

**STUDIES ON  
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**GLOCALIZATION OF BUDDHISM  
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and  
Nan Tien Institute, Australia

# THE LOCALIZATION AND SPREAD OF JAPANESE BUDDHISM

**Fumihiko Sueki**

*Professor, International Research Center for Japanese Studies*

Fumihiko Sueki obtained his PhD from the University of Tokyo's Department of Indian Philosophy and Buddhist Studies, and Faculty of Letters. His previous appointments include lecturer at the Toho Gakuin and professor at the University of Tokyo Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences. Sueki's publications include *Annen Genshin*, *Nihon Bukkyō Shisōshi Ronkō*, *Studies of Buddhism during the early Heian period*, *Bukkyō Kotoba no Shisōshi*, and others.

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## **The Trend towards Secularism**

It is well-known that Japanese Buddhism came from China, and in the course of its acceptance and accommodation into Japanese society, it underwent many changes, whether planned or unintentional. Are these changes original innovations or complacent degeneration? The distinction may be subtle. It is certainly not our role here to resolve this question by passing value judgements, as there might be necessary reasons behind these changes. Rather than simply making a value judgement, the researcher prioritize the pursuit of truth. Having said that, when considering the nature of religion, we must necessarily be concerned with how changes affect the vitality of religion.

## **The Secularization of Monasticism: Crisis of Detachment from Secular Elements**

The questions that loom over us then are: What is religion? What is Buddhism?

To me, a remarkable feature of religion is its constant aim to rise above mundane and worldly ideas in the pursuit of transcending the secular. As we know, Sakyamuni Buddha left the life of a householder to be liberated from life's sufferings, which include the four aspects of birth, aging, sickness, and death, and also a further four aspects—separation from loved ones, closeness to loathsome people, not getting what one wants, and the Five Aggregates. These Eight Sufferings are inevitable afflictions for human beings living in the secular world, which is why Buddhism exhibits strong elements of transcendence that in turn manifests in its monastic institutions. While it remains debatable how lay practitioners in the early period of Buddhism managed this issue, we are at least certain that the Sectarian Buddhism that followed shortly after professed that one cannot reach enlightenment without practicing as a monastic. Today, Buddhism in Southeast Asia still strictly abides by this rule.

On the other hand, by the time of Mahayana Buddhism, the position of lay practitioners had become more elevated. One such example is Vimalakirti, who is depicted as having attained spiritual realizations superior to that of monastics despite being a layperson. Simultaneously, philosophies arose that held one may obtain rebirth in the Pure Land through simple practices like those of the Pure Land School. There are other philosophies of instant enlightenment such as “affliction is Bodhi,” which are grounded in emptiness. However, India's Mahayana Buddhism maintained that such states could only be attained through cumulative practice, that ordinary people cannot become suddenly enlightened. As such philosophies spread from China to Japan, there was, however, a strong inclination towards secularism. This inclination was starkly evident in the Chinese Chan School's philosophy of sudden enlightenment, but in China it retained the institution of monastic practice.

When Chan Buddhism spread to Japan, monastic institutions gradually collapsed—though they were ultimately preserved in a secularized form. Marriage and the consumption of meat were deemed acceptable from an early time. The author of *Nihon Ryoiki*, Kyōkai, was one such monk who took a wife. In *Nihon Ryoiki*, monastics who broke precepts were depicted as saints. From the late Heian to the Kamakura period, monks getting married was taken for granted. It is indeed puzzling why Buddhism did not transform into a lay movement but instead

preserved the appearance of a monastic institution, while entirely replacing its qualities—a process strikingly similar to the *kun'yomi* of Han glyphs in Japan. A related issue is that as Buddhism tended towards secularization, the idea of negation of the secular was beginning to form in Japan.<sup>1</sup> Although the finer details remain debatable, I personally acknowledge this point. It is generally believed that the Japanese way of thinking is inclined towards the secular, and we can tentatively say that the concept of transcendence from the late ancient to medieval period happened under the influence of Buddhism. Conversely, as Buddhism in Japan came to emphasize the secular, this was represented doctrinally by the philosophy of intrinsic enlightenment (*hongaku shiso*).

### **Secularization of the Philosophy of Intrinsic Enlightenment**

It is generally believed that Saichō was the one who infused secularism into the philosophy of intrinsic enlightenment, and who regarded the theory of buddha-nature as a mainstream concept in Buddhism because it was an optimistic approach which recognized that anyone could become a buddha, and weakened the impetus for monastic practice. In addition, the bodhisattva precepts that Saichō tried his best to establish at Mount Hiei were in line with the principle of *shinzoku ichinyo* (unity of the real and the mundane)—both of which blurred the distinctions between the monastic and lay. Later, the bodhisattva precepts gradually lost significance, and even came to be understood more as ideals than as precepts to be upheld. In this sense, secularist elements had seeped into the philosophy of intrinsic enlightenment by the time of Saichō, who nevertheless had nothing to do with the former, as evidenced by his strict observance of monastic precepts in formulating demanding rules for his twelve-year retreat in the mountains.

