

# The Japanese View of the "Other World": Japanese Religion in World Perspective\*

UMEHARA, Takeshi

*International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, Japan*

*(Accepted 14 November 1990)*

## THE MEANING AND SPECIAL NATURE OF JAPANESE RELIGION

The topic I have chosen for my talk today is, "Japanese Religion in World Perspective."

To treat this topic, I must first give an outline of Japanese religion, describe its particular intellectual characteristics, and then consider what significance it may have in the modern world.

Religion has two aspects. The first is doctrine, the second ritual. Although both aspects are shared by all religions, their interrelationship varies greatly. In some religions, doctrine has a profound connection with ritual, so much so that the two are really indivisible. In the case of Christianity, the link between the two is quite close. Therefore, in order to know Christianity one must first read the Bible. Even in Christianity, however, and especially in Roman Catholicism, there are many instances in which practices not necessarily related directly to Christian doctrine have been admitted into the religious rites of regional churches.

Still, I believe that this tendency is much more obvious in Japanese religion. Japanese Shinto has hardly any clearly defined scriptures. Perhaps one can say that Shinto is, instead, a complex of religious rituals centered upon *matsuri* (a general term for acts of worship addressed to a deity, including large-scale religious festivals). Thus, to study the ideas present in Japanese Shinto, one must carefully examine the rituals centered upon *matsuri* and consider what ideas are implicit in them.

Buddhism, unlike Shinto, has quite a strong body of doctrine. Each sect of Japanese

\* Translated from Japanese by Dr. R. TYLER, Australian National University. The original text: UMEHARA, T. (1988): *Nihonjin no anoyo-kan* (The Japanese view of the other world), *Chuo-koron*, May, pp.102-130. 梅原 猛 (1988) 「日本人のあの世観」 中央公論, 5月号, pp.102-130.

This article is based on a lecture delivered at the first international symposium organized by the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, on 9, March, 1988.

Buddhism has its own scriptures and, at the same time, various commentaries on these scriptures composed by the sect's founder. In the quality and quantity of the scriptures said to have been spoken by Shakyamuni (the historical Buddha), and in the quality and quantity of canonical commentaries on these scriptures, Buddhism is no whit inferior to Christianity with its Bible and the authoritative commentaries upon it. Nonetheless, when speaking of Japanese Buddhism, one cannot afford to overlook the enormous gap between the doctrine upheld by each sect and the rites actually performed by that same sect. To put the matter starkly, one can say that although the Japanese Buddhist sects each have their own body of doctrine, that doctrine has very little connection with the religious rituals which they actually perform. What actually links these sects to the vast majority of Japanese, and what therefore sustains their economic and spiritual base, is the set of religious rites centered upon funerals. To overstate the case a little, it is only thanks to funerals, memorial services, and the cult rendered to the ancestors at Bon (mid-August) and the equinoxes, that Buddhism has established its profound tie with the Japanese people. Buddhist priests are the ones responsible for presiding over these funeral-centered rites, over memorial services for the ancestors, and over the cult of ancestral spirits. Priests ought therefore to be truly religious persons, people of real spiritual standing. For the Japanese, however, this is always a secondary consideration. The first consideration is inevitably that priests should perform funeral and ancestral rites smoothly and expertly.

Last year, at a friend's daughter's wedding, I met Takada Kōin, the chief priest of Yakushiji near Nara. "It's a little embarrassing," the Reverend Takada remarked in his speech, "for a black-robed fellow like me to appear as the guest of honor on so happy an occasion, but actually, priests of the Six Nara Sects don't do funerals at all. When one of us dies, a Pure Land priest comes and takes care of the funeral. So you see, my coming here and making a speech doesn't mean bad luck."

His words made me give further thought to two things. First, Buddhism in Japan is so excessively tied up with funerals that a blackrobed priest looks out of place giving a speech as guest of honor at a wedding. The Reverend Takada was obviously sensitive enough to have realized that, so he put in a word to justify himself. Secondly, priests of Nara Buddhism—that is, the Buddhist sects which reached Japan in early times and which still show the strong influence of Indian Buddhism—even now do not, as a rule, perform funerals. The funeral is not originally a Buddhist ceremony at all. It was only after funerals had infiltrated Buddhism that Buddhism and funerals came to be inseparable. To my mind, the Reverend Takada's statement that "priests of the Six Nara Sects don't do funerals" challenged the established customs of Japanese Buddhism and proudly affirmed that the Buddhism of Nara still preserves the original Buddhism of India.

There is no doubt that apart from the Six Nara Sects and the Buddhist New Religions, the funeral is the fundamental rite of Japanese Buddhism. At one time, reformist priests from the Shin Pure Land temple of Higashi Honganji, led by the religious reformer Kiyozawa Manshi, championed emancipation from "funeral Buddhism" and initiated a new religious movement. They inevitably ended up rejecting the very foundation of their own livelihood.

