

Buddhism and Breastfeeding

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Abstract

Buddhism is an ancient religion that began in India and spread throughout Asia. It is prevalent in modern Japan. Breastfeeding has been a strong practice for centuries with the custom being to continue until the child is 6 or 7 years of age. The Edo period was very influential in establishing breastfeeding customs that continue today.

Introduction

ORIGINATING IN ANCIENT INDIA approximately 2,500 years ago, Buddhism is the oldest religion in the world. (According to the Britannica Online Encyclopedia, Buddhism began between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE, Hinduism began about 1500 BCE, and Judaism began about 2000 BCE.) The number of followers worldwide is believed to be approximately 350 million. Buddhism is primarily practiced in Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Tibet, South Korea, and Japan. By co-existing or blending with local cultures, mores, and traditional religious beliefs, Buddhism still greatly influences the society, daily lives, and customs of those respective peoples. Since it is not necessarily easy to generalize Buddhism and breastfeeding, this paper will focus on the child-rearing customs in Japan in terms of the relationship between Buddhism and food (such as milk), or breastfeeding.

Japan's Milk and Dairy Product Consumption and Buddhism

Until Japan began its full-fledged adoption of modern Western civilization in the Meiji period (1868–1912), there was almost no custom among the common Japanese to consume milk and dairy products. Yet, it is not true that the Japanese never had a chance to eat dairy products previously. Buddhism is believed to have arrived in Japan in 538. From then, along with Buddhist scriptures, medical books were also imported to Japan from China. Those books described the medical benefits of milk consumption and methods of rearing milk cows, thus fueling speculation that the Japanese had some knowledge of milk. In the mid-6th century, many Kudara people immigrated from the Korean Peninsula to Japan and became naturalized citizens. It is believed that those people taught the Japanese how to raise milk cows and how to milk them, as well as techniques to

process dairy products. In those days, we believe, mainly royal family members drank milk not as a foodstuff but as medicine. The historical record of the first consumption of milk in Japan was when Emperor Kotoku (596–654) was eager to drink milk, which had been presented as a gift.

One fascinating fact is that in the Taiho Ritsuryo Code (Japan's first full-scale administrative and criminal laws), enacted in 701, the establishment of the government-run *nyuko* (dairy farm) was prescribed, and *so* (a cheese-like dairy product) produced at that farm was presented to the Imperial Court. By the Heian period (794–1185), *nyuko* had spread to various regions in Japan, and *so* was paid as tax to the central government. Also, as milk production increased, *so* was extensively distributed not only among the royal family but also among nobles in general. Still, common folks seemed to have had few opportunities to enjoy milk or other dairy products. Soon after, as the power of the Imperial Court declined, the *so* tax system also collapsed, and thus Japan's dairy farms were completely antiquated by the 14th century. Worse still, when the meatless diet began to spread with the penetration of Buddhism, the banned animal products even included the milk of cows. After this, until the mid-19th century, the Japanese did not consume milk or dairy products. According to one theory, one contributing factor for the decline of dairy farming was the demand for horses, which surpassed the demand for cows because of the rapid expansion of the samurai.

Buddhist Precepts and Food and Milk

After its arrival in Japan, Buddhism gradually spread among the ruling class. In the 7th century, Buddhism finally became the state religion; a series of Buddhist precepts began to influence aspects of the daily lives of Japanese people. One of the important precepts was "abstinence from killing animals." Under the teachings of Mahayana (Great

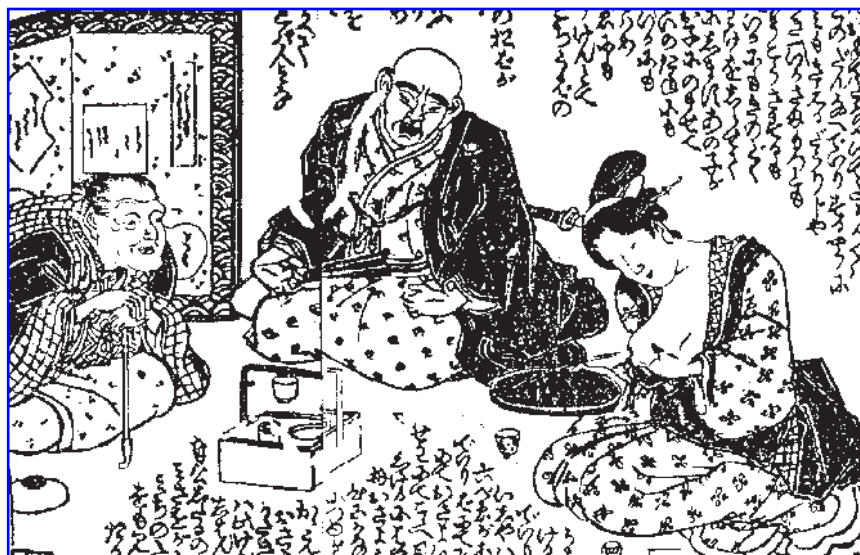


FIG. 1. A wet nurse job interview: The scene of evaluating a wet nurse candidate squeezing out breastmilk.

