

The religious implications of the byodoin essay



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Buddhism has the characteristics of what would be expected in a cosmic religion for the future; it transcends a personal God, avoids dogmas and theology; it covers both the natural and spiritual, and it is based on a religious sense aspiring from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual, as a meaningful unity. Albert Einstein (Buddhism)

Buddhism has affected many people. From the Buddhas first followers to my next door neighbor, people everywhere have followed the teachings of Buddhism. Buddhism was started by a Prince; a prince who wanted more. Many different ways of showing appreciation to Buddha are present in todays society as well as when Buddhism was first started. There are paintings, carvings, statues and buildings dedicated to Buddha, but one of the most prevalent of these ways of appreciation is the Byodoin Temple in Uji, Japan. This temple is a beautiful example of Japanese Buddhist architecture, including painting and carvings inside. To understand the full impact of this temple and its contents, we must first understand Buddhist thought. By starting with Buddha and going through Buddhist thought, art and the period in which the Byodoin was constructed, we will learn the true impact of this building on the Buddhist culture.

Buddhism was born in a time when Hinduism ruled the streets. To many it seemed that somehow, somewhere, there had to be more. For one man, this puzzle would lead him on a journey through the countryside and towns of ancient Nepal and eventually into himself, where the true meaning of Buddhism lies. This is the story of that one man, Prince Siddhartha Gautama.

Prince Siddhartha Gautama, born to Shuddhodana and Maya, the king and queen of the Sakyas, was born in Lumbini, Nepal around the year 563 BC. According to Buddhist belief, Siddhartha was divinely conceived. His mother had a dream one night, and in that dream an elephant with six tusks came to her with a lotus flower in its trunk and touched her right side. This is when Siddhartha was conceived.

When Siddhartha was born, his father summoned Brahmins to tell what his future would hold. They gave him two options: he would either be a world conqueror or a great teacher. Wanting the first destiny for his son, Shuddhodana embellished his son with all the pleasures of life- not wanting him to see any death or disease. One day, Siddhartha asked his charioteer to take him for a ride throughout the city. While riding he saw three things he had never seen before. One was an elderly man, another was a man suffering from illness, and finally he saw a dead body surrounded by mourners. Since he had never seen anything like this before, he asked his charioteer what these things were. He responded to the Prince that these things were natural and unavoidable, and happened to everyone. Once again Siddhartha asked his charioteer to take him out into the city; this time he was to see the last of four images that would change his life forever. The last sight he saw was a wandering old holy man with no possessions. His head was completely shaved and he was wearing a yellow robe. Having seen all these things, Buddha not only became aware of the pain and suffering of humankind, but was also prompted to do something about it. He left his family in search of the answers to his questions (Buddhism).

Siddhathra traveled throughout the northeastern portion of India, seeking out holy men and teachers who taught him ancient Indian techniques of meditation. Even though meditation was important to him, his main quest was to find the answer to the problem of suffering. He wanted to know why they were suffering and how it could stop. So Siddhartha studied the teachings of Hinduism. He was very fascinated by the belief of reincarnation or Samsara. (This was the belief of the soul, after death, would travel to a new body and be born again.) Depending on the persons previous life, their soul could enter a body of a higher or lower state of existence. The determining factor of a souls new existence is based on how the person lived his previous life- this is called Karma. Siddhartha found this very interesting, so he adopted a life of self-denial and penance, meditating constantly in order to hopefully be reincarnated to a higher status.

After consulting the many teachers and holy men, Siddhartha learned that the answer is inside you-it cant be found outside. This is when he was enlightened. The experience of enlightenment was really the beginning of the history of Buddhism and the religion itself. This is when Siddhartha became the Buddha, which means the enlightened one. As the Buddha, Siddhartha experienced Nirvana, the condition of wanting nothing. Buddha realized this was the way to end suffering, so he shared his enlightenment with others so that all living souls could end the cycles of their own rebirth and suffering. To express his newfound beliefs, Buddha conceived the Four Noble Truths. They consist of:

1) Suffering consists of disease, old age, and death; separation from those we love; craving what we cannot have; and hating which we cannot avoid.

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2) All suffering is a consequence of desire and the attempt to satisfy our desires.

3) Therefore, suffering can be overcome by ceasing to desire.

4) The way to end desire is to follow the Eightfold Path (Smith).

