

# A Brief History of Japanese Buddhism

Jonathan S. Watts

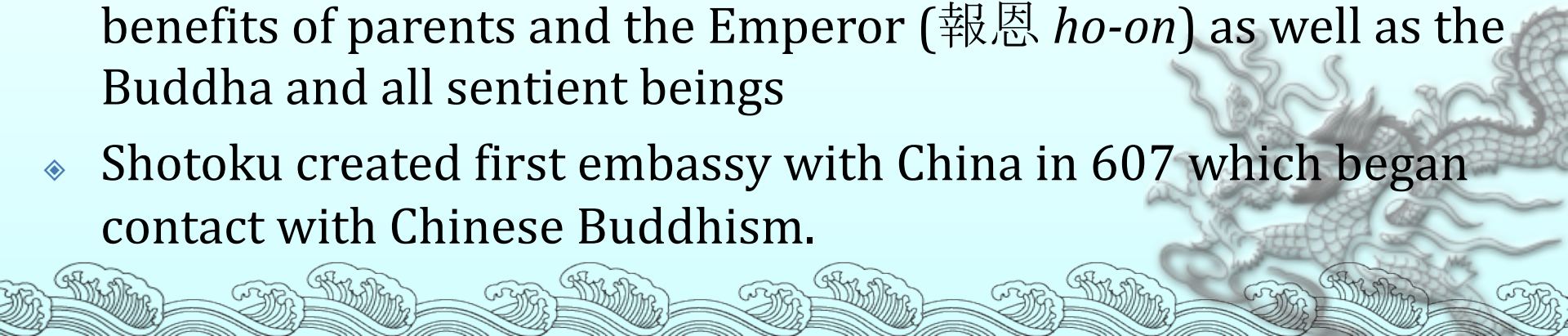
Keio University

Tokyo, Japan



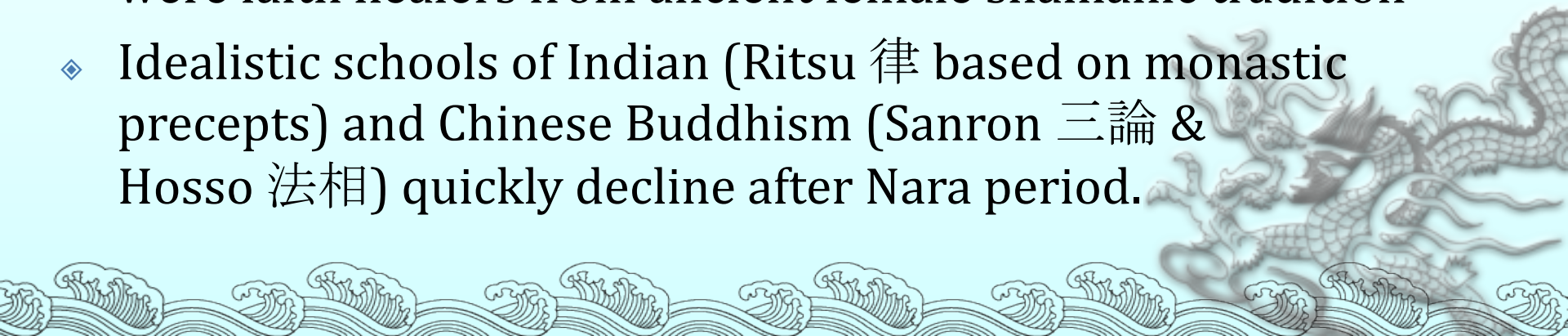
# Beginnings of Japanese Buddhism

- ◆ Introduced in 552 from Korea by the leader of the Paekche Kingdom as a part of a political alliance.
- ◆ *Prince Shotoku (574-622), regent to the imperial throne, is an unusual and extremely important historical figure for attempting to introduce universalistic ideas to the insular concept of society as clan or tribe under a divine emperor.*
- ◆ His 17 Article Constitution introduced and assimilated a number of key Buddhist ideas: 1) the concept of universal law from Dharma; 2) emphasis on lay Buddhism and practical use for society; 3) respecting harmony (和 *wa*); 4) repaying the benefits of parents and the Emperor (報恩 *ho-on*) as well as the Buddha and all sentient beings
- ◆ Shotoku created first embassy with China in 607 which began contact with Chinese Buddhism.



# Beginnings of Japanese Buddhism

- ◆ Buddhism had to adapt to Japan's particular spiritual tendencies, like prayer, ritual, and exorcism for this worldly benefit (現世利益 *gensei riyaku*)
- ◆ Nara Period (646-794) established Buddhism as a state religion under 6 principle schools which prayed for the well being of the nation. Ordination of priests and nuns was strictly controlled by government.
- ◆ A large number of Buddhist nuns in the Nara era—and new urban Buddhist sects in the 1900s with female leaders who were faith healers from ancient female shamanic tradition
- ◆ Idealistic schools of Indian (Ritsu 律 based on monastic precepts) and Chinese Buddhism (Sanron 三論 & Hosso 法相) quickly decline after Nara period.