Vehicle) Buddhism, one of the Buddhist systems that had been imported to Japan, a meat diet was banned completely as a result of thoroughgoing interpretation of this precept.

Consequently, an Imperial edict to prohibit eating game animals was issued repeatedly around the 7th century when Buddhism became the official state religion. That meant that until then, meat eating had been commonly practiced in Japan; the Japanese used to eat not only wild birds and animals, but also the meat of cows, horses, wolves, and dogs as well. At any rate, after the Buddhist precept of "abstaining from killing animals" was brought to Japan in the 7th century until the mid-19th century, the meat diet was not officially practiced in Japan for approximately 1,300 years.

Nonetheless, Buddhism did not originally ban meat. In primitive Buddhism, mendicant monks wandered around every day begging for food (with an alms bowl); they had no choice but to eat any food, meat or not, offered for the reposit of souls. In Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, where Southern Buddhism had inherited that precept, mendicant monks still respect it, yet meat is not banned.

Meanwhile, Buddhism has a very close relationship with dairy products such as milk and cows. It is well known that in India, the birthplace of Buddhism, cows, especially female cows, were traditionally worshipped as sacred animals. The founder of Buddhism, Shakyamuni, was also called Gotama Siddhartha; *go* means "female cow," and *tama* "most excel-

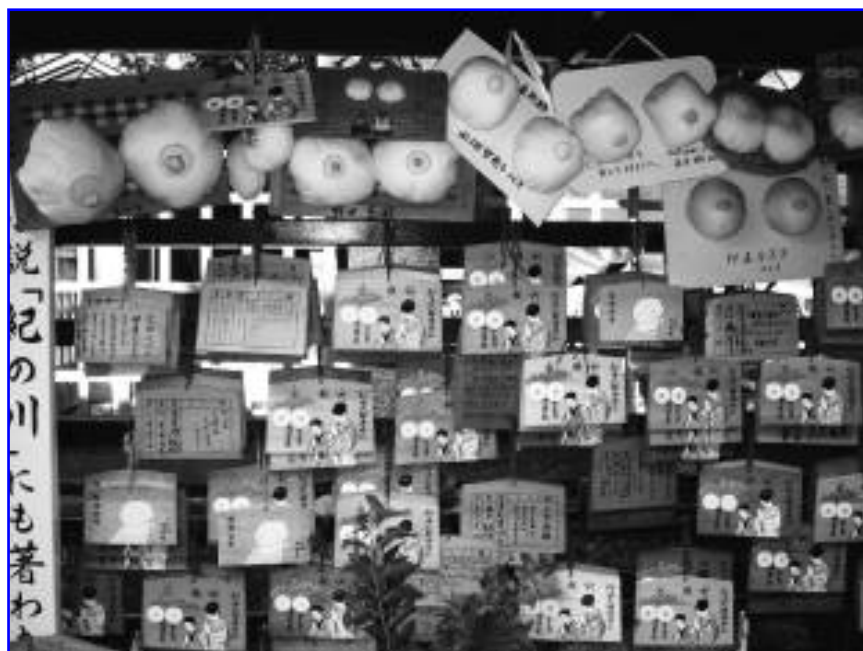


FIG. 2. Handmade breast models and *ema* prayer boards honored at Jison-in.



FIG. 3. Ema prayer boards at Shitenno-ji: "I pray I will have plenty of breastmilk and my children will grow up healthy."

lent." "The most excellent female cow" was the name bestowed upon the best and greatest persons in India. Another story goes like this: After entering the priesthood, Shakyamuni abandoned the ascetic practices because he could not attain enlightenment even after 7 years of training. Then, when a girl named Sujatha gave him milk gruel (a yogurt-like dairy product), Shakyamuni regained his strength. After that, he was able to achieve enlightenment through meditation. This very famous episode represents the character of

Buddhism. Furthermore, in Buddhist scriptures, various stages of the Buddhist path are likened to the manufacturing processes of dairy products; as the phases gradually go up through Buddhist ascetic training, the highest phase of Buddha attained is expressed as *daigo*. *Da-i-go* is a buttermilk-like dairy product and used to be respected in ancient times as extremely elegant and delicious. In present-day Japan, however, *da-i-go-mi* is frequently used to express "real attraction," not this original meaning of "exquisite taste."



FIG. 4. Ema prayer boards at Shitenno-ji, reflecting many mothers' wishes for abundant breastmilk secretion.



FIG. 5. Ryūon-ji Temple: various *ema* prayer boards and breast models for breastmilk prayers.

Japan's Breastfeeding Custom and Buddhism

Extended breastfeeding and Buddhism

For the feeding of babies or infants, artificial feeding is now dominant in Japan. However, until around the 1960s, breastfeeding was the main method of feeding babies, and it was not rare to see extended breastfeeding even after the age of 2 or 3. Interestingly enough, during the Edo period (1603–1867), the custom of intentionally breastfeeding children until 6 or 7 years of age existed in order to improve children's health, as opposed to extended breastfeeding without any purpose. It wasn't that the same biological mother would continue to breastfeed the infant; a wet nurse was hired when the baby was about 2 years old, and then she would continue breastfeeding till the baby was about 7. If there were multiple children, an equal number of wet nurses were hired. Thus, only relatively wealthy people could afford it. Figure 1 shows an Edo-period illustration depicting people who evaluate a wet nurse by having her squeeze out breastmilk.

