

## BUDDHISM IN A BOWL A GOURMET'S GUIDE TO JAPANESE BUDDHISM

*The Buddha talked about dukkha, a lack of satisfaction and offered his teaching for its relief. Sometimes we call that lack 'suffering', but it's also fair to see it as starvation or hunger. There is a hunger in the world and a craving for a truly satisfying meal. The fast food/junk food that passes for spiritual sustenance in our world is incapable of anything but a momentary relief. It is not nutritious and it is finally not satisfying. The Buddha responded to this hunger with a feast he called the "Eight Steps to Satisfaction", and we can see that as a large platter of eight servings, each rich and tasty in its own way, and together, a fully satisfying meal.*

*In this talk, I want to step back a bit from this Buddha-meal and pay attention to one national 'cuisine' which has cooked up several fascinating variations on Shakyamuni's basic recipe. I propose we look at some of the great dharma-chefs and the buffet they created which we know as Japanese Buddhism.*

### INTRODUCTION

We'll enter through the kitchen of our own tradition, Tendai, because all the other chefs apprenticed and sharpened their skills in the steam and smells of this great school. In particular, we'll meet Saicho, the first great teacher in the Tendai tradition and his stove-mate, Kukai, who founded Shingon, an immensely important school in Japan. We'll also meet Dogen, Honen and Shinran, three later cooks who turned Zen and Pure Land into equally important styles, styles which form the

everyday diet of Japanese Buddhists. Finally we'll consider some of the unique ingredients in the cupboards of Japanese dharma.

### THE JAPANESE STEW

Going back for a moment to Shakyamuni's original recipe, we can see how the progression of later versions from other Indian teachers made the Dharma resemble something like a Shepherd's Pie, a set of layers, each rich and flavourful, one piled on top of the other. We can distinguish these as separate schools - Theravada, Mahayana, Sunyavada, Vajrayana

and so on. In the Indian experience we might imagine the excitement as new generations of teachers cooked up different recipes for these layers. In ways the flavours and ingredients flowed into one another, in other ways, people became jealous and disputive over which layer was the best.

In those times, extending across Asia, from Greece, across north India, Tibet, China and into Korea and Japan, stretched the legendary Silk Road, a trade route which linked people, kingdoms and cultures. Add that to the sea excursions from southern India through Cambodia, Thailand and the southern kingdoms of early China. What you end up with is the first great Dharam 'take-out' system. All these recipes from India travelled along these routes, tantalizing the spiritual tastebuds of every culture along the way.

I'm reminded of my own experience growing up in a modest city in post-war Eastern Ontario. A few generations before my family moved there, the food was all farm meals, "meat and padaydas" - nothing unfamiliar, please. Then gradually, we experienced the introduction of Chinese food, Italian food, Indian food, and on and on, until we resembled every other small city in the East, with Cajun, South-West, Thai and every conceivable style of food. Then in the 90's we experienced what was called "fusion cooking", mixing Indian and Italian, Cajun and Japanese. It was chaotic but produced something new and unexpected. And it all tasted great.

his is similar to the growth of Japanese Buddhism. All those layers of teaching arose sequentially in India, but travelled across to East Asia in a more or less random way, so that by the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century, that is, almost 1,000

years after the Buddha, there were dozens of mature and competing schools of Dharma available for the hungry spiritual seekers of China. Here we meet our first important teacher, Chih-i-ih. He was the abbot of a Buddhist sangha located on Mount Tiantai. He desperately wanted to make sense of all the varying, competing and, in some way, contradicting teachings being served up in China. He proposed that we can see all these differing recipes as complimentary. He believed there was no hierarchy, no "ultimate teaching", that each style provided a fully satisfying means of reaching the Buddha-truth. This was the creation of Tiantai Buddhism.



