

Japan and Buddhism

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Abstract: When Siddhārtha got Enlightenment at the age of thirty-five, he did not stop there, and he spread his knowledge to common people in simple language and showed them the Path. His followers spread his teachings not only in India but also in other countries. In sixth century, Buddhism reached Japan via China and Korea. Shintōism, the indigenous religion of Japan, mixed well with the Buddhism and created a new religious field for both religions. Other religions also were introduced in Japan but they did not mix with their cultural aspects; like adaption of Buddhist deities and worship of Shintō deities. We can always find a Buddhist temple inside the Shintō shrines. This paper is based on how Buddhism survived in Japan during various time periods.

Keywords: India, Japan, *Siddhārtha*, Buddhism, *Shintōism*

Journey of *Siddhārtha* towards Buddhahood

Siddhārtha Goutama is son of king *Suddhodāna* and queen *Māyā*. Queen *Māyā* dreamed a six-tusked white elephant entered her womb from her right side. On her way to mother's house she gave birth to a baby at the Lumbini garden. After seven days queen *Māyā* died, and Gautamī¹ took care of the baby.

An astrologer predicted the future of *Siddhārtha* and said, he will become either a great king or a great saint. After hearing this, king *Suddhodāna* gives all the luxuries to *Siddhārtha*, and at the age of nineteen he got married with princess *Yaśodharā*, and they had a son called *Rāhula*.

One day when out from palace, he encountered a decrepit old man, a sick man, a dead person and a monk. He became unhappy because, everyone has to face these stages of life, except the monk, because he was already beyond the materialistic life. At the age of twenty-nine, *Siddhārtha* left his family and palace, to search the truth. This is known as '*Mahābhiniṣkramaṇa*' or 'the great renunciation'.

Siddhārtha called his charioteer *Chandaka* (*Pāli*: *Channa*), to take him up to *Anoma* river. He gave all his belongings to *Chandaka* and started his journey. He visited many places, *Anupia*² and *Rājagṛha*³ etc. He became the disciple of the famous sage *Ārāḍa Kālāpa*⁴ where he got the knowledge of *Vedas*, *Śāstra*, *Upaniṣad*, and *dhyāna*. But still he was not satisfied and left the place and reached *Uruvela*⁵.

Siddhārtha met with other five monks and with them, he started practicing austerities for six years, because of fasting, he became weak and fell unconscious. He understands that, in this way he will never get what he wants, so he decided to beg some food and get back the strength. A village girl called *Sujātā*⁶, who fed *Siddhārtha Pāyāsa* or *Pāyāya* (milk-rice), and he ended up his six years of fasting, it is believed that she lived in the village of *Senani* (now it is known as *Bakraur*) near *Uruvela*.

All the five monks left him alone, but *Siddhārtha* decided to stay and again he sat under a *Peepal* tree⁷ and started meditation. During this time, *Māra*⁸ tried to tempt *Siddhārtha* but failed. *Māra* sent his daughters to distract *Siddhārtha*, but he swept them away. We can also say that, *Māra* is not only a figure but it is a representation of inner temptation, like ego, which create obstacles in the path of enlightenment. Finally, on a full moon day he got *nirvāṇa*⁹ and become the Buddha at the age of thirty-five. From that time, that *Peepal* tree known as *Bodhi* tree.

Buddha visited many places and gave the knowledge, to the common peoples as well as kings, like *Bimbisāra*. He visited *Kapilavastu*, where along with his family others also became his followers, and his cousin *Ānanda*¹⁰, become his chief attendant. His mother *Māyā* become his disciple, and become the first Buddhist nun.

Buddha deceased in *Kusinagara*¹¹, at the age of eighty. The demise of Buddha is known as '*Mahāparinirvāṇa*' or 'the great state beyond *nirvāṇa*'. According to *Mahāparinirvāṇa* Sutta, a blacksmith named *Chunda*, who lived at *Pāvā* offered food to Buddha. That was his

¹Gautamī is not only *Siddhārtha*'s step mother but also his maternal-aunt. She is the first *Bhikkhūnī*.

²Anupia is situated in around 31 miles from *Basti* in Uttar Pradesh. It is also known as *Kopia*.

