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The Origins of Jōdo Shinshū

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Abstract

Shiran Shonen, who lived in medieval Japan, founded Jōdo Shinshū, a sect of Mahayana Buddhism. His beliefs came from a wide range of places. However, the idea that directly inspired Shin Buddhism came from the Seven Pure Land Patriarchs. By tracing the legacy of these patriarchs chronologically, this paper trace the development of Jōdo Shinshū from the origins of Buddhism all the way to Shinran.
Often referred to as “Japanese protestantism,” Shin Buddhism, or Jōdo Shinshū, is the most widely practiced form of Buddhism in Japan today. Consequently, one cannot hope to understand Japan without understanding one of its most popular religious traditions. Shinran Shonen (1173-1263), a Buddhist monk from Kyoto, founded Jōdo Shinshū over the course of his life, after being influenced by his teacher and fellow monk, Hōnen, as well as the teachings of the other six preceding Pure Land patriarchs. His experience with these patriarchs shaped his beliefs and, naturally, the school of Buddhism he founded. The legacy of the patriarchs influenced how Shinran viewed history, holy literature and even the time period that he lived in. It is hard to find a single part of Jōdo Shinshū that is untouched by the patriarchs. 

Buddhism began in the fifth century BCE. According to legend, its founder, Siddhartha Gautama, was the prince of the Shakyas, a clan in modern-day North India and Nepal. His father, the king of the Shakyas, received a prophecy before his son’s birth that, if his son left the palace, he would abandon the Shakyas. As a result, Siddhartha’s father kept him locked up within his palace. However, Siddhartha’s confinement was pleasant; his servants gave him anything he desired, and he married a beautiful woman. One day, he desired to leave the palace, so his father designed plan. Before Siddhartha left the palace, his father made sure he wouldn’t see anything unsightly. Nevertheless, as Siddhartha roamed around his kingdom, he saw an old man, near death. Because of his sheltered life, the old man surprised him. The idea that all life, no matter what, always ends in such suffering made him leave the palace and look for a solution to suffering.

2 James Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū* (Indiana University Press), pg. 3.
At first, Siddhartha joined a group of aesthetic monks; they would fast for long periods of time, only eating a single grain of rice every day. However, while Siddhartha was meditating by a river, he heard three singers say, “If the harp string is not tightly stretched, the sound made will not be melodious, but if it is over tight, we cannot sing either,” and, after meditating on the singer’s message, he thought, “Austere self-mortification as well as self-indulgence are both wrong.” At that moment, Siddhartha stopped being an aesthetic and ate a bowl of rice pudding. He then meditated under the Bodhi Tree, where he achieved enlightenment, or Nirvana, and became the Buddha, literally meaning “Enlightened One” in Sanskrit.

By achieving enlightenment, Siddhartha had ceased all suffering within himself and freed himself from the cycle of rebirth, or Samara. In Buddhism, all sentient beings are stuck in this cycle. They can be reborn into a better lives by doing good deeds. This concept is called karma. Karma and Samsara were not originally Buddhist. Instead, they come from Hinduism, the indigenous religion of India. Without a doubt, Buddhism and Hinduism have a relationship similar to that of Christianity and Judaism, in that, one grew out of the other.

It is unclear whether the legend of Siddhartha Gautama is fact or fiction. Either way, the legend is apocryphal and important because Buddhism accept it as dogma. It is Buddhism’s foundation myth, like the crucifixion of Jesus for Christians. Regardless of its historical accuracy, it has still had an impact on history. The teachings that it lays out are the core beliefs of Buddhism. As far as the origins of Shin Buddhism are concerned, the most important among these core beliefs is that of Nirvana.

Although the various schools of Buddhism have developed different paths to enlightenment, the goal of achieving Nirvana is still found in all of them. Nevertheless, even

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3 Chittadhar Hrdaya, The Epic of the Buddha (Shambhala Press), pg. 170.
early Buddhists had disagreements about the path to enlightenment. From these disagreements, the two major schools of Buddhism were born: Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism.

