

# MAPPŌ

## Three Periods

MAPPŌ. The Japanese term Mappo (Chin., mofa ) denotes the third and eschatologically decisive period in the history of the Buddha's Dharma as revealed in certain texts that were to have a significant impact on the evolution of East Asian Buddhism, particularly the Pure Land tradition. The three-stage periodization of which it is a part includes the period of the True Dharma (shōbō ), when the Buddha's teachings were correctly practiced and people thereby attained enlightenment; the period of the Counterfeit Dharma (zōbō ), when the teachings existed but very few upheld the practices and none attained enlightenment; and the period of Final Dharma (Mappō, often translated as the "Latter Days of the Law"), when only the teachings remained, the practices were no longer pursued, and enlightenment was a mere word. In the view of those who espoused this eschatology, such a declining view of history, which was ascribed to the growing spiritual deficiencies of the saṃgha, spelled doom for the traditional schools of Buddhism. As many Buddhists came to believe that the traditional teachings had lost their relevance to the times and to the religious needs of the people, the Pure Land path emerged on the stage of history, claiming to have been especially prepared by the Buddha for the age of Mappō.

The concept of the three stages of Dharma culminating in mofa appeared in the form we know it today in China during the second half of the sixth century, where it is first mentioned in the Lishi yuanwen (Vows) of the Tiantai master Huisi (515–577), composed in the year 558. A few years later, a Mahāyāna sūtra, the Daji yuezang jing, was translated into Chinese, introducing a variety of similar eschatological views concerning the period of Final Dharma. The Japanese scholar Yamada Ryūjō has shown that this sūtra was the product of four major strands of scriptures woven together, each containing various forebodings on the destiny of the Buddhist saṃgha. One of the earliest mentions of the three stages of Dharma is found in another text of the period, the Dasheng tongxing ; however, the precise source of Huisi's formulation remains unclear.

The notion of three stages of Dharma evolved gradually through the centuries in the historical experience of Buddhism, incorporating the multiple and variegated factors that contributed to the progressive decline of the church. These factors, some of which had existed since the time of Śākyamuni Buddha himself, became exacerbated with the passage of time: the violation of monastic precepts, debates surrounding the ordination of women, sectarian rivalries, a tendency to adhere to the letter, rather than the spirit, of the teachings, corruption in the monastic centers, the emergence of anti-Buddhist despots in India and central Asia, social and political unrest throughout Buddhist Asia, and finally, the devastation of Buddhist communities in Gandhāra by the Ephthalites in the sixth century, an event that convinced many of the impending destruction of the saṃgha.

Prior to the mid-sixth century, various texts had made reference to the eras of True and Counterfeit Dharma, but none to the period of Final Dharma. However, the appearance of the Daji yuezang jing, coinciding with the wholesale devastation of institutional Buddhism during the Northern Zhou persecution of 574–577, confirmed the arrival of the age of Final Dharma foretold in that and other texts. In response to this historical crisis two powerful movements emerged, both proclaiming their teachings as eminently suited for the times: the Three Stages (Sanjie) school of Xinxing (540–595) and the Pure Land path of Daochou (562–645).

Ultimately, four basic chronologies emerged, each reckoned on the basis of the Buddha's decease, universally accepted in China as having occurred in 949 bce:

True Dharma, 500 years; Counterfeit Dharma, 1,000 years  
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Calculated on the basis of the first of these chronologies, the prevailing belief was that the period of Final Dharma, which was to last for ten thousand years, had begun in 552 ce. Although this belief was inherited by Japanese Buddhists, the year 1052 was also widely embraced in medieval Japan as the beginning of the age of Final Dharma, based on the fourth of the above-mentioned chronologies.

Belief in the three stages was combined with another popular view concerning the destiny of the saṃgha, one that divided Buddhist history into five five-hundred-year periods. This notion too had a complex history, but in its final form characterized the gradual eclipse of the Dharma as follows; an age in which enlightenment was the dominant feature of the religious life, an age in which meditative practices were firmly established, an age in which the study of scripture was firmly established, an age in which the building of stupas and temples was firmly established, and an age in which fighting and bickering and the decline and disappearance of the Dharma were the dominant features of the religious life. The period of Final Dharma was identified with the last of these ages. Another prevalent view, intimately connected with that of Mappo, characterized our time as one of Five Defilements, in which the age itself, all religious views, all desires, all sentient beings, and all human life are defiled.

Mofa is mentioned by almost all of the eminent Buddhist writers of the Sui and Tang dynasties, but it was Xinxing and Daochou who refused to regard it as merely descriptive of external historical events and actually incorporated it into the very foundation of their teachings. That is, both thinkers affirmed the reality of the end time in their own religious awakening and realized the extent to which the fundamental ignorance (avidyā ) of all beings precluded the mastery of traditional practices leading to supreme enlightenment. Such an admission of contemporary deficiencies, both inner and outer, justified in their view a new path to salvation.

In the case of Xinxing, this new path called for the universal recognition of the Buddha nature in all beings and the consequent practice of selfless acts of compassion toward everyone, regardless of status, as an antidote to the blind ignorance and profound egocentricity of the age. For Daochou it meant entrusting the ego-self to the saving vows of the Buddha Amitābha (Chin., Womitufo; Jpn., Amida) as the only viable means of deliverance from the ocean of Saṃsāra. Xinxing's Three Stages school experienced a turbulent history and eventually disappeared during the Huichang persecution of Buddhism in 845, but the Pure Land lineage of Daochou gained wide acceptance and became a major force in East Asian Buddhism.