Buddha also developed the Eightfold Path. This Eightfold Path was the way to reach Nirvana, or the end of desire and therefore the end of suffering. Its basic principle is eight steps that you need to take or have before reaching Nirvana. Those steps are:

1) Right knowledge: This is knowledge of the Four Noble Truths.

2) Right aspiration: This is knowing what the problem of life is and what you want out of life.

3) Right speech: This is noticing how many times a day you lie, gossip, slander, bear false witness, and abuse with your speech. It is also trying to rectify those things.

4) Right behavior: These are like the 10 Commandments. It also includes abstinence for monks and unmarried people and the abstinence from drugs or alcohol.

5) Right livelihood: This is being in an occupation that promotes life instead of destroying it.

6) Right effort: This is being steadfast in your pursuit of Nirvana; it could also be called moral exertion.

7) Right mindfulness: This is fighting ignorance through self-examination.

8) Right absorption: This is meditation to try to experience the world in a different way

Theoretically, if you follow these, you will reach Nirvana and ultimately end your suffering.

Because of the simplicity of the Buddha's teachings, its significance on personal action, and his opposition to the caste system, Buddha soon won himself many followers. Like other religious teachers, he usually used stories or parables to explain his beliefs. Around the year 483 BC Buddha passed away at age eighty. Just before his death, people crowded around him and asked their him their final questions. Buddha started a great religious movement that would spread throughout the world and still remains a vital force 2500 years after his death (Buddhism).

Buddhism started with one man who wanted something more. He wanted understanding of the world around him. He set out on a great quest, seeking out many philosophers and ultimately creating the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, the backbone of Buddhist belief. He was a teacher, philosopher, and yet, just an ordinary man. He accomplished great things, but most of all, he established a religion that would influence society for centuries to follow.

Buddhism was established during the Heian period, a time in which Japan changed dramatically in several areas, including culture and government.

These changes would affect Japan forever, leaving a permanent mark on all of society.

In 794, the Emperor moved the capital from Nara to Kyoto. The period from 794 to 1192 is called the Heian era, because Kyoto was called Heian-kyo in those days. During this era, the power of the Emperor had fallen, and the nobles came to run the government instead. Literature flourished, such as novels and poems written by the nobles. Among the nobles, the most influential were Fujiwara no Michinaga and his son, Fujiwara no Yorimichi. They had great trust from the emperors for many generations and by the Heian era, their daughters became the empresses, and their grandchildren became the next emperors and empresses. In this way, the Fujiwara family prospered more and more. They also posed as the Sessho, which governed the country when the Emperor was still young or was sick, and the Kanpaku, which supported the emperor after he had come to age. They always had access to power. The early Heian culture was greatly influenced by China, but after the Kentoshi system ended, Japan's original culture formed. This culture is called the Kokufu culture, which suits the Japanese climate and livings. Another characteristic is the development of literature, with the invention of kana script. Japanese landscapes and drawings connected with stories were also made. During these four centuries Japan moved away from the direct influence of continental culture as a Japanese-style aristocratic culture flowered and matured.

The most commonly sculpted or drawn was, of course, the Buddha himself (Paine). In art, the Buddha is very special, and each part of it has a meaning. His hands are always in one of several positions (mudras). When his hand is

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on his knee (bhumisparsha), he is calling early beings to be witnesses for his enlightenment. His hand in his lap represents the physical world. An open hand (abhaya) means blessing and protection, and when the pointer-finger is up, he is in a favor granting position. Hands folded in his lap mean he is teaching. His topknot, or wisdom bun (ushnisa), represents his superior knowledge. His long earlobes remind us of his time as a prince when he wore elaborate earrings, and his robe for when he gave up his property in search of enlightenment. We usually recognize him for his long, straight toes, and sitting position (dyanasana) (Buddhism).

In the last century of the Heian period, the horizontal, illustrated narrative hand scroll (the emaki) came to the fore. Dating from about 1130, the illustrated Tale of Genji represents one of the high points of Japanese painting. It was written by Murasaki Shikibu, a lady-in-waiting to the Empress Akiko (988-1074), in about 1000. The novel deals with the life and loves of Prince Genji and the world of the Heian court after his death. The builder of the Byodoin, Fujiwara no Michinaga was the inspiration for the main character, Prince Genji. The 12th-century artists of the emaki version devised a system of pictorial conventions that visually convey the emotional content of each scene. In the second half of the century, a different, livelier style of continuous narrative illustration became popular. (Fujiwara Art).