The formation of the Mahayana and Theravada schools happened between the 5th century BCE and the first century AD, while Buddhism was still entirely confined to the Indian Subcontinent. These schools, in and of themselves, are similar to the different forms of Christianity. For example, Protestantism and Orthodox Christianity are forms of their respective religion that have different denominations within them. Likewise, Mahayana Buddhism, of which Jōdo Shinshū is a member, has many schools within it.

The reason for the division of Buddhism into the Mahayana and Theravada branches is unclear. Some trace it all the way back to the death of the Buddha, where his followers convened councils to codify their teachings. This then led to Theravada Buddhism to use the Pali Canon, whereas Mahayana Buddhism uses a loose collection of sutras as their holy literature. Different sects of Mahayana Buddhism put more emphases of specific sutras.

A sutra is a collection of the Buddha’s sayings which he preached after achieving enlightenment. As Reverend Hayashi, a Jōdo Shinshū minister, explains, “It is not clear whether [the Mahayana Sutras] are the exact words of the [Buddha] or not. However, if the Mahayana Sutras are not the exact words of the [Buddha], they still contain the essence of the truth of his enlightenment.” In that sense, the sutras can be thought of as containing allegorical works.

Shin Buddhism uses the Three Pure Land Sutras. These sutras focus on the Amitābha, a transcendent Buddha, and the Pure Land, a realm beyond this world. Shin Buddhists seek to

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6 Hisao Inagaki, *The Three Pure Land Sutras* (Society for the Promotion of Buddhism), pg. xiii.
achieve enlightenment by being reborn in the Pure Land. There, achieving enlightenment would be effortless.\textsuperscript{7} To be reborn in the Pure Land, Shin Buddhists believe that one must take refuge in the Amitābha. This is done by chanting the nembutsu, which consists of “Namu Amida Butsu,” literally meaning, “I take refuge in the Amitābha.” This is similar to praying the rosary in Catholicism.

The Three Pure Land Sutras are viewed as the spiritual predecessors to the Pure Land Patriarchs.\textsuperscript{8} They are the equivalent of the Bible in Christianity. However, although they were composed in the second century, Hōnen, a patriarch himself who lived in twelfth century Japan, was the one who selected the Three Pure Land Sutras.\textsuperscript{9} Moreover, because Hōnen was the last patriarch, there is no evidence that the six preceding patriarchs would have put any greater emphasis on these sutras more than any other sutras that also mention the Amitābha. This is the chief holy text of Shin Buddhism, and even though it was written well before any of the patriarchs, their influence is still demonstrable. Today, reciting passages from the Three Pure Land Sutras is common practice in Japan on Buddhist holidays like Bodhi Day.

Born in the second century and possibly mythological, Nagarjuna, an Indian monk and the first Pure Land Patriarch, “delineated two [paths] of achieving the [state] of nonretrogression,” according to William Dobbins, a Professor of Religion and East Asian Studies at Oberlin College.\textsuperscript{10} In this state of nonretrogression, one would be unshakeable in their pursuit of enlightenment. The two paths that Nagarjuna delineated were the easy and difficult practices. The easy path, which he promoted, involves chanting and meditating. Once again,

\textsuperscript{7} Dobbins, pg. 3.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, pg. 2-3.
\textsuperscript{9} Hisao Inagaki, \textit{The Three Pure Land Sutras} (Society for the Promotion of Buddhism), pg. xiii.
\textsuperscript{10} Williams, page 56; Dobbins, pg. 4
according to Dobbins, “The [easy path] came to identified with the Pure Land path.”

Because little is known about Nagarjuna, his devotees have created myths about him. In one myth, he visits a kingdom of snakes and brings back various sutras that were heretofore unknown to mankind. It is hard to attach Nagarjuna is any historical context due to his possibly mythical status. Despite this, his ideas are still extremely influential in Mahayana Buddhist thought. His student, and second Pure Land Patriarch, Vasubandhu, went on to further Nagarjuna’s teachings. He established the five nenbutsu practices, which are, “[w]orship of [the Amitābha], [p]raise of [the Amitābha], [a]spiration for [b]irth in the Pure Land, [c]ontemplating the Pure Land, and [t]ransferring [m]erit,” as Richard St. Clair, a Jōdo Shinshū practitioner, explained. In addition, all of these practices can still be seen in Shin Buddhism.

