



# Buddhist Political Thought in Japan

A received assumption in Japanese religious studies concerns Buddhist institutions' organic support of the imperial state throughout history, mostly done through symbols and rituals. This paper aims at challenging this received understanding by focusing on the nature and typologies of Buddhist political thought and praxis in premodern Japan. I will discuss different ideas of kingship, corresponding to the different ideal figures of the Mahāsammata (the first, elected ruler), cakravartin (universal king), and devarāja (god-king). I will also point to the existence of a significant republican tradition, dating back to the political environment in north-eastern India at the time of the Buddha, and implemented in large monastic institutions in Japan. In the paper, I will emphasize the strong sense of institutional autonomy that animated Buddhist institutions for a large part of their long history, also against state interests. I will conclude with a few remarks about the momentous transformations in Buddhist political thought and practices during the Edo period that still affect, to an extent, Japanese Buddhist institutions today.

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"Sacred Models: Authority and  
Representation in Asian  
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