Buddhist art is very special to believers; the most popular subject of art being the Buddha himself. Buddhist art was not confined only to painting. It also included sculpture and architecture.

As Japan moved into the 9th century, new architectural styles were produced, and since Buddhism was such a big part of their culture, their architecture reflected their religious views. The ideas of Buddhism are seen in the pagodas to the governmental buildings of that era. Branching from Chinese architecture, Japanese architects made for themselves a new era of buildings and gardens that would last for a lifetime.

Buddhism was and still is very instrumental in shaping Japanese architecture. It tended to be very ornate. Buddhism and Shintoism (the faith based on nature and ancestor worship) both have two very different approaches to architecture. Shintoism tends to be very simple, and Buddhism tends to be very ornate; these two opposing elements struggled against each other. The result seems to prove the strength of the innate taste for simplicity as shown by the fact that some of the Shinto shrines still retain their original simplicity, while Buddhist temples show marked traces of having been simplified in many respects. Simplicity is the keynote of Japanese dwelling houses (Harada). In this way, Japanese architecture moved away from its Chinese influence to help form its own culture.

Around the 9th century, Japanese Buddhism moved towards more democratic and inclusive forms, of which the most important was Pure Land Buddhism. Pure Land or Amida Buddhism was oriented around the figure of Amida Buddha. In the previous incarnation, as a bodhisattva, he refused to accept Buddhahood unless he could grant eternal happiness in the Pure Land to whoever called on him; this compassionate promise was called the “Original Vow.” Anyone who calls his name, “Namu Amida Butsu,” with sincere faith, trust, and devotion, will be granted eternal life by Amida of

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happiness in the Pure Land which has been set aside specifically for those who call on him (Fujiwara Art).

The Byodoin was a place for members of the Jodo sect of Buddhism to worship. The Jodo sect focused on the Amida Buddha, or the Buddha of everlasting light. Pure Land is a part of Mahayana, a branch of Buddhism that believes people should work for the enlightenment of all beings, not just themselves. Mahayanas place great emphasis on Bodhisattvas, who are creatures who have vowed not to enter Nirvana until all beings no longer suffer. Having seen past the world of form, the bodhisattvas are nearly eternal and omnipresent. One of the more famous bodhisattvas is Amida.

Faith in Amida centered on the belief that at the instant of death, Amida would descend to earth to carry the soul to the “Western Paradise”, a Buddhist Heaven of eternal bliss. Certain branches of the faith became so simplified that uttering praise to Amida became the only prerequisite to birth in the Pure Land, a faith so simple that even the peasants could understand it (Heian Era).

Amida Buddha in the Byodoin

According to this Jodo sect, the world is seen as Hell, but by giving service to Buddha in this world, one will be born into the Land of Happiness in the world to come. It emphasized the agony of those in Hell and the joy of those who were born in the Land of Happiness. As a result, aristocrats competed with one another to build temples, Buddhist images, paintings of Buddha, and copy Buddhist scriptures; these cultural activities accelerated the Japanization of Buddhist culture. Temple architecture became elegant

through the fusion of the temple and the aristocrat's residence. In sculpture, wood carvings, became the ideal; likenesses of Buddha came to be drawn as handsome and elegant figures easy for the Japanese to like; in other paintings the Japanese style called Yamato-e was adopted. This style was used to draw Japanese figures and scenery, and united with Japanese literature to establish new picture scroll form (ore-makimono) used to depict stories.

Many cultural areas were influenced by Pure Land Buddhism. They include, but are not limited to, painting, sculpture, and architecture. One of the most obvious is of course the architecture. Throughout Japan are many temples and buildings that demonstrate the Heian era architecture. One of the most critically acclaimed is the Byodoin.

One of the most prevalent examples of this moving away from Chinese influence is the Byodoin Buddhist Temple in Uji, Japan. Although most of this temple was destroyed in 1336 by war, one part still remains as an example of how the Japanese valued their religion and art. The Byodoin building itself began as a country villa owned by Michinaga Fujiwara, a powerful court minister. The Phoenix Hall was built in 1053 by his successor, Fujiwara no Yorimichi, who later converted it into a temple for Amida Buddha. The hall, painted red along with its lavishly decorated interior, is considered the epitome of art and architecture of the Heian period. Inside is an image of Amida Buddha, sublimely seated in the lotus position. This sculpture was created by the famed Heian artist Jocho, who also designed the ornate ceiling shining with bronze mirrors and the walls bearing images of Buddha riding on clouds to the " Pure Land." The door facing the Buddha has a

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square hole through which commoners from could contemplate his face across the temple. In the early days, the Uji-gawa River ran under this hall, and fishermen tried their luck from a porch that jutted over the river. It is also held that Yorimasa Minamoto disemboweled himself within this hall in 1180 after suffering a military defeat at the hands of the Taira. While performing this fatal act, he was said to have sat upon his opened fan. In commemoration, a monument marking the spot is surrounded by a fan-shaped fence fashioned from stone (Japan Travel Updates).