In China, the implications of the concept of mofa were mitigated by the continuing vigor of mainstream Mahāyāna Buddhism, which insisted on the observance of precepts, adherence to meditative practices, and cultivation of wisdom as essential for supreme enlightenment. Daochou and the subsequent Pure Land masters, while proclaiming a new path suited for the age of mofa, were not entirely free from the weight of this great tradition and continued to advocate a variety of more traditional Buddhist practices. By contrast, in Japan a foreboding sense of doom permeated the whole of medieval society, involving all of the Buddhist schools. Recognition of the advent of Mappo was thus a decisive factor in the formation of the major schools of Japanese Buddhism in the thirteenth century—Jōdo, Jōdo Shin, Nichiren, and Zen—and even affected the earlier schools founded during the Nara (710–784) and Heian (794–1185) periods.

The first non-scriptural citation of the term in Japan appears in the *Nihon ryōiki* (Miraculous stories from the Japanese Buddhist tradition), compiled in the ninth century. A lament in this text states, "We are already in the age of Degenerate Dharma. How can we live without doing good? My heart aches for all beings. How can we be saved from calamity in the age of Degenerate Dharma?" The nature of Mappo is also the topic of the *Mappo tōmyōki* (The lamp to illuminate the age of final Dharma), attributed to Saichō (767–823), the founder of the Japanese Tendai school. According to Saichō, each of the three stages of history is characterized by practices relevant to that particular age. The practices suited to the period of True Dharma include observance of the precepts and the practice of meditative disciplines. Those practices endemic to the period of Counterfeit Dharma are the violation of the precepts and the accumulation of property by monks. In the period of Final Dharma all monks must be honored, even though they violate or disregard the precepts, since the very nature of the times precludes the very existence and validity of the precepts.

Such a view of the end time, widely held by both clerics and laity, meant not only the bankruptcy of the Buddhist saṃgha but appeared also to herald the end of the world itself through the operation of inexorable historical forces. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries a variety of events seemed to confirm the reality of mappō: the impotence of imperial rule, the decline of the aristocracy, social upheaval, local uprisings, internecine warfare, natural calamities and pestilence, and conflagrations that destroyed the capital.

This sense of impending collapse generated a variety of responses among the Buddhist clergy. These were of two basic types. One vigorously rejected this pessimistic view of history and reaffirmed the power of traditional paths to enlightenment. The other accepted the fact of Mappo as the manifestation of the basic human condition—weak, imperfect, vulnerable, and subject to temptations—and saw the working of Dharma in the very midst of such karmic limitations, whether through the Nembutsu, containing the saving vows of Amida Buddha, or in the Daimoku, manifesting the miraculous salvific powers of the Lotus Sūtra.

It was Hōnen (1133–1212), one of the pioneering figures of the Kamakura period (1185–1333), who incorporated the implications of the doctrine of Mappo into a virtual revolution in Japanese Buddhism. For him, the end time of history did not signal the decline and destruction of the Buddhist saṃgha but rather the opening up of the true saṃgha to both men and women, upper and lower classes, clergy and laity alike. For Hōnen, Mappō did not mean the rampant violation of precepts but the disintegration of the sacrosanct authority of precepts that discriminated against certain groups of people. Since the age of Mappō meant the nonexistence of precepts, the path of enlightenment was now open to people considered evil in the eyes of traditional Buddhism: those who made a living by taking life (hunters, fishermen, peasants, and warriors) and those who were outcasts from society (traders and merchants, prostitutes, monks and nuns who had violated the precepts, and others). Such people he proclaimed to be the primary concern of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow (hon-gan), the ultimate manifestation of true compassion. On the basis of this conviction Hōnen proclaimed the founding of an independent Jōdo (Pure Land) school in 1175.

Thus, while Mappo spelled doom and despair for the established sects, it was an age of boundless hope and optimism for the disenfranchised. More fundamentally, in this view history became witness to the truth and relevance of the Pure Land path to enlightenment, as had been prophesied by Śākyamuni in the Pure Land sūtras. The end time of history was here and now, but it was in the here and now that Amida's compassionate vow had become fully operative.

Shinran (1173–1263) pushed this acute sense of historical crises even more radically into an existential realization of the human condition. He saw the particular evils of the age of Mappo as revealing the very ground of self-existence. For Shinran, evil, though particularized in the individual, forms the essence of humanity in Saṃsāra. But this realization of profound karmic evil is not final, for deeper and wider still is the working of Amida's compassionate vow, operating through saṃsāric existence to deliver the self, as well as all suffering beings, into the Pure Land.

For Shinran, then, mappō was no longer a particular period of history but the fundamental reality of life itself, embracing all ages, past, present, and future. The Primal Vow of Amida is working not only in the end time but has always been responding to the deepest yearnings of humanity, whether in the period of True Dharma, Counterfeit Dharma, or Final Dharma, whenever and wherever man is steeped in brutish egoism. It took the radical breakdown of history, however, for this

truth to surface within human consciousness. As Shinran wrote in the Shōzōmatsu wasan (Hymns on the last age):

Throughout the three periods of True, Counterfeit, and Final Dharma Amida's Primal Vow has been spread. In this world at the end of the Counterfeit Dharma and in the Final Dharma age All good acts have entered the Palace of the Dragon.