³In present time it is known as *Rājgīr* situated in Bihar. The meaning of '*Rājagṛha*' is 'Royal Residence'.

⁴*Ārāḍa Kālāpa* was the first teacher of *Siddhārtha*. He taught *yogic* meditation and other teachings of Hinduism. (link, visited on:)

⁵*Uruvela* is a village of *Māgadhā*, in present time *Uruvela* known as Bodhi Gaya, in Bihar.

⁶*Sujātā* was a milkmaid, who fed *Siddhārtha* milk and rice, which called *khīrodana* or *pāyāya* in *Pāli*. This incident is commonly found in temple wall paintings and sculptures.

⁷Sacred fig

⁸In Buddhism, *Māra* is demonic celestial king, who associated with death, rebirth and desire. *Taṇhā* (Thirst), *Aratī* (Aversion), and *Rāga* (Attachment, Desire, Greed, Passion) are known as three daughters of *Māra*.

⁹*Nirvāṇa* is the state of perfect blessedness, achieved by the abrogation of individual existence and extinction of all desires and passions.

¹⁰*Ānanda* was a cousin of *Siddhārtha* and Buddha's beloved disciple.

last meal, and after having it, Buddha fell ill. He asked *Ānanda* to spread a cloth on the ground between two *Sal* trees (*Shorea Robusta*). He was also born between two *Sal* trees and wanted to die in similar way.

Spreading of Buddhism

After the enlightenment *Siddhārtha*, never wanted to be like a god, therefore he visited many places to teach the way to avoid suffering and receive the enlightenment, as a travelling teacher. Buddhism spread quickly in India, because that time people wanted a religious reformation, also the family background of *Siddhārtha* plays an important role.

Buddha's teachings were in very simple language that can be easily understandable among the common people, because that time the *Sanskrit* language was not understandable to the common people. So, the language also played a significant role in spreading Buddhism quickly.

The rituals of Buddhism is not expensive, therefore poor people can also practice the rituals. There is no caste system in Buddhism, which attracted many people, who were discriminated in society. Buddhist universities like, *Taxila*, *Gaya* and *Nalanda* etc. played important role to spread the religion not only in India but also in other countries. Kings also helped this religion to spread, like *Aśoka*¹² (304-232 BCE), and *Kaniṣka*¹³ (78-144 AD) who not only become the followers but also declared Buddhism as a state religion.

The Geographical Location and Foreign religious and cultural influence on Japan

Japan is a small Asian country surrounded by sea and close to China and Korea. 70% of the land is mountain area and 30% area is plain land. Japan is situated in the volcanic belt; therefore, Japan is blessed with the hot springs. Mount Fuji (3,776) is the highest mountain in Japan. The chain of island is spread/stretched from north to south and because of this, the climate of Japan is varies from region to region. Japan has been always influenced by Chinese and Korean culture from the ancient time. It is believed that, before the Chinese and Korean cultural influenced Japan, pure Japanese culture was celebrated all over Japan, and their religious belief was Shintōism. But time passed and Chinese culture was introduced in Japan, and it brought a huge change in the life of Japanese people. Shintōism gradually hid behind the shade of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism etc.

Buddhism covered the Shintōism, from the early 9th century up to 19th century. Shintō Shrines are also influenced by Buddhism, simplicity of the Shintō shrine transform into a gorgeous colorful shrine. Confucianism did not influence the religious life of common people at the beginning, but gradually practice of Confucianism spread among the common people of Japan, and Confucianism became the part of politics. After Meiji restoration Shintō was divided into two group, State Shintō and Sectarian Shinto. This division was created for government convenience.

Buddhism in Japan

We all know that Japan is known as Buddhist Country, but in present time, the major religious beliefs followed by the people of Japan are Shintōism, Buddhism and Christianity. The Shintōism entails pure Japanese beliefs from ancient time, Buddhism is an Indian religion which travelled to Japan through China and Korea during 6th century and Christianity was introduced in Japan by St. Francisco Xavier in 16th century. It is believed that, Buddhism was not spread among the people at the beginning stage, because it came from a different country and all the customs, rituals, language become a burden for the common people of Japan. Therefore, at the preliminary stage Buddhism became the religion for elite class people.