# Heian Buddhism (794-1185)

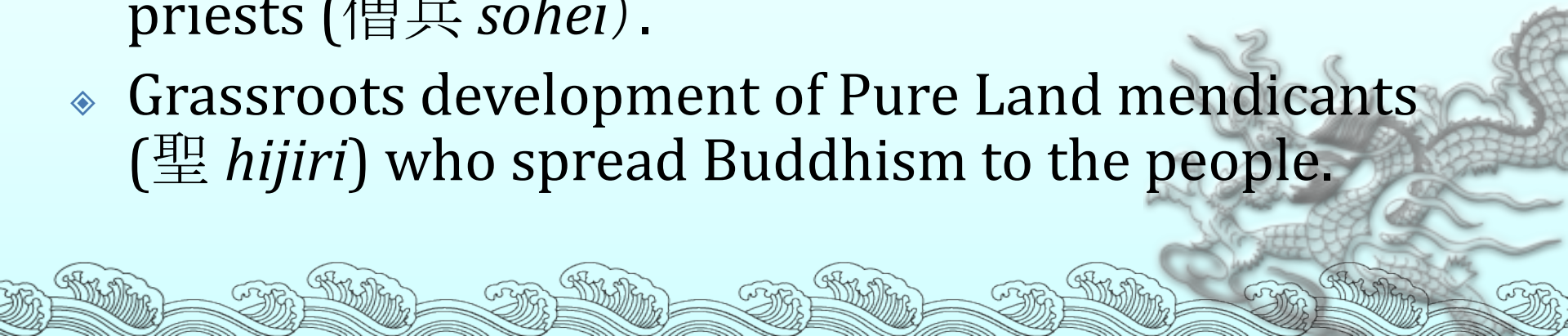
- ◆ Establishment of two major denominations which became dominant: Shingon 真言 (esoteric) by Kukai and Tendai 天台 (exoteric) by Saicho.
- ◆ Esoteric Buddhism meant rituals and prayers for “worldly benefit” (現世利益 *gensei ryaku*) and avoiding calamities.
- ◆ Exoteric Buddhism focused on study and developed the key Japanese Buddhist idea of “innate enlightenment” (本覚 *hongaku*) based on the idea of “buddha nature”





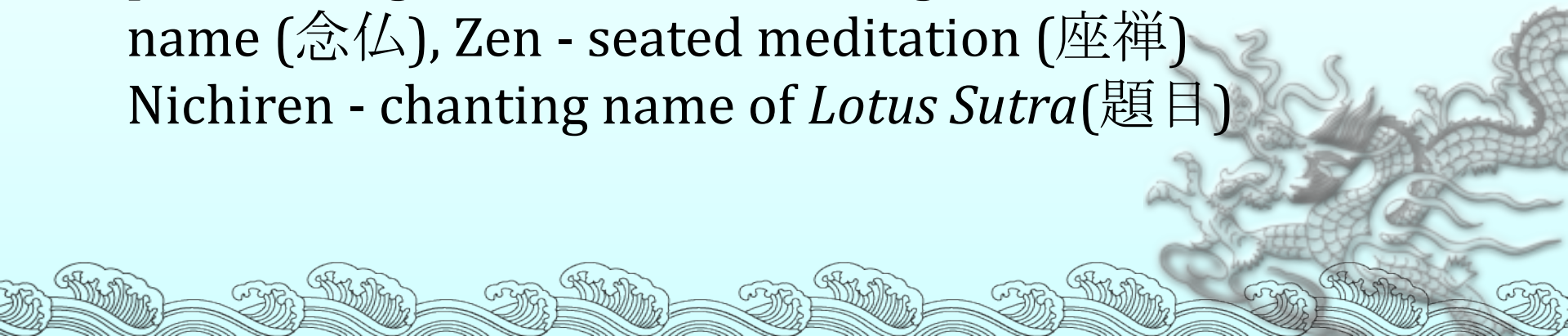
# Heian Buddhism (794-1185)

- ◆ Saicho, the founder of Tendai, rejected the core 227 monastic precepts in favor of the less formal 58 “perfect and immediate precepts” (円頓戒) paving the way for the alcohol, meat eating, and marriage for most Japanese priests today.
- ◆ These denominations were supported by the aristocracy, but became themselves major centers of political power with bands of mercenary soldier priests (僧兵 *sohei*).
- ◆ Grassroots development of Pure Land mendicants (聖 *hijiri*) who spread Buddhism to the people.



# Kamakura Buddhism (1185-1333) & Its Formative Influence

- ◆ Establishment of Buddhism for the masses through the reformation movements of Honen & Shinran (Pure Land 浄土 *Jodo*), Dogen (曹洞禅 *Soto Zen*), and Nichiren (法華經 *Lotus Sutra*)
- ◆ Each of these teachers stressed a single, simple practice available to all people which had the same or stronger power for salvation than a monk's ascetic practice. e.g. Pure Land - chanting of Amida Buddha's name (念仏), Zen - seated meditation (座禅)  
Nichiren - chanting name of *Lotus Sutra*(題目)



## **Kamakura Buddhism further developed basic Japanese instincts towards no separation between sacred and profane**

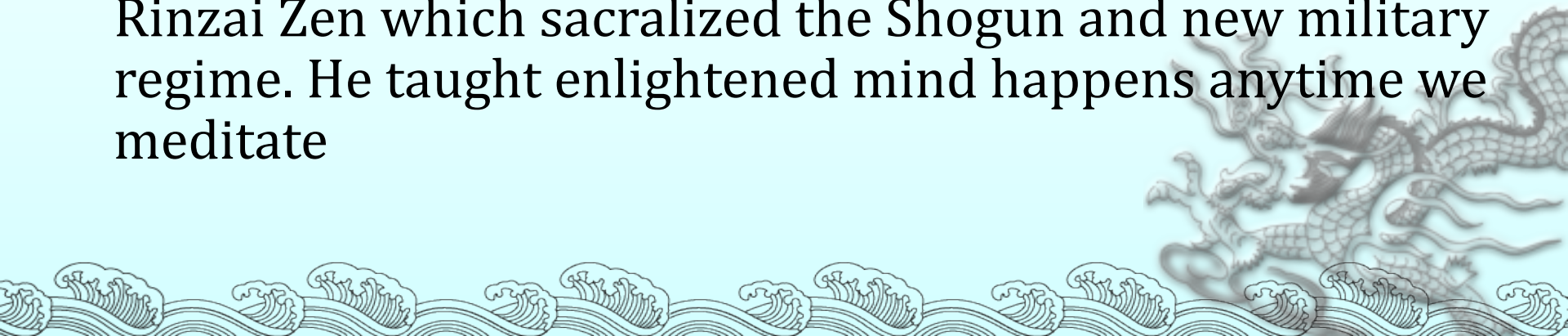
- ◆ Pure Land teachers, especially Shinran, gave further doctrinal basis for monks to abandon monastic lifestyle (celibacy, no alcohol and meat, always in robes with shaven head).
- ◆ Zen meditation and practice influenced fine arts (tea ceremony, calligraphy, flower arrangement) and martial arts (archery, swordsmanship, samurai and military culture), especially Rinzai Zen 臨濟禪
- ◆ Lotus Sutra emphasized “this worldly benefits” and became most popular form among merchants and of modern Buddhism in the industrial, material age