Even during the time of Nagarjuna, Buddhism was fairly obscure in India. However, the reign of Ashoka the Great in the third century BCE kick started its expansion. Although he was originally a Hindu emperor, Ashoka converted to Buddhism after waging an especially brutal war against a rival kingdom. His subsequent promotion of Buddhism through out the Mauryan Empire, which encompassed modern day India, spread the religion to places as far away as Central Asia.

11 Dobbins, pg. 4.
12 Williams, pg. 56.
Between the second and sixth centuries, Buddhism began to spread to China.\textsuperscript{15} T`an Luan, the first Chinese patriarch, associated rebirth in the Pure Land with, what he called, Other Power.\textsuperscript{16} This Other Power comes from the Amitābha and is in within all living beings. For Shin Buddhists, it guides them toward the Pure Land. Although exact definitions are vague, Taitetsu Unno, a Jōdo Shinshū scholar, taught that “[T]he [nembutsu] is called Other Power.”\textsuperscript{17} Seeing as how the nembutsu is the most important practice of Shin Buddhism, this statement is significant. Clearly, Jōdo Shinshū theology still takes its cues from the patriarchs. This concept is so important in fact that Unno devoted an entire chapter solely to it in his book, \textit{River of Fire, River of Water: An Introduction To The Pure Land Tradition of Shin Buddhism}.

The next Chinese patriarch, Tao Ch’o, is most notable for developing the idea of mappō. He believed that sentient beings could no longer achieved enlightenment in this life. Essentially, the Buddha was the last person able to achieve Nirvana in this life, and since then, the world has degenerated. Sentient being should now strive to achieve enlightenment is the next life. This next, enlightenment-fulfilling life, not surprisingly, would take place in the Pure Land, according to Tao Ch’o. Shan Tao, the last Chinese patriarch, and later Genshin, the first Japanese patriarch, continued their predecessors in the promotion of the nembutsu practice. Shan Tao establish the nembutsu as supreme to all other practices. Genshin even offered the nembutsu as an alternative to meditating.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Zhaoguang Ge, \textit{An Intellectual History of China: Knowledge, Thought, and Belief Before the Seventh Century CE}. (Brill Publications) pg. 316.
\textsuperscript{16} Dobbins, pg. 5.
\textsuperscript{17} Taitetsu Unno, \textit{River of Fire, River of Water} (Doubleday Publishing) pg. 36.
\textsuperscript{18} Dobbins, pg. 5-6.
The Nara period (710-749) in Japan marked the introduction of Buddhism to the archipelago nation. Among the first forms of Buddhism to arrive was the Tendai school. This school would then grow in influence during the subsequent Heian era (794-1185). Both periods saw the growth of sinophilia in Japan. Since China was familiar with Buddhism by then, it’s not hard to see why Japan would want to import the religion, to make itself for Chinese. It also was during this time, Genshin lived and died. One hundred and fifty eight years later, Hōnen, a Tendai monk, “broke with the establish center of monastic learning, Mt. Hiei, and proclaimed the establishment of [a] … Pure Land school,” as recounted by Taitetsu Unno. Another Tendai monk, Shinran, would follow Hōnen and build his own beliefs based on what he had been taught. Hōnen abandoned the monasteries on Mt. Hiei because he viewed the old schools as too elitist. Instead he advocated for a form of Buddhism which was meant, not for the elites, but for the average person.

In his time, the Japanese establishment reviled Shinran and Hōnen. A former Emperor of Japan, Gotoba, leveled charges against Hōnen, essentially calling his beliefs heretical. In those charges, Gotoba, criticized the teaching of the exclusive nembutsu, which Hōnen preached. The excluding nembutsu took Shan Tao’s teaching even further. Hōnen not only believed that the nembutsu was superior to all other practices, but also it was now the only path to achieving rebirth in the Pure Land. The influence for this belief came from the idea of mappō. The start of the eleventh century was not kind to Japan. Various disasters, both natural and political, plagued the country. There was, according to the Paul Williams, a Religious Studies Lecturer at the