It is no doubt true that "funeral Buddhism" really is the true nature and destiny of the Buddhism of Japan. But why should Buddhism, which originally had no connection

whatever with funerals, have ended up as "funeral Buddhism" once it reached Japan?

This question has to do with the very nature of Japanese Buddhism or of Japanese religion. A funeral is a rite for sending the deceased off to the other world. The litanies read at Japanese funerals often include such passages as "Step forth now into that other world and wait there for us," or "Please watch over us from that other world," or "Sleep in peace in that other world". This suggests that even now the Japanese, at least at funerals, have a strong faith in the other world, or at any rate pretend to.

What does "the other world" mean? Funeral litanies hardly ever say "Wait for us in paradise," or "We pray that you shall not suffer in hell." For the Japanese, the place where the dead go is the "other world." What *is* this "other world"?

### THE ORIGINAL JAPANESE CONCEPTION OF "THE OTHER WORLD"

To explain this Japanese conception of "the other world," I think the best scholarly approach will be to set forth the religious ideas which reveal it in its purest form, that is, which describe the conception as it has come down to us in an unbroken tradition since antiquity—indeed, no doubt since pre-Buddhist times and despite strong Buddhist influence after Buddhism entered Japan. It will then be possible, on this basis, to consider the conception which the Japanese have subsequently held of "the other world." In other words, I will first set forth what Max Weber called the "ideal pattern" of this conception, then consider the various views of "the other world" held by the Japanese as variations on this "ideal pattern." That, I think, will be the best way to proceed.

I have a hypothesis which I find extremely useful for understanding Japan and Japanese culture. This is to consider Japanese culture in terms of contrast and synthesis between the hunting and gathering culture of Jōmon civilization, and the wet-rice culture of Yayoi civilization.

Hitherto, understanding of Japan and Japanese culture has assumed that Japanese culture is unitary and based above all on agriculture. However, my own study of Japan and Japanese culture, conducted over many years, has led me to become dissatisfied with any such unitary interpretation. Ideas similar to mine have already been set forth by Okamoto Tarō and Tanikawa Tetsuzō, and developed more recently by Takahashi Tomio and Amino Yoshihiko. If my own understanding has any personal stamp, it is that I see Ainu culture and Okinawan culture as being the purest relics of Jōmon culture. Thus, I see Japanese culture as oval in structure. The unchanging elements of the culture—religion and mores—still bear the powerful imprint of Jōmon times; whereas those elements which change easily—technology and political organization—are largely Yayoi in character.

In terms of the natural sciences, the accuracy of this understanding has been rigorously demonstrated by the physical anthropologist Hanihara Kazurō, of the Center which I direct, and by colleagues of his elsewhere. That is, physical anthropologists have shown that there are in Japan two human types. The first is that of the Japanese who were settled in Japan before the Yayoi period. The second is that of the Japanese who came to Japan in the Yayoi period, bringing rice culture with them. Both types are of course mongoloid in

character, but racially they are different. This understanding is, I believe, fully adequate to refute the assumption that hitherto had underlain almost all discussions of the Japanese as a people and a culture: that the Japanese are a single, unified people. I have no doubt that this understanding, which has already been proven in terms of physical science, will soon be proven in terms of cultural science as well. However, I cannot develop this point further here.

For the present, I will confine myself to my assigned topic, religion, and pursue the understanding I have just outlined in that field alone. I will first describe the concept of "the other world" which is to be found in Ainu and Okinawan religion. I will then propose that this conception of the other world is precisely the one originally held by the Japanese. Finally, I will consider later an unrelated Japanese conceptions of the other world in the light of the model.

I have acquired my knowledge of the Ainu and Okinawan conceptions of "the other world" through the works of such Ainu scholars as John Batchelor, Kindaichi Kyōsuke, Chiri Mashiho, Kubodera Itsuhiko and Fujimura Hisakazu, as well as a great many Ainu *yukar* texts; through conversations with Ainu elders; through the works of Iha Fuyū, Nakamura Yashū, Hokama Shuzen and others, as well as the Okinawan *Omoro sōshi*; and through countless visits to the Ainu and Okinawan regions. All this material has led me to conclude that the conceptions of the other world held by these two cultures are startlingly similar. What can it possibly mean that the religions of these two peoples, and especially their conceptions of the other world, are so remarkably close, when the people themselves can hardly have had any cultural contact with one another since the beginning of the Yayoi period? All I can make of it is that although widely separated to north and south, both peoples preserve in pure form the "other world" which existed in Japan itself before the arrival of Buddhism and probably before even the Yayoi period. I therefore wish to discuss here that same Japanese conception of the other world and to reconsider in that light the conception of the other world held by the Japanese since the beginning of the Yayoi period and since the introduction of Buddhism. As I see it, the Ainu and Okinawan conception of the other world has four essential features.

