

# THE RELIGIOUS WORLD IN JAPAN

## Japanese Buddhism and World Buddhism

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Those who are beginning the study of Japanese Buddhism will soon realize that the sects of Japanese Buddhism are not equivalent to the denominations of Christianity. Strange to say, Japanese Buddhism has no sacred scriptures accepted as the canon common to all Japanese Buddhist sects. Japanese Buddhists have no sutra to chant in unison when they jointly have a Buddhist service. Moreover, in Japanese Buddhism more than one Buddha is worshipped. One sect worships one Buddha; another sect worships another. It appears that the sects of Japanese Buddhism are quite independent of each other.

When Buddhism was introduced into Japan in the sixth century the Japanese people did not know that Buddhism was divided into sects. Soon afterwards, however, they realized that the Buddhist images they enshrined in the same temple were not worshipped with the same degree of reverence by all Buddhists. Then, soon after they discovered Buddhist sectarianism, they witnessed the introduction from China of one Buddhist sect after another. At first these sects were studied in the same temple, but in the course of time temples were created that belonged to one or another of these sects and feuds began to arise between the sect-temples. For the past fourteen centuries sectarianization has developed so that now in Japan we have no temple which does not belong to one or another of the various Buddhist sects.

For many centuries Buddhism was patronized by the rulers of

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Japan, but the reasons were political rather than religious or cultural. They wished to use Buddhism as a means of securing the peace of the country. They believed that the chanting of sutras would drive away enemies and make their country prosper. To them the antagonism between sects was annoying. They tried to stop the quarreling between sects by supporting them all equally. But it was to no avail. It was hopeless to try to get all the sects to cooperate in an intersectarian movement.

The first time Japanese Buddhist sects cooperated with each other was when the Meiji government suppressed Buddhism. If that anti-Buddhist policy had not been changed, Buddhism today might be more active in intersectarian cooperation. Unfortunately, the suppression of Buddhism by the Meiji government soon stopped and the sects recovered governmental patronage with the result that cooperation between the sects ceased. However, the new age, which opened with the Meiji Restoration, did not allow Japanese Buddhists to remain as they had been in previous centuries. Christian evangelistic activities, which had been renewed for the first time since 1639, were successful because the Japanese people at that time welcomed anything Western. Sectarian Shinto sects, which were formed towards the end of the Tokugawa period, became powerful enough to deprive the Buddhist sects of some of their votaries. The supporters of the older Buddhist sects were also reduced a great deal in number by new Buddhist sects which were not affiliated with any of the older sects. Another factor which weakened the older Buddhist sects came from science. Archaeological investigations resulted in the discovery of errors in the history of Buddhism prepared by sect authorities. Textual criticism revealed facts inconsistent with hitherto-established dogmatic principles.

The spread of education elevated the standard of knowledge of the people, depriving priests of their status as men of letters. The development of government-sponsored social welfare work les-

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sened the social functions of temples. But what is more important here is the fact that at the beginning of the Meiji era, the religious authority of Buddhism was reduced to a considerable extent, because all Buddhists gave up celibacy and vegetarianism.

In order to cope with this unfavorable situation caused by various circumstances within and without, sect authorities did two things. First, they made a strenuous effort to propagate their own religion which, because of the security provided by governmental patronage, had been seriously neglected. Preaching in most cases had become mere lip-service and their philosophy based on sect dogmas had become a mere play of metaphysical terms.

Second, they sought a rallying point about which all sects could cooperate in opposition to the non-Buddhist or anti-Buddhist movement and they found it in the world of learning rather than in a joint organization of the representatives of Buddhist sects.

Buddhism and religion as a whole were scientifically investigated, while the hitherto-established doctrines were confined to a small room in the Buddhist universities. Specialists in the science of Buddhism were invited to the sectarian universities in complete disregard of the sect differences. For example, a Buddhist scholar, who was a priest of the Shin Sect, lectured on Buddhism at a university established by the Nichiren Sect. Thus, a sect meant no more than a community to which a particular religious organization belonged traditionally, — a situation not very far from the conception of caste in India. The science of Buddhism aimed at studying Buddhism in the light of history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. It tried to justify the formation of the doctrines of all sects and not exclusively of a particular sect. Consequently, priest-students of sectarian universities who heard the lectures were discouraged from devoting themselves to propagating their own sect, and so the cooperative attitude of the sects towards each other was greatly promoted by this comprehensive study of Buddhism.

