Changing Perceptions of Buddhism in Premodern Japan

Buddhism was first introduced to Japan in the sixth century via the archipelago's contact with the Korean Peninsula and the Asian mainland; from that moment forward, Buddhist influence profoundly shaped Japanese culture, spirituality, politics, literature, and art.[1] Despite the constant presence of Buddhism throughout premodern Japan, the relationship between this religion and the imperial state underwent numerous modifications as a result of the regime changes that took place. For instance, Buddhism was heavily aligned with imperial power when rule was first consolidated on the archipelago because of the Emperor's need to legitimize his newly-acquired power. However, as the premodern period progressed, Buddhism developed into a countercultural instrument and new sects emerged that challenged social and political hierarchies, such as in the Kamakura and Muromachi periods. Thus, Buddhism was not consistently aligned with or opposed to imperial power in premodern Japan; rather, this religion featured changing political and aesthetic applications, as well as shifting spiritual tenets, that informed whether or not Buddhism was integrated into a given era's existing power structures.

When power was first centralized on the archipelago during the eighth century, Buddhism received extensive imperial patronage under Emperor Shômu as he considered this religion integral to the strength of his governance. Notably, Emperor Shômu came to power in the wake of longstanding competition for the throne, plagues, natural disasters, and rebellion — all of which motivated his need to reinforce the imperial state and solidify his own right to rule.[2] His decision to incorporate Buddhism into the imperial state was largely due to Chinese influence as Emperor Shômu sought to emulate the power that was exercised and maintained by the Tang

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[1] Amino Yoshihiko, "The Title of Emperor and the Name Nihon," in *Rethinking Japanese History*, trans. Alan S. Christy (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 2012), 245.
[2] Gregory Smits, "Dawn of History Through the Nara Period," in *Topics in Japanese History* (1995-1996), 19.

Dynasty.[3] Moreover, the Emperor recognized how powerful Buddhism was a political tool and as

a result, he began patronizing Buddhist places of worship, including temples and monasteries, so

as to establish an imperial monopoly on this religion.[4] A key example of this patronage was

Emperor Shômu's proclamation that a massive statue of the Buddha be erected so as to

encompass and unite all Japanese people under the "fellowship of Buddhism".[5] This project

required the full use of the nation's natural resources and labor in order to be completed, which

indicates how significant this statue was to Emperor Shômu's administration.[6] While this

declaration emphasized the need for the statue to be completed in a respectful and pious manner,

the Emperor's repetitive reference to power as a motivating factor for this undertaking

complicates the notion that Emperor Shômu endorsed Buddhism in Japan for strictly spiritual

purposes. Thus, the connection between Buddhism and Japanese imperial power can be more

accurately understood as politically motivated. More specifically, the Emperor claimed that his

ascension to the throne was not the result of his own will, but rather that his appointment

occurred through divine intervention — also known as a heavenly mandate.[7] By legitimizing his

rule in this way, Emperor Shômu aligned himself with the Buddhist virtues of generosity and

good will, which further reinforced the Emperor as a benevolent and pious leader. Emperor

Shômu also proclaimed himself to be a Buddhist protector of the realm, which established

imperial authority as inextricable from the power of the divine — thereby making Buddhism

integral to the crafting and legitimation of the Japanese state. Due to prior political instability on

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[3] Amino Yoshihiko, "The Title of Emperor and the Name Nihon," in *Rethinking Japanese History*, trans. Alan S. Christy (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 2012), 246.
[4] Smits, "Dawn of History Through the Nara Period," 20.
[5] Theodore de Bary et al., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 114.
[6] Theodore de Bary et al., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 114.
[7] Noriko Aso, "Institutional Religions: Organized and Organizing," HIS 150A: Ancient Japan, 2021.

the Japanese archipelago, Emperor Shômu utilized the authority that Buddhism already

commanded as a way in which to assert the strength of his new administration.