(1) *The "other world" is a perfect mirror image of this one, but in other respects is not very different from it. There is in the "other world" no distinction between heaven and hell, and consequently no judgment of the dead. (See Fig.1.)*

That the "other world" should be a mirror image of this one does not mean that values there are reversed. It is only the order of space and time that are backwards. Right in this world is left in the other and vice versa. Down in this world is up in the other, etc. The Ainu believe that people in the other world walk with their feet upward. Moreover, summer in this world is winter in the other and summer in the other is this world's winter; while day in this world is night in the other and so forth. If this world is a world of matter, the other world is a world of anti-matter, and vice versa.

This pattern is highly significant. That there should be no difference in values between this world and the other means that in the other world there is no distinction between heaven and hell. And if no such distinction exists there, then there is no judgment after death. This is utterly different from the conception of the other world according to Buddhism or Christianity.

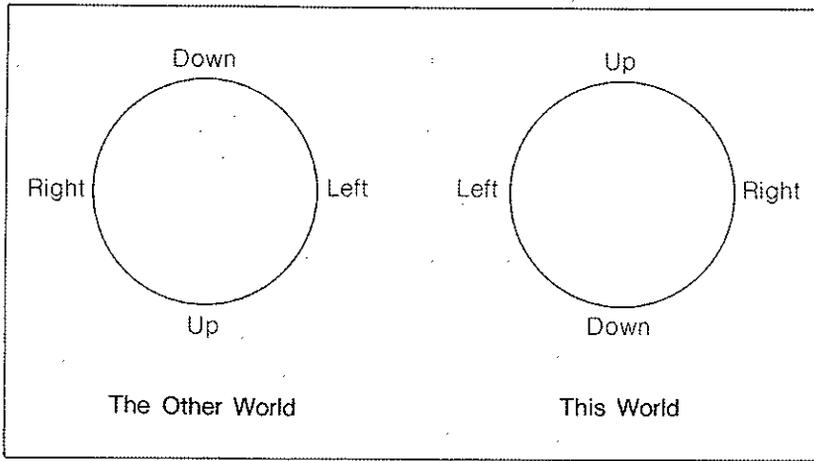


Fig.1. The other world is a perfect mirror image of this world.

Regarding the location of this other world, there is some difference of opinion between the Ainu and the Okinawans. The Ainu place it on mountaintops or beyond the sky, whereas for the Okinawans it is *niraikanai*, that is, beyond the sea. However, since "beyond the sky" and "beyond the sea" both join in the far beyond, both conceptions of the other world are essentially the same.

(2) *When a person dies, his soul leaves his body, goes to that other world and there becomes a kami or divine spirit. Almost all people, therefore, go to that world after death and live there with the ancestors, who had been expecting them. People who have done something really terrible, or people who still harbor profound resentment toward this world, cannot go directly to the other world. However, if the surviving relatives call in a shaman and have the proper rites performed, the deceased is able to proceed to the other world.* (See Fig.2.)

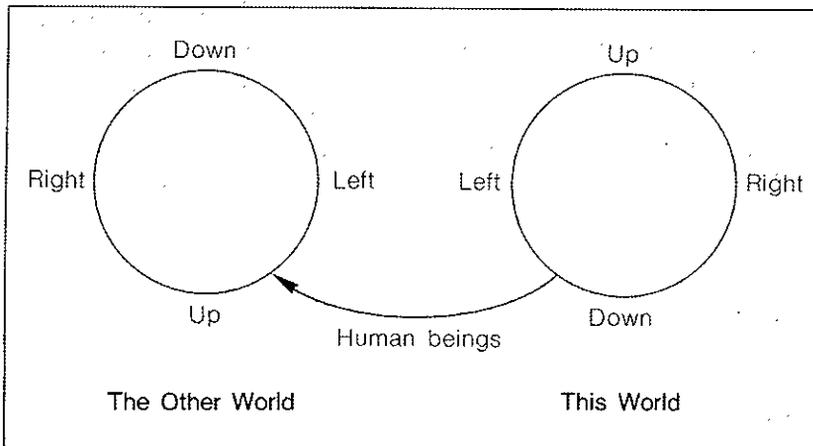


Fig.2. The order of space and time is reverse.

If it is true, in accordance with my first point above, that in the other world there is no distinction between heaven and hell, and no judgment of the dead, then anyone at all can go to the other world. In Ainu or Okinawan religion, the soul leaves the body at death and then sets off for the other world. The body itself—the corpse—is like a snake's cast-off skin. It is valueless. In ancient Japanese, *hōmuru* ("to hold a funeral") was pronounced *hafuru*, which can also mean "abandon." In other words, the body, being the cast-off husk of the soul, was literally abandoned in the mountains.