# **Kamakura Buddhism**

## **represents a counter ethnic-national and pro-universalistic trend**

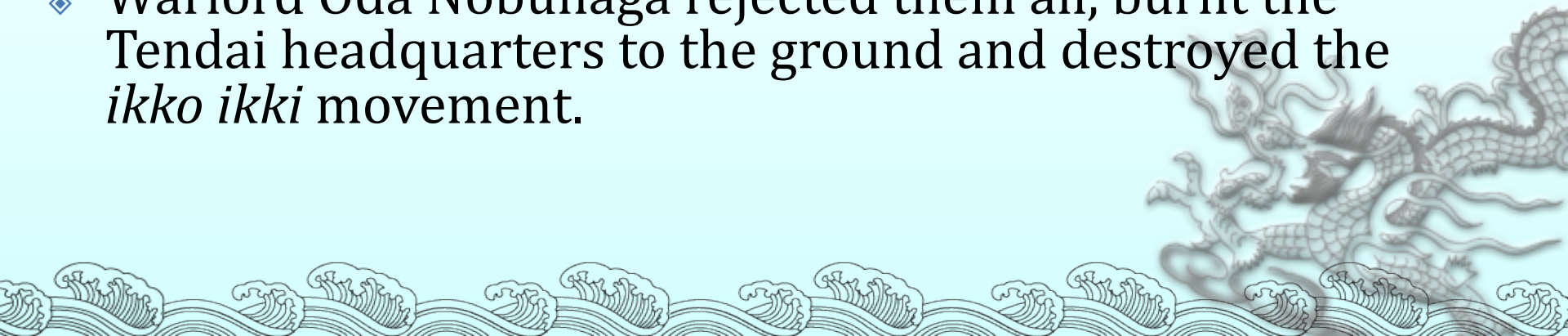
- ◆ Pure Land was anti-establishment spiritually, socially and politically; the worst person can gain salvation; ascetics walked among the people not socially withdrawn; faith in Amida transcended filial piety and faith in Emperor.
- ◆ Nichiren confronted political authorities; promoted the universal nature of Lotus Sutra above state and imperial law
- ◆ Dogen repudiated the fusion of esoteric ritualism with Rinzai Zen which sacralized the Shogun and new military regime. He taught enlightened mind happens anytime we meditate





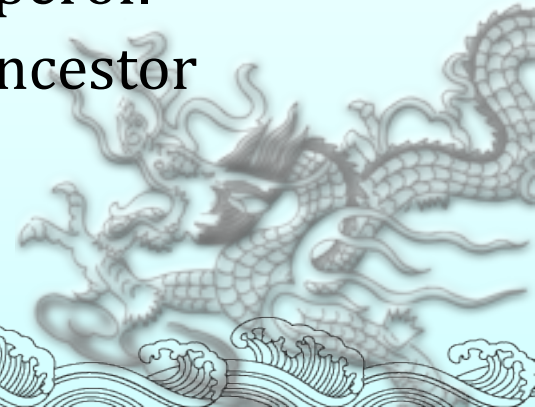
# Muromachi & Warring States Periods (mid 1300s to 1600)

- ◆ New Kamakura Buddhist movements grew into major socio-political institutions which rivaled the size and power of the Shingon and Tendai denominations.
- ◆ Shinran's True Pure Land denomination launched major peasant rebellions (*ikko ikki* 一向一揆) against the powerful warlords. Nichiren based Lotus militias (*hokke ikki* 法華一揆) protected merchant classes in Kyoto. Soto Zen became closely aligned with the local warrior classes → *a rare instance of Japanese using (Buddhist) ideology for active social change*
- ◆ Warlord Oda Nobunaga rejected them all, burnt the Tendai headquarters to the ground and destroyed the *ikko ikki* movement.



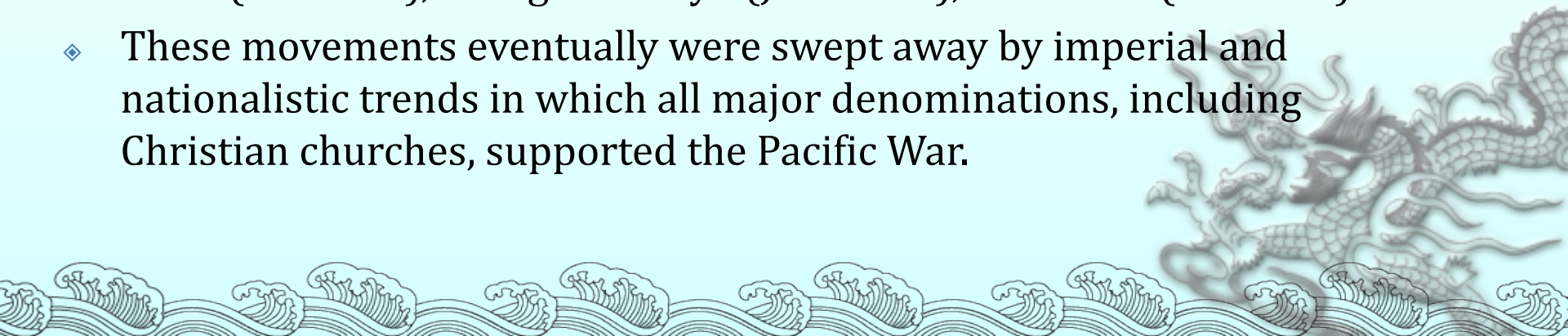
# Tokugawa Era (1603-1868)

- ◆ Tokugawa Ieyasu established his dynasty, unified Japan, and created a system to control all Buddhist groups.
- ◆ The temple parishioner system (檀家制度 *danka seido*) was a means to use temples to monitor and control the population through enforced membership to a local temple and to prevent the spread of Christianity. The number of Buddhist temples more than doubled. The Buddhist temple became firmly established as the center of the community.
- ◆ Confucian influence was strong and helped create a national ideology/theology of family ancestor worship which extended up to veneration of the state and emperor.
- ◆ Buddhist temples became the center for this ancestor worship and “Funeral Buddhism” (葬式仏教 *soshiki bukkyo*) was born.



