "It can't be helped/nothing can be done about it". The Japanese penchant for elegant simplicity derives from Buddhist philosophy, particularly Zen. Japanese aesthetics in general are heavily influenced by Buddhist concepts, as noted above in the elements of *wabi-sabi*. Buddhism is a major contributor to Japan's cultural heritage and as such it plays a large role in the tourist industry. All in all, Buddhism is an integral part of Japanese society and manifests itself in many significant ways that have emerged from its rich historical and cultural context.



Some final notes on 2 aspects of Buddhist iconography which you will see commonly throughout Japan:

- 1) **Kannon, the Goddess of Mercy** - Mahayana Buddhism encompasses a pantheon of *bodhisattvas* (called *bosatsu* in Japan) - revered or divine beings who have achieved enlightenment, but rather than enter nirvana they have chosen to stay on Earth to help others. The premier bodhisattva in Japan is Kannon. You will see her widely worshipped and depicted in art & statuary. Kannon has a clear predecessor in Hinduism: the Hindu god of mercy, **Avalokiteshvara**. But Avalokiteshvara is usually depicted as male, while Kannon is female or androgynous. Kannon is widely worshipped throughout Asia - she is *Guanyin* in China, *Gwan Eum* in Korea, and *Quan Am* in Vietnam.
- 2) The **swastika** - While disturbing (to Westerners), the swastika is a 5000+-year-old ideogram which came to Buddhism by way of Hinduism and is a common - and very positive - apotropaic symbol in Japan & Asia. The word swastika derives from the Sanskrit word *svasti*, meaning **well-being**. This positive good luck symbol was hijacked by Hitler's evil Third Reich, who turned it on its side - and it has yet to recover. That erroneous perversion of the swastika should not stop us from recognizing its ancient origins and positive connotations in Japan & greater Asia.

[Note: Please also see my other relevant handouts: My **Timeline of Japanese History**, and my **Buddhism Primer** and **Buddhist Iconography** handouts - all available for view or download on my website: ScholarAtSea.com.