New Buddhist sects emerged during the Kamakura period, primarily in reaction to the

devastation caused by the recent Gempei Wars; as a result of their disillusionment with society

and the traditional social order, these new forms of Buddhism were heavily persecuted by the

imperial government. The Gempei Wars took place between 1180 and 1185 and this conflict was

largely characterized by competing patronage systems, settling scores, and attempting to seize

local power.[8] According to Buddhist theologians, the Gempei Wars, among other disasters,

constituted proof that Japan had entered the degenerative age of the cosmic cycle, which was

called mappô.[9] Using this newfound conclusion, several Buddhist sects developed in the

Kamakura period — all of which began at Mount Hiei, which was a national center for a wide

range of Buddhist studies.[10] One such denomination was called Jôdo, or the Pure Land sect, and

was established by Hônen who had studied at Mount Hiei. Hônen agreed that Japan had entered

the degenerative age and thus believed that enlightenment was impossible to achieve for any

individual, regardless of how devout they were.[11] However, he thought that people could enter

the Pure Land — a realm short of enlightenment but not completely tortuous — by reciting the

name of the Amida Buddha.[12] Hônen further stated that "It is nothing but the mere repetition of

the '*Namu Amida Butsu*,' without a doubt of His mercy, whereby one may be born into the Land

of Perfect Bliss".[13] Not only did Hônen emphasize that anyone, regardless of their societal class,

could achieve some form of salvation, he also stressed one's belief in the Amida Buddha as

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[8] Noriko Aso, "Heian to Kamakura," HIS 150A: Ancient Japan, 2021.
[9] Gregory Smits, "Japan's Middle Ages: 1200-1600," in *Topics in Japanese History* (1995-1996), 101.
[10] Noriko Aso, "After Heian: Changing Conceptions of Good and Evil," HIS 150A: Ancient Japan, 2021.
[11] Noriko Aso, "After Heian: Changing Conceptions of Good and Evil," HIS 150A: Ancient Japan, 2021.
[12] Smits, "Japan's Middle Ages," 104.
[13] Theodore de Bary et al., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 226.

much more important than practicing religious worship at an institution. Due to Hônen's

conviction that anyone could be born again into the Pure Land through chanting, he saw no

reason as to why the Amida Buddha would distinguish between moral people and corrupt

people.[14] Although Hônen did not consider himself to be a revolutionary figure, the Pure Land

sect of Buddhism was perceived as a threat to the religious establishment's agreed-upon

distinctions between right and wrong.[15] Moreover, Hônen's disciple Shinran later established a

more radical form of Jôdo that he called the True Pure Land sect, which called for the sincere

chant of the nembutsu; the question of sincerity became especially contested in the age of human

decline and deterioration.[16] Shinran also believed the traditional hierarchy between the

superiority of good and inferiority of evil was no longer applicable in the degenerative age and

thus, the attempt to do good works was counterintuitive and delusional.[17] True Pure Land

Buddhism was threatening to established power structures as a result of Shinran's redefinition of

the moral order; but this denomination became especially dangerous to the Kamakura Shogunate

and the imperial court when Rennyo institutionalized this sect by building various places of

worship during the fifteenth century.[18] This radical questioning of good works was continued by

Ippen who founded the Ji or Time sect of Buddhism; Ippen believed that neither faith nor sin

mattered in regards to achieving salvation because understanding Amida' compassion was

beyond the capabilities of humans.[19] This sect was particularly popular among marginalized

peoples in Kamakura society, including women, merchants, and people who lived in urban areas

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[14] Theodore de Bary et al., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 224.
[15] Noriko Aso, "After Heian: Changing Conceptions of Good and Evil," HIS 150A: Ancient Japan, 2021.
[16] Theodore de Bary et al., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 227.
[17] Noriko Aso, "After Heian: Changing Conceptions of Good and Evil," HIS 150A: Ancient Japan, 2021.
[18] Noriko Aso, "After Heian: Changing Conceptions of Good and Evil," HIS 150A: Ancient Japan, 2021.
[19] Theodore de Bary et al., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 230.

— which the imperial government feared would incite anarchy or other forms of civil unrest.[20] While these sects experienced varying degrees of persecution from the government, all Buddhist denominations that developed in the Kamakura period were perceived to undermine the traditional structure of society and to threaten the authority of the religious establishment.