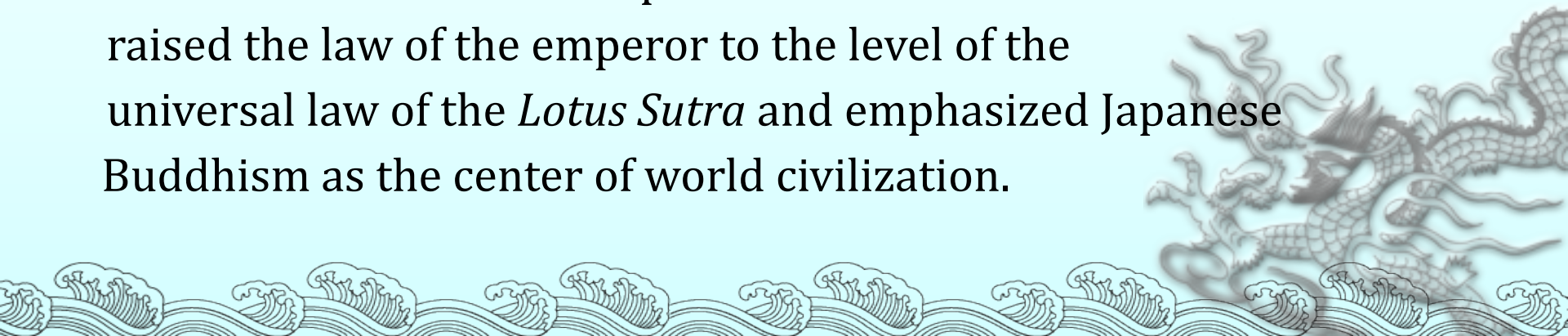
# Meiji Era (1868-1912)

- ◆ End of Tokugawa Dynasty meant Buddhism was removed as a state religion and briefly persecuted. Monks were legally allowed to abandon the monastic lifestyle, unprecedented in Asian Buddhist history.
- ◆ In order to survive, all major denominations sought to prove their usefulness by supporting national development and the official national ideology based on worship of the emperor.
- ◆ There were various reform movements within and without Buddhism to return to original Buddhism, to become more scientific and modern, and to be more practical to daily life.
- ◆ There were a few radical, anti-nationalist priests who supported socialist movements for exploited people, like Burakumin and Koreans. Uchiyama Gudo (Soto Zen), Takagi Kemmyo (Jodo Shin), Seno Giro (Nichiren)
- ◆ These movements eventually were swept away by imperial and nationalistic trends in which all major denominations, including Christian churches, supported the Pacific War.



# Japanese Buddhist Support for the Pacific War

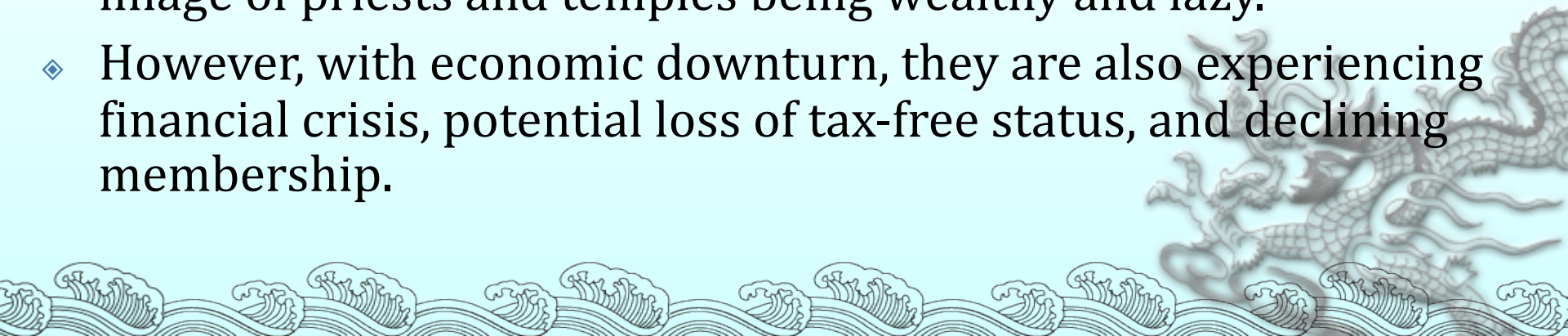
- ◆ Priests were drafted into the military as common foot soldiers and not just as chaplains
- ◆ East Asian Buddhist teaching of “repaying benefits” (報恩 *ho-on*) to parents and all sentient beings was shifted to emperor and state.
- ◆ Zen teachings were fused with Bushido (武士道) to teach giving up one’s life in battle; there is “no-self” that kills; and meditative fearlessness in the face of death.
- ◆ Doctrine of Two Truths (眞俗二諦 *shinzoku nitai*), key to Pure Land Buddhists, was flipped to say that the absolute truth of the Buddha was expressed in the relative truth of the Emperor in this world.
- ◆ Nichiren Buddhists developed “Nichiren-ism” which raised the law of the emperor to the level of the universal law of the *Lotus Sutra* and emphasized Japanese Buddhism as the center of world civilization.