It is reported that in one Okinawan dialect, *haku* refers to the draining of body fluids from the corpse. Perhaps the Japanese word *haka* ("grave") originally had the same meaning. I daresay the custom of washing the bones, which survives in Okinawa, is deeply connected with this sort of idea. To wash the bones of the dead some years after death, and remove all the flesh which still clings to them, no doubt signifies that the soul has departed from this world and ascended safely to the other.

And in this other world, the ancestors are waiting. The basic unit of social life there is the family, and each person who goes there is greeted by his or her own ancestors. Now, it can happen that an extremely bad person is rejected by the other world, or that someone profoundly attached to this one cannot pass on to other without great difficulty. In such cases the shaman's words at the funeral are of the greatest importance. The shaman has to persuade the ancestors that the person he is about to send them is not that bad after all, and at the same time to persuade the deceased not to cling to this world but to travel safely to the other.

People with a strong attachment to this world can apparently return to it. Such souls come back as birds. The shaman must recognize them immediately and speak to them firmly. I once met an Ainu elder who told me proudly how he had immediately detected a soul which had come back in this way, and how he had sent it on safely to the other world after all. I could not help being moved to find a shaman like the ones in the *Tale of Genji* still alive in the second half of the twentieth century. However, there apparently are souls which simply cannot go to the other world at all. These are the souls of people who have died in accidents and whose bodies cannot be found. In Okinawa, for example, the soul of someone lost at sea is believed not to be able to go to the other world. Perhaps this belief has something to do with the idea that the person may still be alive and that one must not send a living person to the other world. At any rate, it seems that despite the existence of certain exceptions, a person at death leaves the physical body and is able to go to the other world. And even if a soul is not easily able to pass over to the other world, it will be able to do so safely if the surviving relatives call in a shaman and have the proper rites performed. Therefore, the rites performed after a person's death are extremely important.

(3) *Not only humans but all living creatures have a soul which, after death, leaves the body and goes to the other world. In particular, living creatures which are important to humans must be sent off carefully to the other world. (See Fig.3.)*

The best illustration of this is the Ainu bear ceremony (*Kuma okuri*, "sending off the bear"). According to the Ainu, the bear is a "guest" (*marōdo*) who appears in this world in order to offer himself as a gift to humans. Even for the Ainu, who were hunters, daily fare consisted of nuts, berries, wild greens and fish. Meat was no doubt a treat for special

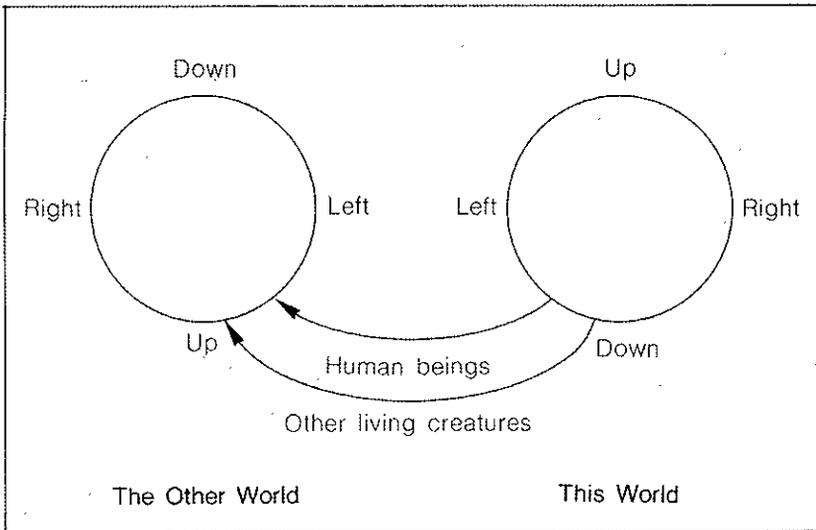


Fig.3. Human beings and other living creatures must be sent off carefully to the other world.

occasions, feast days and festivals. In both quantity and quality, bear meat was surely the best of all. Therefore the bear, who brings the gift of his superior flesh, was for the Ainu the most welcome "guest" of all. And since bears appeared in the human world bearing this gift, the humans were entitled to receive this gift in accordance with the bears' own wish. After receiving the gift, however, they had not only to thank the bear and send it back to the other world, but to present the bear with gifts from the human realm. This is the ceremony known as *iomante*, which means "ceremony to send the bear's spirit back to the other world." The Ainu would catch bear cubs in the mountains, bring them up, eat them when their meat was at its best, and then send each bear's soul back to the other world. The heart of this rite was for the people to consume the bear's meat along with its soul, to drink its blood, to declare their oneness with the god (the bear), and then to send the bear's soul back to the other world. This was done early in the night. Early night in this world is early morning in the other world. One who leaves for the other world in the morning reaches safely those who are waiting there for him. Loaded with gifts of wine, fish and grain, the bear's soul would return to the sky. Having arrived, it would then summon all its fellow bears and give them a feast with the wine, fish and grain it had received from the humans. Listening as the new arrival told his story, the bears would be awed by the wonders of the human world, where a bear is so kindly treated and from which it comes back so loaded with gifts. The bears would then want to try visiting there themselves. That way, there would be plenty of bears to capture the following year.