One reason extended breastfeeding was intentionally practiced until 7 years of age was the high infant mortality rate of the day; as an old Japanese saying goes, "Children belong to the gods until 7 [children were a presence belonging to the world of gods, not this world]." Empirically, people in the Edo period understood that extended breastfeeding could lead to a healthier and longer life as well as lower risk of infant death.

Furthermore, Buddhist teachings in the Edo period strongly supported the extended feeding until 6 or 7 years of age. In Buddhist texts from China's Tang Dynasty (618–907), there are such phrases as "drinking one's mother's breast milk adds up to one hundred and eighty *goku*," and "I grew up healthy thanks to my mother's one hundred and eighty *goku* of breast milk." In China and Japan, those were well-known expressions to show the kindness received from

fathers and mothers, or the "indebtedness to breastmilk feeding." *Koku* (or *goku*) was a Chinese volume unit equivalent to 10 L; since ancient times, 30 *koku* (300 L) for 1 year or 180 *koku* (1,800 L) for 6 years was believed to have been fed to children. And, conversely, those expressions were interpreted to mean that children could enjoy mother's breastmilk as long as 6 years; they were often quoted during the Edo period as a Buddhist teaching supporting extended feeding. Not only that, a *waka* poem by Gyōki (668–749), a



FIG. 6. Kishibojin (Hariti).

renowned Buddhist priest in the Nara period, states, "I endeavor every moment of my life to pay back the love and the one hundred and eighty *goku* of milk my mother bestowed upon me—Gyoki." Allegedly, this basis was also used by Edo citizens to rationalize extended feeding. A passage from *A Manual on Child Care*, written by Edo-period pediatrician Gyuzan Katsuki (1656–1740), laments the fact that too many mothers, citing the above Buddhist texts and the Gyoki poem, were mostly breastfeeding their children and giving very little of solid food until they were 2 or 3. In other words, extended feeding until 6 or 7 was very common in Japan. I find the fact that they intentionally practiced extended breastfeeding for health reasons reasonable and efficient, and also believe that this wisdom of the people is worthy of admiration.

A breastmilk prayer: Praying for abundant secretion of breastmilk

Because whether or not a mother could raise a baby with breastmilk was often a grave matter of life or death, the Japanese had the time-honored custom of visiting a Buddhist temple or a Shinto shrine to pray for abundant breastmilk secretion for the mother as well as the sound development of the baby. The act of praying for secretion of breastmilk is traditionally called a "breastmilk prayer." Various forms of this custom are still practiced at numerous temples and shrines throughout Japan.

Figure 2 shows *ema* prayer boards and breast models offered at Jison-in in Kudoyama in Wakayama Prefecture, Japan. The Jison-in Temple was founded in 816 by Kukai (668–749), perhaps the most famous priest in Japanese Buddhism. Since the spirit of Kukai's mother is honored there, Jison-in has been long known as a temple women visit for breastmilk prayers. At the top of the photograph are cloth breasts handmade by mothers praying for abundant breastmilk secretion. Also seen below on the *ema* prayer boards are breasts and the figure of a mother and a daughter.

Figures 3 and 4 show the *ema* prayer boards offered for breastmilk prayers at the Shitenno-ji temple in Osaka City, Japan. The Shitenno-ji Temple was founded in 593 by Empress Suiko (554–628). Because the wet nurse of Prince Shotoku (574–622), a renowned prince of the imperial fam-

ily, had been honored at the temple, the breastmilk prayer has been offered on a time-honored basis.

Figure 5 depicts breast models and *ema* prayer boards for breastmilk prayers, which are stored at the Ryuon-ji Temple (founded in 1492) in Komaki City, Aichi Prefecture, Japan.

Figure 6 shows the Kishibojin deity ("Hariti"), a Buddhist goddess for the protection of children, easy delivery, and happy child rearing.

Originally, Kishibojin was a vicious Brahmanic demon in ancient India who abducted and ate children. Eventually, she accepted the preaching of Shakyamuni and converted to Buddhism. From that time, Kishibojin became the protector of easy childbirth and parenting in Japanese Buddhism. Across the nation, there are numerous temples where Kishibojin is honored; the custom of visiting one of them and praying for easy delivery and abundant breastmilk is still commonly practiced.

Thus, in present-day Japan, where advanced modern medicine is readily available, the act of praying for abundant breastmilk secretion and for healthy child development at Buddhist temples remains very common. In that respect, Buddhism as a traditional custom has deeply penetrated into the daily life and psyche of the Japanese.

Conclusion

I have mainly focused on customs and mores in Japan in relation to Buddhism and breastfeeding.

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