

The Buddhist music of Japan came into being largely as a result of borrowings from India and China, but it is also the product of several stages of assimilation that affected the language of the texts and the accompanying instruments.

The principal form is the shomyo, the teaching of which, having begun with the large-scale introduction of Buddhism in 552, is thought to have been elaborated, after their return from China, by the two monks Saicho (better known as Dengyo Daishi, 767-822), the founder of the Tendai sect, and Kukai (better known as Kobo Daishi, 774-834), the founder of the Shingon sect (Shingon means the "true word" doctrine). The first religious and cultural centres of these sects were the Mount Hiei sanctuary outside Kyoto and the Toji sanctuary in the city itself, and the Koya San monastery in the Kii Peninsula. The existing shomyo melodies are not older than the 12th century.

Japan also received a direct transmission of Indian Buddhism: in 736, during the reign of the Emperor Shomu, the Indian priest Bodhisena and a bonze from Indo-China resided at Nara, the latter also teaching the pure Indian tradition.

The shomyo derives from a Chinese adaptation of the sacred chant of Vedic India, a homophonic cantillation by an a cappella choir that is very similar to Gregorian chant. A solo voice is followed by antiphonal choral singing, originally without instrumental accompaniment but with abundant ornamentation, the pauses being marked by a bell or a percussion instrument of metal or wood. After its appearance at the Japanese court, which coincided with the beginnings of Gagaku music, the shomyo gradually came to be influenced by the latter and soon acquired its own instrumental accompaniment. At the same time, and especially in the 10th century, a period when relations with China were interrupted, some of the shomyo texts were translated into Japanese. Even now the shomyo texts are sung in Sanskrit (bonsan), Chinese (kansan) and Japanese (wasan), and the traditional