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Defeat in World War II influenced Japanese Buddhism in many ways. Before the war, emperor-worship was seen everywhere in Japanese Buddhism. There were temples of which the chief abbots were members of the Imperial Family or noble families closely connected with the Imperial Family. Some temples had in their precincts halls which were specially dedicated to some emperor of the past. The sects which had these temples under their control treasured them because of emperor-worship. Some temples connected themselves with the Imperial Family through marriage. Temples were proud of having been visited by an emperor or a member of the Imperial Family, or of preserving things connected with the Imperial Family. Since the new Constitution of Japan was promulgated, however, things imperial have lost their meaning, giving a blow to Japanese Buddhism.

Moreover, during the War and the Occupation Buddhism suffered many set-backs. Air-raids destroyed most of the temples in urban districts; the loss of farmland by the enforcement of the Agricultural Land Reform Law impoverished temples in rural districts. Some priests left their temples for financial reasons. Christianity was re-imported triumphantly as the religion of the victors (but don't forget that Germany and Italy are also Christian countries). Christian churches and other Christian facilities were established with funds from abroad. Some Buddhist priests in a certain district had to donate to the construction of the International Christian University because they were told that the collection of the funds for the construction was ordered by the Allied Powers. New religions which sprang up one after another after the end of the war, deprived Buddhist sects of many of their supporters. The secession of temples from their mother sects, which was facilitated by the Religious Corporations Ordinance of 1945 and the Religious Juridical Persons Law of 1951, weakened the older Buddhist sects. Under these circumstances, interested priests of the various Buddhist sects convened

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to find a way of surviving this critical state, and thus a cooperative attitude among the sects was promoted.

The development of international air service and mass communication after the end of World War II changed the attitude of Japanese Buddhists greatly. This enabled the Buddhists of the world to have their First World Buddhist Conference in Ceylon in 1950. Since then a World Buddhist Conference has been held biennially. Many Japanese Buddhists have participated in these conferences and have learned that there are more Buddhists in the world than they had anticipated. Consequently, they came to think that they should not be attached to sect differences, which seemed trifling matters when compared to the problems to be settled in regard to the intercourse between the Buddhists in the world. They were much more concerned about World Buddhism than about the intersectarianism of Japanese Buddhism. Their eyes were directed toward the world. This enabled them to expedite the movement towards intersectarianism.

The Second World Buddhist Conference was held in Tokyo in 1952, five months after the effectuation of the peace treaty. The large number of Southern Buddhists to visit Japan on this occasion surprised the Japanese people. The World Peace Conference, the World Religionists' Conference, and other international cultural conferences, which were held in Japan in the following years, were also attended by some Southern Buddhists. Furthermore, not a few Japanese Buddhists visited Southern Buddhist countries at the invitation of the Buddhists in those countries in connection with celebrations of the Buddha Jayanti. It was no longer necessary for Japanese Buddhists and Southern Buddhists to study about each other in books. Some Japanese Buddhists criticized Southern Buddhism as formalistic, while some Southern Buddhists reproached Japanese Buddhism for its deformity. Generally speaking, however, through this exchange of persons mutual understanding and friend-

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ship were greatly promoted. The Buddhists of the world have become next-door neighbors.

The above-mentioned Buddha Jayanti are in commemoration of the 2,500th anniversary of the death of the Buddha, which was celebrated in various countries in Southeast Asia during and after 1955. In 1959 it was celebrated in Japan under the joint sponsorship of the Japanese government and the Japan Buddhist Federation.

To admit that the Buddha died in 544 B.C. was suicidal for Japanese Buddhists. They must preserve the traditional date of the death of the Buddha in order that it be in conformity with their doctrine. The most powerful Buddhist sects in Japan were founded in the Kamakura period, when the Buddha was believed to have died in 949 B.C. This date was very important for the doctrine of these sects, because each of the founders of these sects was firm in the belief that he was the savior of the people living in the Age of Degeneration which, according to the texts of Mahayana Buddhism, started two thousand years after the death of the Buddha. If the Buddha was believed to have died in 544 B.C., no founder of a Kamakura sect would have been able to become the savior of the Age of Degeneration, because at that time that age had not yet come.

In spite of this discrepancy vital to the doctrine of the sects, Japanese Buddhists celebrated the Buddha Jayanti for the purpose of furthering friendship and understanding among the Buddhists of the world and encouraging the formation of World Buddhism into which differences between all types of Buddhism would be dissolved. The gathering was a great success. Japanese Buddhists are now convinced that a day will come when the light of the Buddha will spread all over the world through their cooperation with their fellow-Buddhists in and outside of Japan.