Japanese Buddhism can be classified into six major sects, Nara Sect, Tendai Sect, Shingon Sect, Amida Sect, Zen Sect and Nichiren Sect. there are many more sub-sects, like Sanron Sect, Ritsu Sect, Jimon Sect, Shugen Sect, Jodo Sect etc.

Prince Shōtoku Taishi (574~622) understood the Buddhist thoughts and acquired a deep faith in Buddhism. He also established the first constitution of Japan, the Seventeen -Article Constitution. He took the first major step to develop the Japanese Buddhism.

During Asuka Period (592~628), peoples started believing in Buddhism and followers increased. Many temples were built, and people crossed the ocean to reach China to learn Buddhism and other things. Those who travelled to China to learn their culture, religion, art etc. were known as *Kenzuishi*¹⁴ and *Kentōshi*¹⁵.

During Nara period (710~794) Buddhism started influencing politics, Buddhist monks were becoming powerful than the aristocrats of that time. Temples become powerful because monks merged Shintō deities with Buddhism, and because of the assimilation, a new religion came out, which called *Shinbutsushūgō*.

When we say Japanese Buddhism, there are two names always come first in mind, they are *Kūkai* and *Saichō*. Emperor *Kanmu* sent them to China to learn Buddhism and they came back to Japan and spread it. After returning back, *Kūkai* and *Saichō* founded new sects, *Shingonshū* and *Tendaishū*. *Kūkai* and *Saichō* also established their own learning centres *Enryaku-ji* and *Kongōbu-ji*.

In Kamakura period (1185~1333) new sects like, Amida Sect, Zen Sect, Nichiren Sect took form, because the early sects were gradually not progressing with the time. Many temples schools were founded by Buddhist scholars, and they spread Buddhism among the common people. From the beginning of Heian period (794~1185) *Kūkai* and *Saichō* tried to spread Buddhism in all classes of people. In Kamakura period, many sects were established and started spreading their teachings, therefore clashes started happening among them, and

¹¹ *Kusinagra* is situated in Uttar Pradesh, in pre-Buddha period this place known as *Kusavati*, and in post-Buddha period it is known as *Kushunara*.

¹² *Aśoka* or *Asoka* the great was the 3rd Mauryan emperor.

¹³ *Kaniṣka* or *Kanishka* the great was the emperor of Kushan dynasty during the 2nd century.

¹⁴ 589 *Zui* Dynasty started ruling in China. During that time those who went to china to learn their culture, religion, art, they known as *Kenzuishi*.

¹⁵ 618 *Tō* Dynasty Started Ruling China. During that time those who went to china to learn their culture, religion, art, they known as *Kentōshi*.

many temples were burnt. During 1344 Zen priests were criticized and called demons and enemy of the state, but in spite of that the rapid growth of the Zen sect could not stopped.

During Tokugawa period (1615~1868) Buddhism become the only recognized religion by the state government. Many sects got attention by the state and built temples, sponsored by the government. The temples were controlled by *Shōgun* and everyone had to registered themselves at the Buddhist temple, as the proof that they are not Christians. All the activities of the peoples were recorded in temple's record.

As we know that Japan was isolated during Tokugawa period, only a port called *Dejima* in Nagasaki, was opened for ships but in 1854, Commodore M. Perry come directly to the bay of Edo, and asked to open the country, and signed treaties. In the year 1868, the feudalism was abolished, and emperor regained the throne.

Meiji government officially separated the Shintōism and Buddhism, but people practiced the rituals in their daily life. In present time, many people have a Buddhist alter and household shrine in their house. After the ban of Christianity in Tokugawa period, when Japan opened doors for everyone, again Christianity was introduced by the missionaries. In 1862 they built a church at Yokohama, and in 1865 they built another church at Nagasaki. Emperor set the Shintō as the state religion. The existence of Hinduism is also very much visible, because the seven lucky gods of Shintōism, consist of three Hindu deities, Daikoku-ten (Shiva), Benzai-ten (Saraswati), Bishamon-ten (Kubera), and also many other Hindu deities are worshipped in Japan.

Contribution of Buddhism in life of Japanese people

Since Buddhism was introduced in Japan, certain changes can be seen in both people's life as well as in Buddhism. With the introduction of Buddhism, Chinese writing script (*Kanji*) was also introduced into Japan, before that Japanese was a spoken language. With the Chinese script, they chanted the Chinese translation of Sanskrit sutras.