During the reign of the Muromachi/Ashikaga Shogunate, Zen Buddhism's emphasis on unconventional wisdom served to compliment the aesthetic preferences of the time period, which made this sect simultaneously aligned with and opposed to imperial power. Notably, Zen originated in Japan as an anti-establishment movement as its patrons supported their places of worship, rather than government sponsored sects of Buddhism.[21] Additionally, early Zen monks were usually commoners, as opposed to aristocrats or other members of elite society. Through its lack of emphasis on human weakness or the degenerative age, Zen Buddhism maintained that true enlightenment could still be achieved.[22] Moreover, Zen rejected the use of elaborate rituals and scriptures, emphasized meditation as the key to achieving enlightenment and salvation, and employed the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, to encourage the return to stricter monastic practices.[23] Two distinct sects of Zen Buddhism emerged during the Muromachi era: the Rinzai sect founded by Eisai and the Sôtô sect founded by Dôgen. While they shared a number of similarities, the Rinzai sect suggested that enlightenment could be achieved suddenly and the Sôtô sect maintained that true salvation could only be attained gradually through meditation.[24] Zen Buddhism also featured kōan — a paradoxical anecdote or riddle — that served to demonstrate the meaninglessness of distinctions, the inadequacy of traditional logic, and the non-duality of the universe.[25] Although non-duality had long been a feature of Japanese

[20] Noriko Aso, "After Heian: Changing Conceptions of Good and Evil," HIS 150A: Ancient Japan, 2021.
[21] Noriko Aso, "Muromachi Warrior Patronage, Zen, and the Arts," HIS 150A: Ancient Japan, 2021.
[22] Noriko Aso, "Muromachi Warrior Patronage, Zen, and the Arts," HIS 150A: Ancient Japan, 2021.
[23] Smits, "Japan's Middle Ages," 110.
[24] Noriko Aso, "Muromachi Warrior Patronage, Zen, and the Arts," HIS 150A: Ancient Japan, 2021.
[25] Noriko Aso, "Muromachi Warrior Patronage, Zen, and the Arts," HIS 150A: Ancient Japan, 2021.

Buddhism, Zen asserted that the distinction between the self and others was an illusion; thus, if distinctions are fallacies, there should be no societal hierarchy and no difference between a commoner and an aristocrat. As a result of Zen Buddhism's emphatic rejection of authority, the imperial court and religious authorities in the Muromachi period were frightened of its growing popularity. Zen also heavily influenced the arts, particularly due to its emphasis on alternative modes of representation and thinking. Noh theater, which is now considered the classical theater of Japan, originated in the Muromachi period as an art form that challenged the status quo. More specifically, Noh theater portrayed various social classes and did not solely showcase proper or respectable behavior; Noh plays also featured intermissions called kyogen that were intended for comic relief between acts, such as "The Cowardly Bandits".[26] Despite Noh theater's emphasis on non-duality and non-distinction, this art form received extensive patronage from the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu during the late fourteenth century.[27] His imperial patronage represented the elevation of non-aristocratic people and values so as to compete with the cultural hierarchy in the Muromachi era; thus making Zen Buddhism not entirely opposed to imperial authority. Moreover, Noh theater challenged the idea that art was reserved for the upper echelons of society, which constituted a new form of cultural expression that was heavily intertwined with Zen Buddhist tenets. Despite the fact that Zen Buddhism directly challenged aspects of Muromachi society, this philosophy was complimentary to the aesthetics of the era and therefore, this religious movement was not persecuted or unequivocally celebrated by those in power.

In any era of premodern Japanese history, there is a particular relationship between the established religious and political authority and Buddhism due to this religion's changing applications and resonances. Emperor Shômu established his administration directly alongside

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[26] Don Kenny, *The Kyogen Book: An Anthology of Japanese Classical Comedies* (Tokyo: The Japan Times), 70.
[27] Noriko Aso, "Muromachi Warrior Patronage, Zen, and the Arts," HIS 150A: Ancient Japan, 2021.

Buddhism because he saw this religion's political power as necessary to reinforcing his own rule. Contrastingly, the Buddhist sects that emerged during the Kamakura period were thoroughly persecuted because they challenged the traditional dichotomy between right and wrong and encouraged people to turn away from institutional forms of religion and worship. Zen Buddhism in the Muromachi period, similarly, stressed the rejection of authority as necessary to achieving enlightenment; consequently, Zen was patronized by a Muromachi shogun despite its anti-establishment origins — thereby assigning Zen a somewhat ambiguous position within Muromachi culture and politics. As evidenced by the various shifts that this religion underwent throughout the premodern period in Japan, Buddhism and its impacts should not be understood in terms of the binary opposition between those who have power and those who do not.