According to Fujimura Hisakazu, any animal can go after death to the other world, but it is very difficult for an animal which has been killed to do so. That is why such an animal has to be sent off with a particularly elaborate ritual. The Ainu send off in this way not only bears, but owls and foxes. For the Ainu, each of these animals has great significance. The ceremonies to send them off differ little from the ones to send off humans. In fact, not

only animals but even plants are sent off to the other world. Animals and plants important to humans must be treated in this way with particular care.

(4) *After dwelling for a while in the other world, the soul returns to this one. Birth is simply the rebirth of a soul from the other world. Therefore, not only humans but all living creatures repeat an endless cycle of birth and death.* (See Fig.4.)

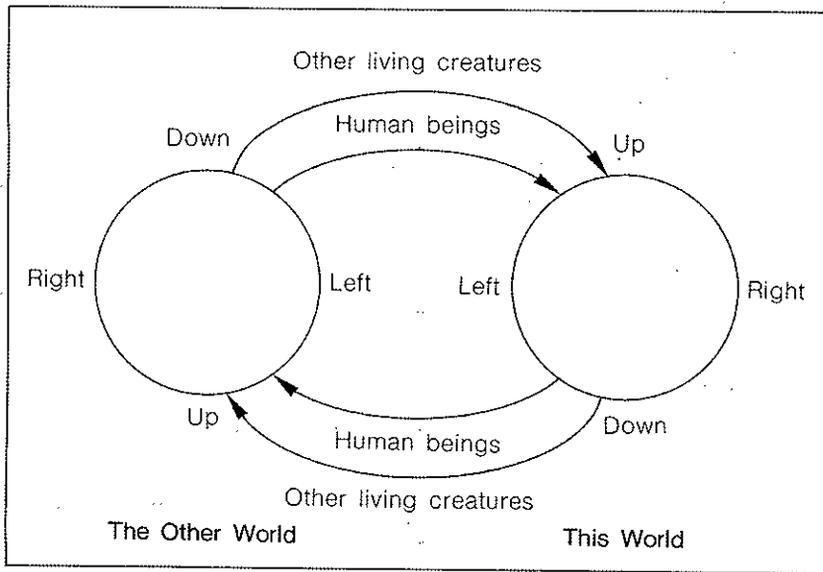


Fig.4. After dwelling for a while in the other world the soul returns to this world.

A soul which has gone to the other world does not stay there forever. After some time, it always comes back to this world again. For instance, when a man and woman get married and have a child, the ancestors in the other world discuss the issue of whom to send back. When they have made their decision and someone has been designated to return, that soul enters the mother's womb and is reborn. According to this way of thinking, descendants are simply ancestral souls reborn.

Now, there is a difference between terrestrial time and time in the other world. For the Ainu, a day in the other world corresponds to a year in this one. Further, those who have behaved well in this world and are well thought of in the other are sent back quickly, while those who have behaved badly in this world are have their return delayed. Sooner or later, however, every soul is able to return to this world.

In this respect, people and animals are very much the same. The souls of animals too are also follow this pattern.

It is easy to understand in this light why funerals are the most important of all religious ceremonies for the Ainu and the Okinawans. The purpose of sending the soul off with scrupulous care to the other world is to make sure that it returns to this worlds again. For the soul to return safely to this world, it must first be sent off safely to the other. At the end of the bear ceremony, the Ainu say, "Come again!" These two words surely express the

hidden meaning of the whole ceremony. That is to say, the ceremony is also a prayer for rich hunting. Sending the bear's soul off to the other world deeply satisfied, makes it possible to welcome bears into this world the following year. The German *auf wiedersehen* ("till we meet again") is the true meaning of this ceremony which can seem so strange to modern Japanese and Westerners alike. Considering the needs of a hunting and gathering society, this gives the ceremony a thoroughly rational foundation.

Thus, the soul repeats an endless cycle of birth and death. Both this world and the other are only temporary dwellings, and the souls of all living creatures circulate eternally between them.

By referring to the Ainu and Okinawan conceptions, I have explored the original Japanese conception of the other world. The issue, however, is whether or not this conception survived the Yayoi period, and especially the introduction of Buddhism, to become the conception of the other world held by the modern Japanese. Naturally, it cannot be said that this conception was transmitted by the Japanese down through the ages in its pure form. I do, however, believe that despite various modifications, this conception of the other world still lives deep in the hearts and minds of the Japanese even into modern times.