The script gives a written shape to the Japanese words, and phrases. This played a very significant role in the field of education. Before Buddhism, shrines were known as religious institution. But Buddhist temples become not only religious institution but also the education center. Until Meiji period most of the primary education was conducted in the Buddhist temple affiliated school.

Buddhism also influenced the field of art. Japanese peoples were creating sculptures and paintings for the Buddhist temples and also music was based on the Buddhist rituals. Performances were also based on Buddhist backgrounds.

The Japanese Buddhist architectures were also influenced by Chinese architectures. Shintō shrines and Buddhist temples shared their characteristics. As the assimilation of Shintōism and Buddhism happened, the complexes of shrine and temples also merged together. The shrine with Buddhist temple is known as Jingūji or Miya-dera. On the other hand, almost every temple has a shrine, which is called Jisha. This makes the people believe in both religion and practice the rituals.

Some Buddhist Sects in Japan

Nara Sect: When Buddhism was introduced in Japan, it was not appreciated by the people of Japan, because it was difficult to understand by the common people. Everything was new for them. The Sanron Sect, Jojitsu Sect, Hosso Sect, Kusha Sect, Kegon Sect and Ritsu Sect were together called as Nara Sect, because they had much influence during the Nara period (710~794). These are the primary sects introduced to Japan from China.

The Tendai Sect: Monk Saichō who was also known as Dengyo Daishi, was the founder of Tendai Sect. Major temple for Tendai sect is *Enryaku-ji*, situated in Kyoto. Tendai sect is appreciated not only by the upper class but also the lower-class people of Japan.

In the year 993, Tendai monk Enichi (814~891), left the *Enryaku-ji* and established his new sect Jimon. Their major temple was Onjo-ji.

Shingon Sect: Monk Kūkai who was also known as Kōbo Daishi, was the founder of Shingon sect. Kūkai unified the Shintōism and Buddhism, which makes a wider path for Buddhism to come close to Japanese people. Saichō and Kūkai both played an important role in merging the Shinto kami and Buddhist deities.

Zen Sect: During Nara period a new sect come out, which was known as Zen sect. But it was not popular among the people, but in 1191 when monk Eisai (1141~1215) founded Rinza school of Zen, it become one of the popular sects among the people. Monk Eisai was a student of Tendai sect. The Zen sect emphasized on meditation and self-discipline.

Amida Sect: Amida was a Bodhisattva, who was refused accept the enlightenment, and share his knowledge to all the people, and help them to achieve the enlightenment. Ryonin (1072~1132) was spreading the Amidaism in all over Japan. He founded a new sect called Yuzu sect.

Nichiren Sect: During thirteenth century a monk called Nichiren (1222~1282), was a student of Tendai sect. He tried to reform the Buddhism and tried to do what he believed. Therefore, he faced too much of criticism.

Some festivals and practices in present times

Oshōgatsu or New Year: People start cleaning their houses and decorate the entrance one week before the new year. On the first of January, people visit temples and shrines. People also celebrate the lunar new year as well.

Hana no Matsuri or The Flower Festival: On this day, people climb a hill nearby, and take their food together, collect flowers and return home. They believe that, the *Yamanokami* or mountain deity will follow the flower and come to their home. On this day, every temple celebrates Buddhas birth ceremony by pouring sweet tea or *Amacha* on the statue of Buddha. Visitors also take the tea from the temple and drink with their families.

Obon or Feast for the Dead: The bon festival is the time to welcome the ancestral sprits and offer foods and other things. People clean their family graves and gravestones, build a temporary special alter in their house for the offerings to the ancestors. On the welcoming day, people build a small fire outside the main gate, next day they call a Buddhist monk to chant Buddhist sutras in the house and in the evening, people practice dance surrounding the fire (*BonOdori*). On the last day, they float offerings in the river and light a small fire in the main gate to send off the spirit.

There are many more festivals which are celebrated by Japanese people in present time. In Japan the Christmas, Halloween and other festivals are also celebrated in large scale. Peoples enjoy the festivals not only from the religious belief but also because they enjoy the way of celebration.

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