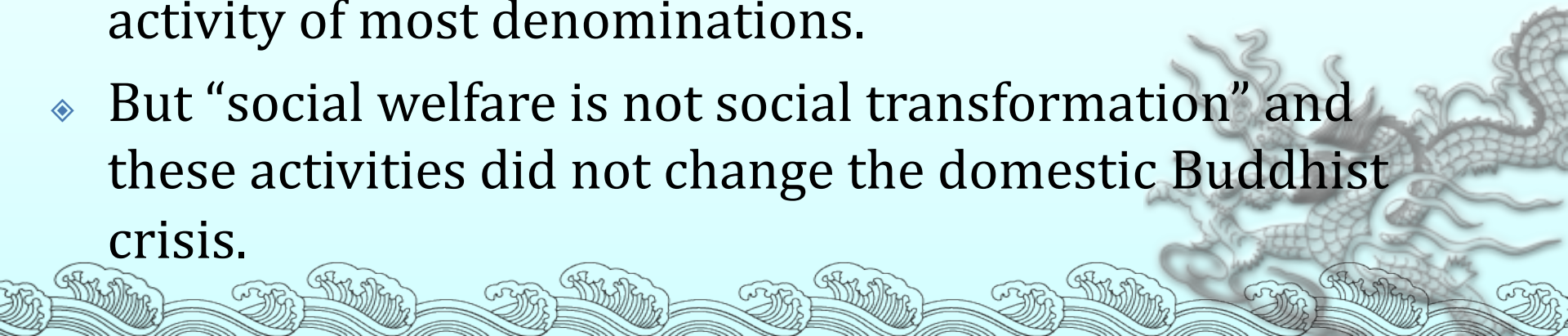
# Post War Era

- ◆ Rise of new, non-monastic Buddhist denominations; mostly *Lotus Sutra* based and focused on this worldly benefit; fulfilled needs of new mass urban population
- ◆ Soka Gakkai, controversial for their national conversion campaign, got involved in party politics with Komeito 公明党
- ◆ Traditional Buddhist groups no longer center of community in urban, secular society
- ◆ Priests and temples became inward looking and socially passive
- ◆ “Funeral Buddhism” (葬式仏教 *Soshiki Bukkyo*) - focus on performing rituals at funerals and memorial services – gave the image of priests and temples being wealthy and lazy.
- ◆ However, with economic downturn, they are also experiencing financial crisis, potential loss of tax-free status, and declining membership.



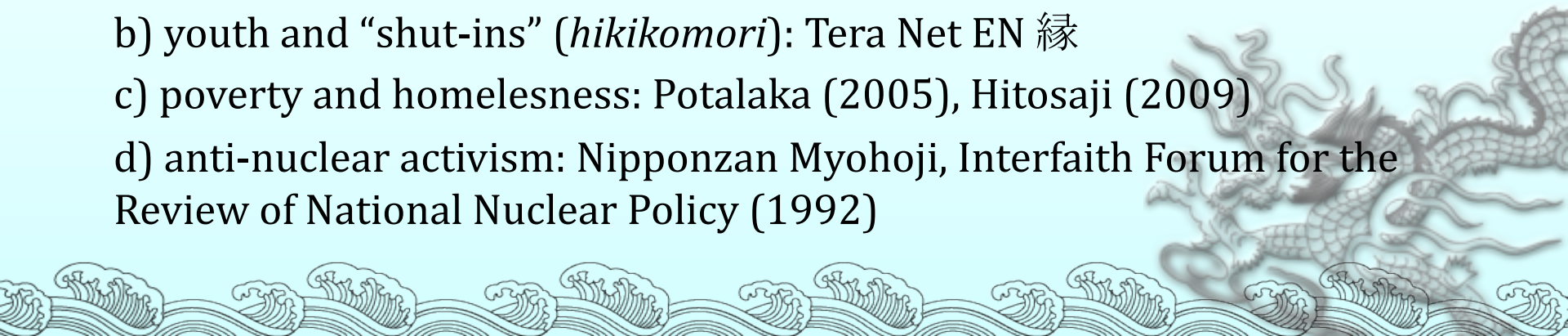
# Socially Engaged Buddhism in Japan

- ◆ Early 1980s, priests respond to this situation by creating Buddhist NGOs (NGO = “international cooperation activities”), especially in response to Indochina humanitarian crisis
- ◆ Activities have been mostly emergency aid and financial resources for material development in Indochina, South Asia, Africa, and Middle East
- ◆ Developed by independent priests without support of central denomination. Now has become mainstream activity of most denominations.
- ◆ But “social welfare is not social transformation” and these activities did not change the domestic Buddhist crisis.



# Socially Engaged Buddhism in Japan

- ◆ 1996 Hanshin Earthquake provided a major crisis for Buddhists and Buddhist NGOs to get involved in domestic welfare work.
- ◆ Since 2003, we see many new types of Buddhist social engagement.
  - 1) Buddhist Reform and Revival: Bozu Be Ambitious (2003), Tokai-Kanto Network of Women and Buddhism (1994)
  - 2) Buddhist Chaplaincy: Rinbutsuken Institute of Engaged Buddhism's Rinsho Bukkyo-shi 臨床仏教師 (Buddhist Chaplain) Training Program (2013), Tohoku University Rinsho Shukyo-shi (Interfaith Chaplain) Training Program (2012)
  - 3) Social Engagement:
    - a) death & dying: Vihara Movement (1984)
    - b) youth and “shut-ins” (*hikikomori*): Tera Net EN 縁
    - c) poverty and homelessness: Potalaka (2005), Hitosaji (2009)
    - d) anti-nuclear activism: Nipponzan Myohoji, Interfaith Forum for the Review of National Nuclear Policy (1992)





# Socially Engaged Buddhism in Japan

transforming “Funeral Buddhism”