#### THE CONCEPTION OF THE OTHER WORLD IN THE YAYOI PERIOD AND AFTER

(1) In the *Kojiki*, for example, the other world is divided into Takama-ga-hara ("The Plain of High Heaven") and Ne-no-kuni ("The Root-Land"). Takama-ga-hara is not a sort of heaven, or Ne-no-kuni a sort of hell. Both are simply other worlds very like this one.

I believe that this sort of conception of the other world survives vigorously in the present. Being sloppy as a child, I often closed my Kimono with the right side over the left, or poured my tea into cold water to cool it off instead of pouring cold water into my tea. My mother would scold me sharply every time I did these things. "That's the way dead people do it," she would say. If so, then apparently the other world is a mirror image of this one. Even now, the Japanese dress the dead with the right side of the kimono over the left, and break the rice bowls or other such things presented to the dead. The meaning of such practices is that imperfect things in this world are perfect in the other and vice versa. To break a rice bowl offered to someone deceased is to wish to send a whole rice bowl to the other world. Moreover, the Japanese still have the custom of holding a wake (*o-tsuya*) early in the night. This wake no doubt survives from an ancient practice of holding the funeral early in the night. As I see it, this means that if the soul is sent off to the other world early in the night, then since the other world is a mirror image of this one, it will arrive in the other world early in the morning and be able to reach safely the place where the ancestors are waiting for it.

(2) The Japanese belief that at death the soul goes to the other world and becomes a *Kami* (a deity), can be seen also in the idea that a person after death becomes a *hotoke* (a buddha). *Hotoke* took the place of *kami* after Buddhism was introduced to Japan, but the idea in both cases was the same. When a person has died, the Japanese say that "he has

become a buddha." However, in original Buddhism, a person could not become a buddha until he had reached enlightenment by accumulating ascetic religious practice. Nevertheless, the Japanese believe that anyone can become a buddha after death. What can this belief possibly be, other than a Buddhist manifestation of the idea I have just discussed, that the soul after death goes to the other world and becomes a *kami*?

The soul proceeds to the other world where the ancestors welcome it, then lives in the other world for some years or decades. At the New Year and at O-Bon, the soul returns to the place where its own descendants are still living.

In this case too, however, there are souls which cannot proceed easily to the other world. For those souls too, it is rites (*kuyō*) performed on their behalf by the living which make it possible for them to go to the other world. The sutra most often read in Japanese Buddhism was the Heart Sutra (*Hannya shingyō*, Skt. *Prajñāparamitā hṛdaya sūtra*). This sutra was frequently employed to help souls who were attached to this world, and who therefore could not pass on easily to the other, give up their attachment and proceed safely to the other world.

(3) It is clear from the shell-mound sites found throughout Japan that from the earliest times the Japanese performed rites to send off the souls of all living things to the other world. Shell-mounds contain not only the shells and bones of many animals and fish, as well as human bones, but also fragments of pottery. The very name for such mounds (*tsuka*, "mound"), meaning above all a funerary mound, shows plainly that those who made them believed all such things had souls, and that from those spots they sent these souls off to the other world. Furthermore, traces not of "bear ceremony" but of a "boar ceremony" (*shishi okuri*) can be found in every part of Japan. In Iwate and Niigata prefectures, where Jōmon culture survives with particular vigor, a dance called the *shishi* dance is still performed. Although *shishi* is now generally written with characters which mean "lion," I suspect that the word's original meaning is "boar" or "wild game" and that the dance is in fact a survival of the ceremony to send off the souls of game animals to the other world.

This custom of "sending off" the souls of living creatures essential to man—creatures which man was obliged to kill—survives even after the introduction of Buddhism to Japan in rites like *unagi kuyō* (a rite for eels eaten by humans), *fugu kuyō* (for blowfish), *hari kuyō* (for used sewing needle) or *ningyō kuyō* (worn-out dolls). When a tool breaks, the Japanese say that it has "become *o-shaka*" (*shaka*=*hotoke*=buddha). This manner of taking the Buddha's name in vain, as it were, says a great deal about the attitude of the Japanese people toward Buddhism. It suggests that the souls of tools, too, go to the other world, from which they return as new tools. In order to make a new tool, one must first send off the soul of the old tool to the other world.

(4) This principle of rebirth is essential to the myths of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, Japan's earliest surviving histories. I take the heart of these myths to be the entrance of the Sun Goddess into the Celestial Rock Cave and her rebirth from it. This motif, as has often been noted, is an expression in myth of the rebirth ceremony for the soul of an emperor, and is no doubt linked to the Ōname-sai, the imperial enthronement ceremony. The soul of the Sun Goddess, that is, the imperial soul, dies momentarily and then returns to life as someone new.