Byodoin is one of the few surviving examples of Heian era architecture in Japan. It is all that remains of the enormous Pure Land Buddhist temple that has all but vanished. Surviving Pure Land paintings from the 11th century often portray buildings, suggesting Byodoin is a literal representation of the Pure Land afterlife.

The Phoenix Hall, or Hoo-do (named for a mystical bird), at Byodoin is the Western Paradise set into architectural reality. Sitting on the western edge of a kidney-shaped pond, is Amida. Housing the statue is the only function of the entire structure. The wings and tower pavilions are purely ornamental, giving buoyancy to the central structure appropriate to a place that represents the lofty Heavens. The Hoo-do consists of a main rectangular structure flanked by two G-shaped wing corridors and a tail corridor, set at the edge of a large artificial pond. Inside, a single golden image of Amida is installed on a high platform. The Amida sculpture created by Jocho using a new technique in which multiple pieces of wood are carved out like shells and joined from the inside. On the walls of the hall are small relief carvings of celestials, the host believed to have accompanied Amida when he

descended from the Western Paradise to gather the souls of believers at the moment of death and transport them in lotus blossoms to Paradise. Raigo (descent of the Amida Buddha) paintings on the wooden doors of the Hoo-do are an early example of Yamato-e Japanese-style painting because they contain representations of the scenery around Kyoto (Byodoin Temple).

The Byodoin was constructed in order to create a Land of Happiness. Everything inside the Byodoin is the best among the mid-Heian era's architecture and art. Byodoin must have been a palace of paradise that all the Heian nobles dreamed of. "If you pray hard to Amitabha Tathagata, you will be able to go to the Land of Happiness." What beautiful dreams did those people dream of, who searched for an ideal world in the other world? The answer is perhaps, the Byodoin (Buddhism).

In the later Heian era, it is said that the Jyodo style garden first appeared. In the drawings of the Land of Happiness of that time, there would always be an Amida in the middle of the palace style house with a pond in the front. The Jyodo style garden was made on the basis of these drawings. The nobles had all the money and power in their hands, and they had no impossible dreams. Although nothing could be done for them after they die, their strong wish made them create a Land of Happiness in this world. They created ornate statues, built palace-style homes, and also built ponds and gardens. This is the beginning of the Jyodo style garden.

The garden of the Byodoin is a grand Heian era garden, and is designated as a garden of scenic beauty. Byodoin's garden of Uji, Kyoto is the typical kind of Jyodo style garden. The Byodoin is famous for being the representative

architecture, still remaining of the palace style. Although it represents the palace style, the building and garden are against the rules of this style. For example, the pond of the Byodo-in is in the East-not the South. Fujiwara no Yorimichi may have intentionally broken the rules of the palace style to be able to cross the Uji River where the Naka-jima Island floats, to get to the Hoo-do by boat. Another example is that the Hoo-do which stands on the Naka-jima Island and not beyond the island. There from the Uji-jinja shrine on the other side of the river, people were able to see the Hoo-do reflecting on the water (Gardens).

Heian era gardens were very important to the structure of temples. There serve as reflecting pools and also a way to access the temple. These gardens were the true interpretation of the Land of Happiness. They tried to physically represent what they thought the Land of Happiness was like, what the nobles and aristocrats would want their Nirvana to look like.

For all these reasons, Byodoin is one of the intriguing and yet educational landmarks of Japan. It tells us about the religion of the people, the culture during the time it was built, and what people valued in their art. The Byodoin, or rather the Hoo-do, stands today as only a glimpse into the life of not only the Fujiwara family, but also the other aristocrats of the Heian period. Not only are there art, sculpture, and carvings to appease the viewer, but there is also a sense of peace. This temple is so revered that a replica was built in Oahu, Hawaii, and in December 1994, the temple was registered in the UNESCO world heritage list as one of Kyoto's cultural assets(World Heritage) and today remains one of the most highly praised works of architecture in the world.

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