

The Buddhist Relationship Between China and Japan



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For more than a thousand years, Buddhism has created an important spiritual and cultural connection between China and Japan.



Shimenawa and ema at a Kumano shrine gate, Wakayama

Buddhism in China and Japan

Buddhism entered China from India and Central Asia during the early centuries of the Common Era. Over time, Chinese monks and scholars translated scriptures, established monasteries and developed major traditions including Chan, Tiantai, Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhism.

As Chinese Buddhism flourished, its teachings travelled across East Asia. Buddhism reached Japan in the sixth century and soon developed close ties with China. Japanese monks travelled to Chinese monasteries to study Buddhist teachings, meditation, ritual, monastic discipline and scripture.

Chinese traditions became important foundations for several Japanese schools. Chinese Chan influenced Japanese Zen, while Tiantai contributed to Japanese Tendai. Pure Land and Esoteric traditions were also deeply shaped by transmission from China.

A Journey of Teachers and Students

For centuries, Buddhist monks crossed seas in search of teachings and knowledge. Chinese masters also travelled to Japan. One famous example was Jianzhen, known in Japan as Ganjin, who helped strengthen Buddhist monastic practice in Japan during the eighth century.

“Wisdom is something to be shared.”

A Shared Buddhist Heritage

Chinese and Japanese Buddhism developed in different cultural settings, but they continue to share important foundations.

Both traditions honour the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and emphasise compassion, wisdom, ethical conduct, meditation, scripture, offerings and community practice.

The photographs reflect this shared heritage through pilgrimage, ceremony, sacred places and cultural exchange.



Ceremonies at the shrine, with pilgrims looking on

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Learning Through Pilgrimage and Exchange

Visiting temples and sacred sites allows practitioners to experience Buddhist traditions directly.

- Temple visits and pilgrimages
- Meditation and religious ceremonies
- Cultural and educational exchange
- Academic study of Buddhist texts
- Meetings between monastics and lay practitioners

These encounters help both communities recognise their common roots while respecting their different traditions.

Pilgrims in traditional Heian-style dress at the torii gate



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Buddhism as a Bridge

The history of Buddhism between China and Japan shows how the Dharma has always crossed borders. Teachings travelled from teacher to student, monastery to monastery and generation to generation.

Today, Buddhist exchange continues that tradition. Through pilgrimage, study, dialogue and friendship, Chinese and Japanese Buddhist communities can deepen mutual understanding while preserving their own distinctive practices.



*Pilgrims gathered on the
Kumano coast*

CHINA · JAPAN · BUDDHISM · PILGRIMAGE · CULTURAL EXCHANGE

*May the Dharma continue to encourage understanding, friendship and
compassion across cultures and generations.*