This idea is connected with the regular rebuilding, every twenty years, of the Sun

Goddess' shrine at Ise. This rebuilding is beyond doubt a rite of death and rebirth. Moreover, some years ago, the remains of "wood circles" began to be found all over northern Japan. These consist of half-round chestnut logs, a maximum of one meter in diameter, arranged in a circle some six or seven meters across. I believe that they show the original form of Shinto pillar-worship or tree-worship. They, too, show traces of having been rebuilt periodically every few years or decades.

The formal "succession to the name" in kabuki is also linked to such ceremonies of rebirth. Some years ago a master kabuki actor became the twelfth Ichikawa Danjūrō, in a ceremony which amounted to a proclamation that as the name had passed on, so the soul of the original Ichikawa Danjūrō had been reborn into the present Ichikawa Danjūrō. The soul of the original Ichikawa Danjūrō had therefore died eleven times and been reborn a twelfth time in the present Ichikawa Danjūrō.

Until very recently in the Japanese countryside, the same name would be carried generation after generation by the household head. Thus the original founder of the household was reborn generation after generation into his descendants.

Actually, even now the Japanese often say when a child is born that it is some deceased grandfather, born again. At present this is only a sort of simile, but until quite recently the Japanese really believed it.

Thus, I believe it is fair to say that the Ainu and Okinawan conception of the other world, which I have already presented, is the conception which continued on from Jōmon times; which the Japanese still held until very recently; and which in fact survives vigorously even now.

I have now discussed this conception of the other world which lurks deep in the heart of the Japanese people. It clearly explains why the funeral is, in Japan, the most important of all religious ceremonies.

### JAPANESE BUDDHISM AND SHINTO

There remains, however, the question of doctrine. I must now discuss the doctrine of Japanese Buddhism and of Shinto. Please refer to Fig. 5.

This figure gives a bird's-eye outline of Japanese Buddhism and of Shinto. I will examine

Buddhism	Shinto
1. Prince Shōtoku (7th c.)	a. Ritsuryō Shinto (8th c.)
2. Saicho, Kūkai (9th c.)	b. Shugendō (10th c.)
3. Jōdo, Zen, Nichiren (12th c.)	c. Pure Shinto (14th c.)
4. Danka system (17th c.)	d. National Shinto (19th c.)
5. Complete abandonment of Buddhist precepts (20th c.)	

Fig.5. Outline of Japanese Buddhism and Shinto.

these two topics in accordance with this outline.

### The stages in the development of Buddhism and Shinto

#### *Buddhism*

(1) Although there are various theories about when Buddhism was first transmitted to Japan, *Nihon shoki* states that the event occurred in 552 A.D., and I see no good reason to doubt this date. As for the firm establishment of Buddhism in Japan, however, Prince Shōtoku, who was active in the early seventh century, surely played a decisive role. As the regent for Empress Suiko, Prince Shōtoku actually had authority equal to that of the empress herself. He understood Buddhism better than anyone else in his time and was its great protector. He is said to have lectured on the *Shōman-gyō* (Skt. *Śrīmaladevi-sūtra*) and the Lotus Sutra (Skt. *Saddharma-pundarikā-sūtra*), and to have written commentaries on these two sutras as well as on the *Yuima-gyō* (Skt. *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*).

(2) After Prince Shōtoku, the Six Nara Sects flourished in the Asuka and Nara periods. However, the true foundations of Japanese Buddhism were surely laid by Saichō and Kūkai who were active in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. Saichō established Tendai Buddhism at Enryakuji on Mt. Hiei, while Kūkai established Shingon Buddhism at Kongōbuji on Mt. Kōya. These two sects, which influenced each other, also exerted a strong influence on the Japanese Buddhism of later times.

(3) However, almost all the sects genuinely thriving in Japan today belong to the "New Buddhism" which arose in the twelfth century. First, Hōnen taught a new kind of Pure Land faith, then Shinran and Ippen developed his teaching further (Shin Pure Land Sect). Meanwhile, Eisai and Dōgen brought Zen from China, respectively founding the Rinzaï and Sōtō schools of Zen. Nichiren, lamenting the growing strength of the Zen and Pure Land faiths, attempted to turn Japanese Buddhism back to the Lotus Sutra devotion which up until then had been central to it. According to Suzuki Daisetsu, it was in the Kamakura period that the true Japanese spark was finally struck—in other words, it was in the Kamakura period that Japanese Buddhism really began. I do not necessarily agree, but one cannot deny that it is the Buddhism of the Kamakura period which has the most characteristically Japanese features.

(4) It is fair to say that there were almost no new religious movements within Japanese Buddhism after the twelfth century. There is, however, one phenomenon which must not be overlooked in any consideration of Japanese Buddhism. That is the *danka* system which was established in the Edo period. In order to suppress Christianity, the Edo Bakufu required every Japanese to be registered as *danka* ("temple patron") at a Buddhist temple. As a result, all the Buddhist sects inevitably became linked with ancestor worship and "funeral Buddhism."