Chih-i

#### THE FIRST JAPANESE CHEFS

Chih-i's effort was mirrored a few years later in the life and quest of a young Buddhist monk in Japan named Saicho. Buddha-dharma had slipped into Japan from China, through Korea,



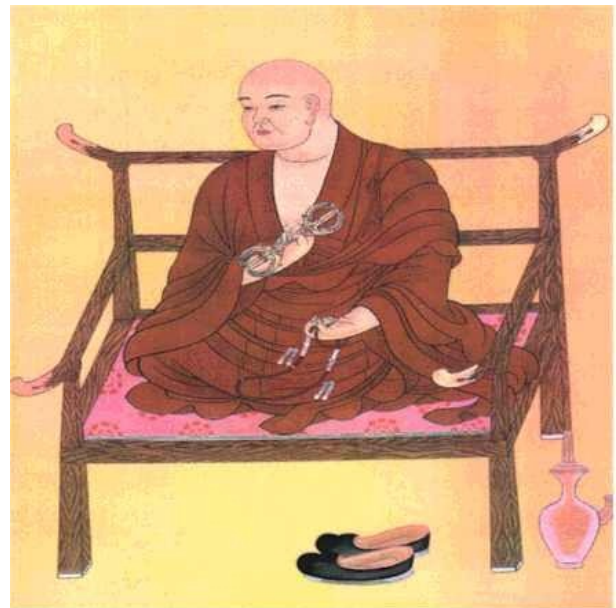
Saicho - Dengyo daishi

and established itself at the Japanese court in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. The sanctioned style relied on an active link to Indian-authorized monks and that tradition. Saicho, a brilliant and energetic man, was frustrated by having to rely only on Indian chefs and Indian recipes to cook up his Dharma. He travelled to Chih-i's Chinese kitchen and brought back as many 'Tiantai cook-books' as he could carry. Through his tireless efforts, he finally and posthumously received permission to establish the first Japanese-authorized dharma line, Tendai. Like Chih-i, his teaching became a stew of multiple styles, stirred together in a harmonious and flavourful mixture. Like the "fusion" style mentioned above, it had hints of Indian flavours, Chinese flavours and some new and distinctive Japanese flavours, ones which would inspire dharma-chefs for the next few hundred

years.

At the same time as Saicho, another young Japanese monk, equally brilliant and energetic, named Kukai, made a similar effort to introduce what he believed was an innovative recipe from China. The two knew each other and travelled together and each brought back their own secret recipe to transform Japanese Buddhism. Kukai's style was known as Shingon and it was less all-inclusive than Tendai, but every bit as distinctively Japanese. He emphasized the performance of certain ritual activities, which Shingon shared with Tendai, but gave special status to them which Tendai does not. In time these two 'kitchens' grew apart and, in some ways, competitive.

Unlike India, Japanese Buddhism existed at the



Kukai - Kobo daishi

pleasure of the imperial court, and so it was a constant pressure to secure and maintain court support. Buddhist teachers had to satisfy the appetite in court for recipes which would gain

the favour of the native Japanese 'kami', the gods and spirits. Within a couple of generations, Tendai had become the most popular recipe in Japan. Shingon had less court support, but grew in popularity with common people. However, as with any culture, tastes change with politics, and by the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was a growing appetite for something new and different, something in keeping with what was happening in society. The major change in the Japanese world was the decline of the Emperor's power and the rise of power in the secular military leadership. Tendai remained associated with the court, but other recipes seemed the preferred diet for the newly emerging samurai-ruled society. The other two giants of Japanese Buddhism, Zen and Pure Land, found their styles more in keeping with the new age.

#### THE LATER CHEFS

Zen had existed for centuries in India, China and Korea. However, it found its true home in Japan through a resonance between its own simple austerity and single-mindedness and the ways of the samurai. Its emphasis on personal effort, at times a brutal physicality and a stoicism about life and death, which sprung from the battlefields of the many civil wars of the time. Dogen, the greatest 'chef' in that tradition and a giant among world philosophers in the world, started out as another Tendai priest. Tendai



Dogen zenji

already taught and encouraged the zen style of meditation and questioning, one of the several approved paths in its teaching. Over time, Zen distinguished itself apart from Tendai, in large part from the efforts of Dogen to articulate a coherent and unique vision of Zen. His writings continue to inspire the world and continue to form the foundation of any study of that tradition. There were divisions and sub-schools within Zen. As with most of the rest of the country Zen and Tendai and Shingon monks formed armies and battled with each other both theologically and physically, with no real benefit to any of them. With the calming of the wars in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the three schools found ways to co-exist and even, in true Japanese style, to blend their flavours to enrich the national Dharma-stew.