In the philosophical transformations that followed, we see in the Tendai example two major branches—accepting and rejecting the assimilation of the philosophy of intrinsic enlightenment. The former is represented by Ennin, Enchin, Annen, and their disciples in their esoteric Tendai tradition, of which Annen's philosophy became the foundational one in the process of turning into that of intrinsic enlightenment. However, this process was gradually restrained by the mid-Heian period, with Genshin representative of those who reversed the trend. Genshin too continued Saichō's theory of buddha-nature with his

publication of *Ichijō Yōketsu*, which took the approach of grounding the theory in canonical material, and thus no support for the secularized interpretation of intrinsic enlightenment could be found. It can instead be said that his approach to Pure Land takes the direction of transcending the secular. By the late Heian period, the philosophy of intrinsic enlightenment developed through *kuden hōmon* (oral transmission). If that was the case, did it all develop in the direction of supporting the theory of intrinsic enlightenment? There are few scholars like Shōshin who clearly criticize this theory from the perspective of canonical materials, but they indeed exist. In this fashion, both philosophical trends intermingled up to the Kamakura period, when a new one was born.

When we look into the concept of intrinsic enlightenment, which matured in the medieval period, we see it contains critical elements of Buddhism's decline. If we consider the perspective of the relationship between gods and the Buddha, with the development of *honjisuijaku*, gods were seen as the models for the Buddha, and so gods which appear on an everyday level to aid people in their problems are considered more valuable than the Buddha. From the secular standpoint of intrinsic enlightenment philosophy, in the secular world we only need such gods and not the Buddha. This culminated in the rise of Shintoism alongside nationalism at the end of the Kamakura period, which absorbed Buddhist ideas as it gradually formed its own independent philosophy. Likewise, the Buddhist concept of intrinsic enlightenment became secularized, influenced by such trends in its implementation within Japan—which seems to reflect the localization of Buddhism itself.

### **The Quagmire of Japan**

Recently, I think of Endō Shūsaku's novel *Silence*<sup>2</sup> whenever I consider the localization and propagation of Buddhism. Although the theme of the novel is the oppression of Christians during the early Edo period, it exposes the heavy topic of how religions localize—a topic which Buddhism cannot avoid.

Ferreira, a senior missionary who gave up his faith, told Rodrigues, the protagonist of *Silence*:

“Twenty years, I have done missionary work for twenty years,” Ferreira repeated these same sentences again and again without any emotion. “What I have learned is that your, or our, religion ultimately cannot take root in this country.”

“No, it is not that it is unable to take root.” The priest shook his head like it was a pellet drum, shouting: “The root has been cut off.”

In the face of the shrieking priest, Ferreira continued with his head lowered and eyelids almost closed, saying like a passionless, emotionless doll: “This country is a swamp. You finally understand! This swamp is more terrible than imagined. Regardless of what seedling, its roots will begin to rot and leaves wither if planted into this swamp. We have planted the seeds of Christ on such a piece of swamp.”

But hasn't there been the fruits of his labor, was there not a period when the faith was spread far and wide? To the unrelenting questions from Rodrigues, Ferreira firmly claimed like an army chasing after the heels of its defeated opponent: “No, that is not true. The people of this country have faith in their gods, not ours. This we have not realized for a long time, we simply confidently assumed that the Japanese have become Christians.”

Obviously, the above is related to Christianity, but it cannot be considered completely irrelevant to Buddhism. Have Buddhists thought about such problems seriously? Everyone believes that Buddhism has become part of Japan, but to what degree? Can Buddhism truly root itself without rotting in this “terrible swamp”?

## The Fundamental Issue in Localizing Foreign Religions

The author of *Silent* went beyond highlighting the above issue. Shouldering the heavy burdens of being a Japanese and Christian, he made a bold conclusion, or rather provided a new direction for analysis at the end of his book:

Finally, Jesus Christ shouted to Rodrigues, who is about to step on the sculpture of Mary and Jesus: “Step on me! Step on me! I exist for the purpose of being stepped upon.” It is through this act of stepping upon the image of Jesus that Rodrigues heard the voice of Jesus for the first time.

“Step on me! Your feet must be in pain—in pain equal to others who have stepped on me before. But having painful feet means there has been enough walking for now. I will share your pain and suffering. I exist to share your pain and suffering.”

“Lord! I hate that you always remained silent.”

“I have not been silent! I have always been suffering together with all of you.”

From a silent God to a suffering Christ, has Rodrigues not too fallen into the “swamp”? In reality, the author used the words of the Chikugonokami officer to forcefully raise the issue:

....faced with their weakness which they cannot help, sentient beings rely upon the compassion of the Buddha—this in Japan we term salvation. However the priest very clearly states that the salvation offered by Christ is entirely different. Christian salvation goes beyond faith and reliance on the creator to include a protective demeanor while accompanying believers

in doing all they can. If this were true, the Christian doctrine has unknowingly been twisted in Japan the swamp.

The author did not provide answers to this question. As to whether the sculpture of Christ mentioned by the author can stand up to the Chikugonokami officer is a discussion for another time. Whether the “Buddha’s compassion” referred to here is authentically Buddhist also needs further study. Nevertheless, both Christianity and Buddhism often faced the same issue when rooting themselves in Japan. What really happens to the Japanese in accepting foreign philosophies and religions? It is precisely because Buddhism is so deeply embedded in Japan that we have to cautiously revisit this issue.

## Notes

- 1 Saburō Ienaga, *The Development of Negative Logic in the History of Japanese Thought* (1943).
- 2 The 1966 publication *Silence* describes the experience of missionary Rodrigues doing work in a Japan which has forbidden the Christian faith, who after experiencing much gives up his faith, but yet truly comes in contact with Jesus Christ for the first time through the turmoil of rejecting his religion.