## **Association of Buddhist Priests Confronting Self-death and Suicide**

(A number of individual priests with a variety of different styles came together in 2007 to work on this problem)



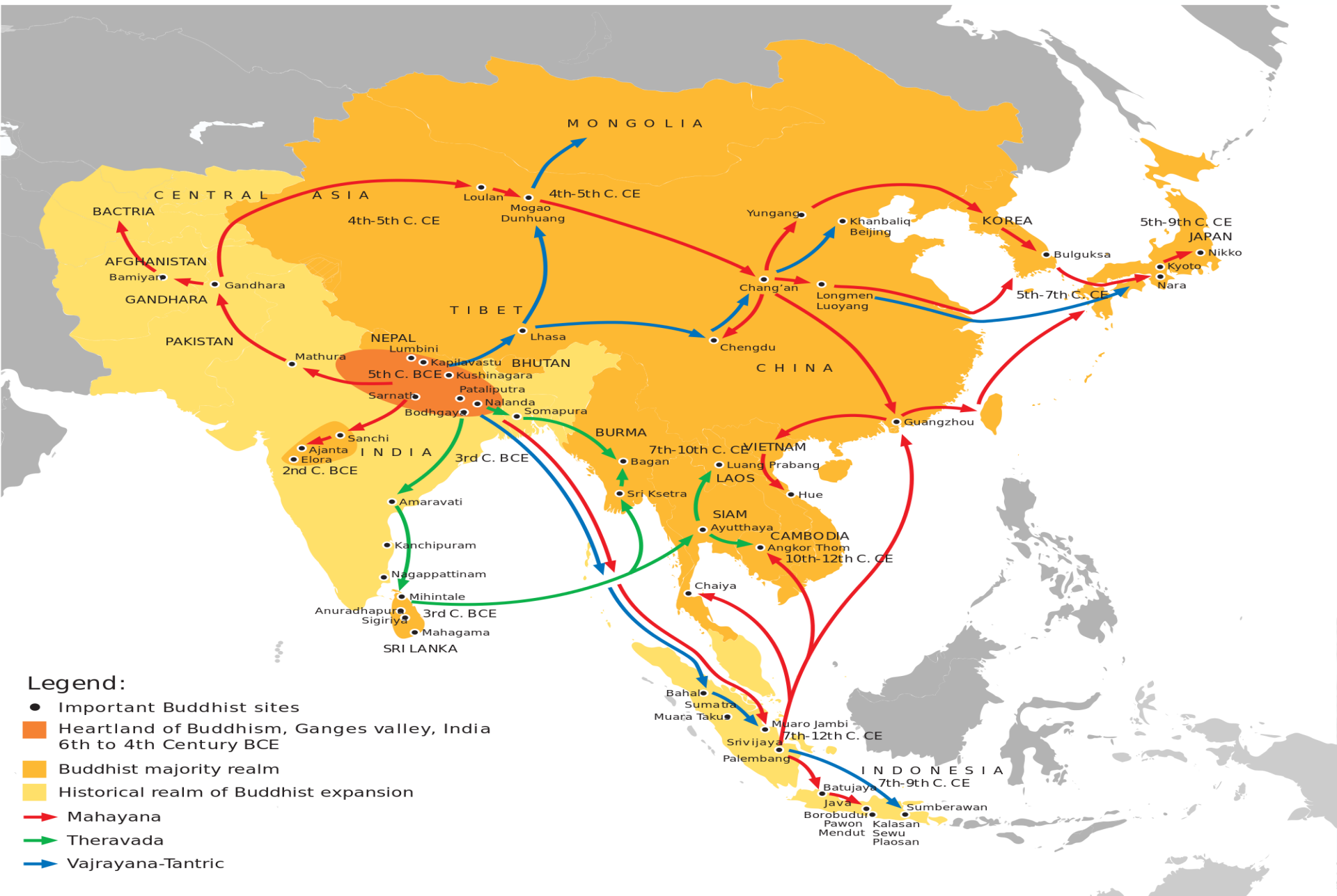


# Beginnings and Significance of the Historical Buddha

- ◆ Siddhartha Gautama, a prince of the Shakya tribal republic, attained enlightenment and became known as the Buddha (the “awakened one”) around 528 B.C. in Northeast India on the Nepali border.
- ◆ He then wandered all over northeast India teaching “the Middle Way” (between asceticism and hedonism) for 40 years before his death
- ◆ He is credited with developing the first highly organized monastic community in India which included women and members of all castes, including “untouchables”.



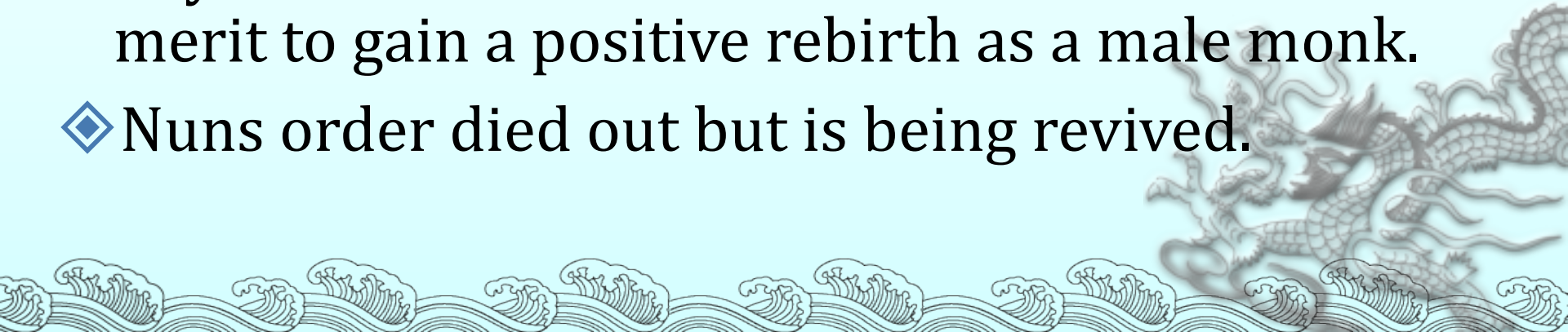
# The Spread of Buddhism



# 3 Basic Styles & Schools of Buddhism

Theravada 上座部佛教 (Teaching of the Elders):