Our last pair of great chefs likewise grew out of the Tendai sangha. The endorsed a different



Honen

element of the harmonious way taught in Tendai, namely a simple devotionalism. Beginning with Honen and climaxing with Shinran, they spoke to and from the need in ordinary Buddhists to have a direct, simple and personal connection with the Buddhas. They were moved by the great vow of Amitabha Buddha, who promised Awakening to anyone who sincerely called on him for help. This simple recipe captured the appetite of everyday Buddhists and to the present represents the most popular form of religious practice in Japan.

#### JAPANESE INGREDIENTS

A great chef is more than an artist with new recipes. A chef must also introduce new foods, new tastes which stimulate and satisfy contemporary cravings. We've introduced the greatest Japanese chefs, now, let's consider a few of the new ingredients that distinguished their cooking from that foundation meal cooked up by Shakyamuni.



Shinran Shonin

"Awakening in this very life" - Previous Mahayana teaching stressed the eons and eons it would take to free oneself of the binding karma that held us in suffering. Japanese Dharma insists that Awakening can occur "in this very life". Different schools describe different ways, but all affirm the possibility.

"Awakening is available to all" - In earlier Buddhism, it was taught that only humans, especially human males, and even more especially, human male monastic males were the sole access route for Awakening. Japanese Buddhism concluded the process which had begun in China which affirmed that awareness was available to any being.

"All things are Buddha" - In earlier teaching, the natural world was seen as rather neutral, like a stage or background for human life and death.

Japanese sensibility has long included a reverence for the natural world. The concept of 'kami', that every natural thing had a resident spirituality, informed Japanese Dharma too. It was the Japanese teachers, notably Dogen who emphasized that everything, even "mountains and rivers" were possessed of a buddha-nature.

"From the beginning, all things are Buddha" - Earlier schools taught that Awakening was the culmination of a long process, a gradual and tortuous casting off of cravings, a true "blowing out" of Nirvana. As we just noted, Japanese teachers held that the Buddha-nature or Dharma-nature was already present in all things from beginningless time. Our practice would disclose this in an instant. We would recognize that our sorrow was not an unfolding or casting off but a penetration into a truth that was already present. Ignorance was not something to overcome but simply to be realized as already true.

"The whole Universe in this moment" - Evident through its expression in Japanese Buddhist art, this concept has a theological basis. All schools teach that one can penetrate the entire Dharma in any given moment of experience. In the arts, we see this in the fondness for miniatures and partial landscapes which point to larger truths.

Expressing the Dharma -All cultures used Buddhist themes in their local arts - painting, sculpture, architecture. Each region has unique and recognizable styles. However, it was Japanese dharma which articulated a national aesthetic out of its Dharma teaching. Nowhere else can you see so many aesthetic ways to the Dharma. The tea ceremony and the ceramics it

uses, the way of the brush, the way of the sword, martial arts and archery, haiku poetry, the dramatic arts like Noh Theatre - these are all acknowledged as sacred arts, legitimate ways to spiritual goals.

## CONCLUSION

Only in Japan would the majority of the population affirm themselves as non-religious and Buddhist at the same time. Our generations of dharma chefs have cooked up a kind of national Buddha-stew which has nourished and fed centuries of Japanese. In the last few centuries the buffet has been shared all over the world. This style of Buddhism has never been isolated as just a philosophy or religion. It has been a flavour, a taste which has penetrated the lives of its practitioners. It has drawn from the national spirit and, in turn, fed that same spirit transforming it into something well-fed and invigorated. Our teaching style, Tendai, has always been in the centre of this feast. When we practice this Harmonious Way, we feed ourselves with an enriched and energized version of the same recipe Shakyamuni began over 2000 years ago.

*Innen Parchelo,  
August, 2012*