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19 Unno, pg. 2.
20 Dobbins, pg. 12.
21 Ibid, pg. 15.
22 Unno, pg. 3.
University of Bristol, “moral bankruptcy, imperial weakness, revolts, and vicious feudal warfare.” Some Japanese Buddhists wondered if this was the culmination of the era of mappō.23

The belief in mappō and Hōnen’s determination to create a more egalitarian Buddhism found the perfect solution in the exclusive nembutsu. Because the era of mappō had begun according to Japanese Buddhists at the time, the ability to be enlightened had diminished. Serendipitously, Pure Land Buddhism emphasized achieving Nirvana in the next life, or life in the Pure Land, not one’s current life. Moreover, as Hōnen preached, the practice that lead a practitioner to enlightenment in the next life was chanting the nembutsu, not meditating or any other elitist, monastic practice.

As a follower of Hōnen, Shiran would have also believed the world was entering the age of mappō. As a result, the times he lived in were imbued religious significance. This feeling on an impending end times fueled Hōnen and Shiran’s evangelical crusade to guide every sentient to Pure Land by means of the nembutsu. This, combined with Hōnen’s anti-elitist viewpoint, almost certainly influenced Shinran when he said, “[The nembutsu] does not discriminate between the young and old, good and evil—true entrusting alone is essential.”24

Going back to Shin Buddhism’s status as Japanese protestantism, one can see that Shinran’s beliefs are similar to sola fide, or only faith, in actual Protestantism. Although it is impossible to know where this came from directly, it is also easy to hypothesize that this came from the seven patriarchs. Almost never do the patriarchs emphases good acts as the path to the Pure Land. Going back Nagarjuna, the path to the Pure Land is based on religious faith. This faith is then intern translated into religious practice, with the nembutsu being the chief practice.

23 Williams, pg. 159.
The core of Shin Buddhism is the nembutsu; it revolves around the nembutsu. This practice is its defining quality. Again and again, throughout his works, Shinran expounds upon how praiseworthy it is. From Nagarjuna to Hōnen, its development is thread that holds Jōdo Shinshū’s spiritual heritage, the seven Pure Land patriarchs, together. As for Shin Buddhism’s other aspects, which are unique to it, Shinran also established them under the influence of the patriarchs. Jōdo Shinshū’s theology, beliefs and practices, all culminating in Shinran, have their roots in the patriarchs.
Bibliography


I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work. Ariane Akhand. This gives the dog an odd snout classification, displaying traits of a dolichocephalic, brachycephalic, and mesocephalic dog all at once. Analysis. The artistic depictions of hunting dogs are almost identical to the descriptions provided by Xenophon. All of these dogs have the long body, pointed snout, long tail, and short fur that is recommended for this type of working dog. I would say that the single set of herding dog remains from Pompeii, the set that possessed an abnormal snout for a dog of its profession, is an anomaly. Because that dog also had the. â€œI hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.â€  This pledge verifies that the work submitted is the studentâ€™s own and has been done in accordance with the requirements set forth by the instructor. Honor Council. Honor Council Members. Faculty Honor Advisors. Honor Pledge. Case Summaries. Expedited Sanctioning. Free essays, homework help, flashcards, research papers, book reports, term papers, history, science, politics. Chemistry 220b, Section 1 Name _ Exam 2 (100 pts) Thursday, February 26, 2015 Chapters 13, 15-19 Write and sign the VU Honor Pledge: I pledge on my honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this examination I. M. Honest _. signature This exam is closed book and closed notes NOTE: It is difficult for me to give you partial credit if you do not show your work! Neatness counts Stereochemistry counts are indicated Good Luck !! page 2 of 8 1 â€“ 15. Multiple Choice. Technology and Business Information Systems Cambra L. Kucharski University of Mary Washington 10 Oct 2012 I, Cambra L. Kucharski, hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work. Introduction Technological advancements have changed the way people walk, talk and work in offices. The concept of doing business has entirely changed in the last few decades and this is because of the introduction of the latest technological tools in business practices. These tools are based on scientific and logical approach which aid in managerial decisions