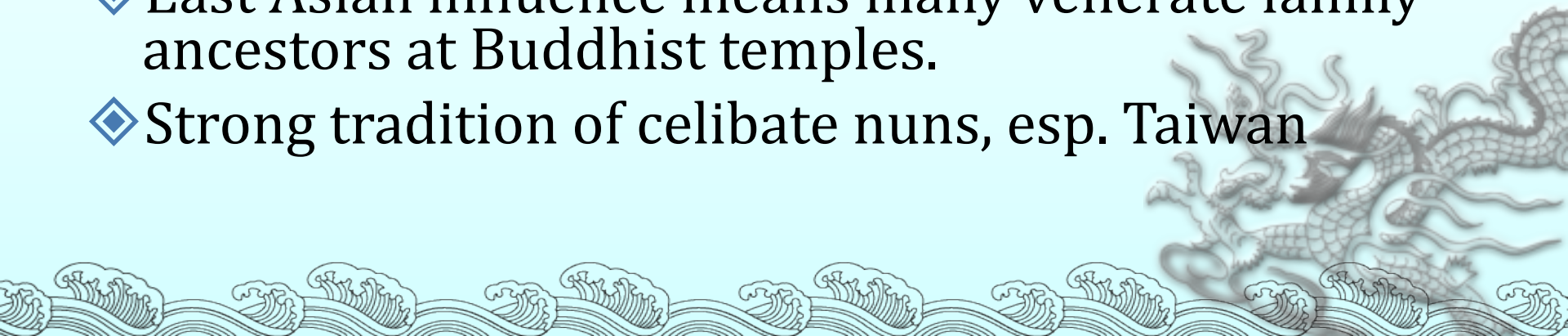
- ◆ Sri Lanka and South East Asia
- ◆ orthodox
- ◆ maintains monastic style of early Buddhism
- ◆ transcendental in that nirvana is seen as a state beyond this world achieved over many lifetimes.
- ◆ Lay followers offer donations to monks to make merit to gain a positive rebirth as a male monk.
- ◆ Nuns order died out but is being revived.



# 3 Basic Styles & Schools of Buddhism

Mahayana 大乘仏教 (Great Vehicle):

- ◆ East Asia
- ◆ reform
- ◆ central ideal of the bodhisattva who voluntarily stays in samsaric rebirth to work for the enlightenment of all beings
- ◆ immanent in that nirvana is found in the world of suffering (*samsara*)
- ◆ East Asian influence means many venerate family ancestors at Buddhist temples.
- ◆ Strong tradition of celibate nuns, esp. Taiwan

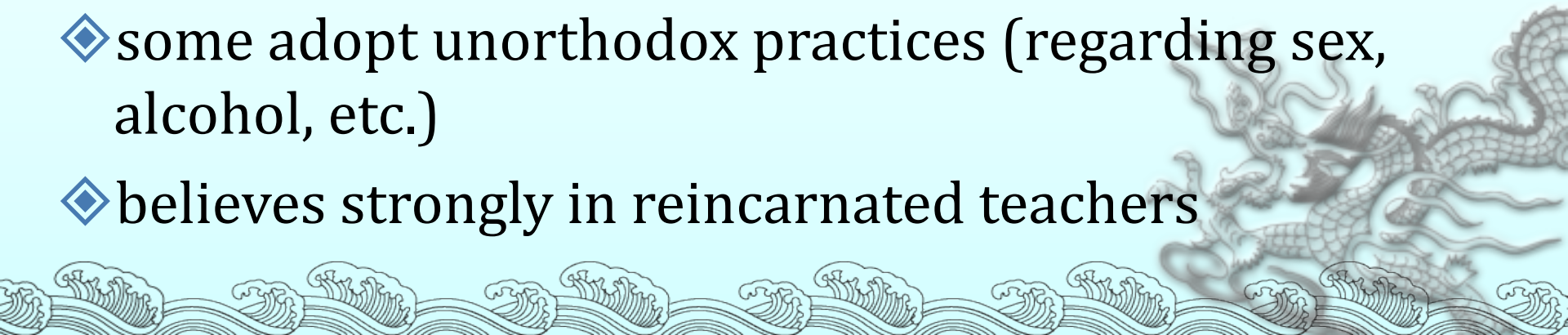




# 3 Basic Styles & Schools of Buddhism

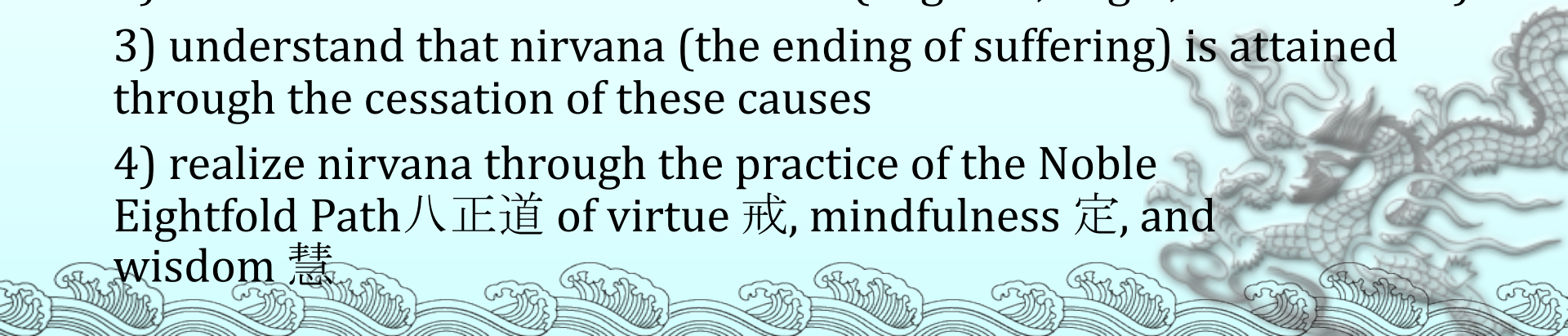
Vajrayana 金剛乘仏教 (Diamond Vehicle):

- ◆ Tibet and Japan
- ◆ *tantra* 密教 or *mantra* 真言: guru leads students through a complex series of initiations and visualizations to gain enlightenment in this life.
- ◆ basically a branch of Mahayana (enlightenment is found in and through the body)
- ◆ some adopt unorthodox practices (regarding sex, alcohol, etc.)
- ◆ believes strongly in reincarnated teachers



# Core Buddhist Teachings

- ◆ Dependent Co-Arising 緣起: There is no Creator God or original source to the universe. Simply a continual flow of causes and conditions.
- ◆ Not-self 無我: Thus, there is no soul or eternal self-existence. Human consciousness goes through an endless cycle of change and transformation.
- ◆ *samsara* 輪廻 and *dukkha* 苦: This endless cycle of change (*samsara*) is a source of endless dissatisfaction or suffering (*dukkha*).
- ◆ The Four Noble Truths 四聖諦: The Buddha thus taught to
  - 1) confront the reality of one's dissatisfaction
  - 2) discover and reflect on its causes (in greed, anger, and delusion)
  - 3) understand that nirvana (the ending of suffering) is attained through the cessation of these causes
  - 4) realize nirvana through the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path 八正道 of virtue 戒, mindfulness 定, and wisdom 慧



# Core Buddhist Teachings: the Noble Eightfold Path 八正道

◆ wisdom 慧

1.Right understanding

2.Right intention

◆ virtue 戒

3.Right speech

4.Right action

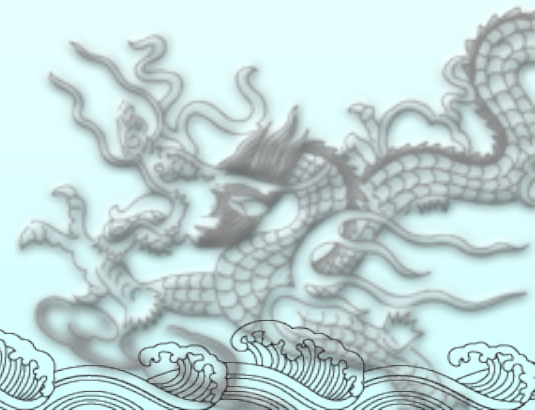
5.Right livelihood

◆ mindfulness 定

6.Right effort

7.Right mindfulness

8.Right meditation

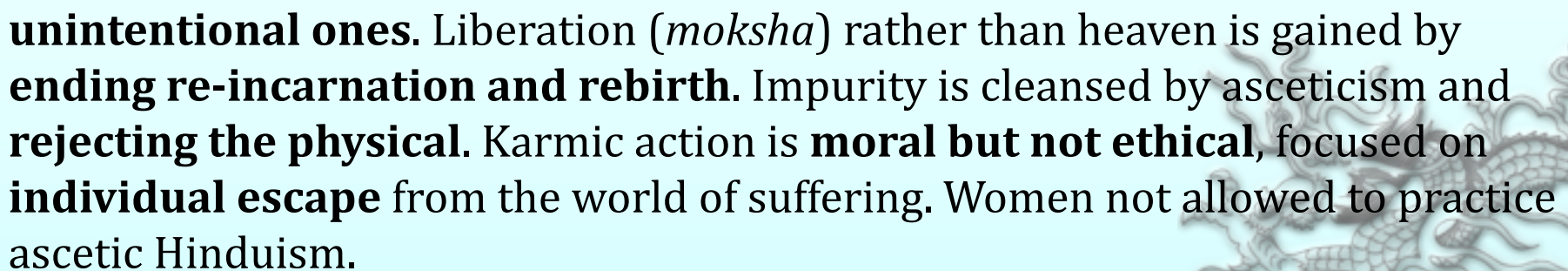


# Core Buddhist Teachings: Karma

Karma = “action” but what kind of action?

◆ Brahmanism/early Hinduism: **karma = ritual action**, meant to secure a favorable birth in heaven **by filling up heaven with merit (puñña)** for the person on whose behalf the ritual is done. By proper rituals the harmony between human behavior and natural law is maintained or re-established. **Impurity is cleansed by ritual.** Karma is not a moral or ethical law, but a social law that perpetuated the caste system (class and gender). Heaven was gained by **paying priests to perform rituals that ensured a good afterlife.**

◆ Ascetic Hinduism/Jainism: **karma = ascetic action**, meant to **cleans the body and mind of impurities** accumulated in living in this world of suffering. “Bad karma” can be accumulated from intentional immoral actions or **unintentional ones.** Liberation (*moksha*) rather than heaven is gained by **ending re-incarnation and rebirth.** Impurity is cleansed by asceticism and **rejecting the physical.** Karmic action is **moral but not ethical**, focused on **individual escape** from the world of suffering. Women not allowed to practice ascetic Hinduism.





# Core Buddhist Teachings: Karma

- ◆ Buddhism: karma = intentional action, in mind, word, and deed. Actions follow the intentions and habits of the mind.
- ◆ “Bad karma” is accumulated from basic ignorance and the greedy/angry/deluded actions that come from it.
- ◆ Impurity is cleansed by the Noble Eightfold Path that combines mental and physical training.
- ◆ Liberation is “to extinguish” (to nirvana) this ignorance, hopefully in this lifetime.
- ◆ Karmic action is ethical, focused on helping oneself and others towards this goal. Women and all classes of people may become full practitioners.