(5) One thing must not be forgotten here: the complete abandonment of the precepts for priests. Ever since Saichō, Japanese Buddhism has differed from Indian and Chinese Buddhism in its attitude toward the precepts. Shinran, in particular, approved of priests eating meat and marrying, and in fact established a boldly innovative style of Buddhism which appears at first glance to ignore the precepts entirely. Until the Meiji Restoration, however, this style of life was limited at least publicly to the Shin Pure Land followers inspired by Shinran. After the Restoration, and especially after the Second World War, this

trend spread to all sects, so that at present almost all have adopted this same mode of householder life for their priests. One can therefore say that Japanese Buddhism has dropped the precepts altogether.

### *Shinto*

A similar consideration of Shinto makes it possible, I believe, to divide the evolution of Shinto into four periods.

(a) As I noted earlier, Shinto is ultimately based on the native Japanese religion which goes back to Jōmon times. However, Shinto passed through a great change in the early eighth century, for this was when Ritsuryō Shinto was established by the Nakatomi and Fujiwara clans. Ritsuryō Shinto is a sort of theological compendium centered upon purification (*harai* and *misogi*), and finds its expression in the *Kojiki* and in the *norito* (prayers) included in the *Engi-shiki*. Hitherto, this Shinto has been considered the original Japanese religion. However, Ueyama Shunpei and I hold that it was something newly created by the Nakatomi clan. Fukunaga Kōji, meanwhile, has pointed out that it shows strong traces of Taoist influence.

(b) The Buddhism of Heian times, established by Saichō and Kūkai, upheld the harmonious relationship of the Buddhist and Shinto deities, and this attitude gave rise to a new kind of Shinto influenced by Buddhism. In my opinion, Shugendō (mountain asceticism) was this new kind of Shinto.

(c) Kamakura Buddhism showed a growing tendency to reject the fusion of Buddhism and Shinto, which had reached its peak in Heian times, and to emphasize the independence of Buddhism. And from the Kamakura period on, there appeared such Shinto sects as Ise Shinto which, in a counterpart manner, stressed the purity of Shinto and its independence from Buddhism.

(d) In the time when the *danka* system prevailed and Buddhism had become simply a part of daily life, nationalistic Shinto came into being under the influence of Confucianism. Its culmination was so-called Hirata Shinto: the Shinto of the early nineteenth-century thinker Hirata Atsutane. Hirata Shinto was a kind of nationalist ideology and exercised a great influence over Japanese society after the Meiji Restoration.

### **A characteristic phase of Japanese Buddhism**

By thus dividing the development of Buddhist thought into five stages and the development of Shinto thought into four, one makes an extremely interesting discovery. The transition to a new stage of Shinto thought is, in each case, situated *between* the stages of Buddhist thought. In other words, the development of Shinto thought in Japan took place either as a result of Buddhist influence or in reaction against Buddhist influence. Moreover, Shinto thought was heavily colored by foreign ideas as follows: (1) Ritsuryō Shinto was colored by Taoism, (2) Shugendō was colored by Buddhism, (3) Pure Shinto was colored by Sung Confucianism, while (4) State Shinto was colored by the Confucianism of Chu Hsi as well as of the "Old Learning" school. Such varied coloration is quite clear. This suggests that since Buddhist thought itself is foreign, the commonly held view that Shinto is the native Japanese religion cannot necessarily be sustained.

Having thus considered all of Japanese religion, we still cannot clearly grasp its characteristics. The best way to proceed now will no doubt be to draw out from Japanese religion

its most characteristic phase and to consider this phase from various angles. What should we then select as the most characteristic phase of all of Japanese religion?

For me, the most characteristic phase of Japanese religion is no doubt the Shin Pure Land teaching of Shinran.

First of all, the Shin Pure Land sect (Jōdo Shinshū) has the most temples and the most followers of any religious group in Japan. And not only does it have the most followers, but Shinran, its founder, is the most popular religious leader in all of Japan.

And there is another thing. Shinran's Buddhism is not just a direct import from India or China. It is a Buddhism peculiar to Shinran and his tradition alone. As the chart given above shows, Nara Buddhism, Shingon and Zen were simply the Buddhism then most popular in China, directly imported into Japan.

Both the Tendai Buddhism of Saichō and the Pure Land Buddhism of Hōnen were a somewhat later flowering of the counterpart phenomena in China, and to that extent involved some unconscious creativity. However, they hardly were entirely original. On the other hand, the Buddhism of Shinran and that of Nichiren correspond to nothing in India or China and can be called wholly Japanese forms of Buddhism.

Therefore, when one wishes to select one of the most creative forms of Japanese Buddhism, the choice lies between Shinran and Nichiren. And I believe that with regard to the tradition of Japanese Buddhism itself, the one to prefer is Shinran. This is because (as I shall explain more thoroughly in a moment) with respect to its conception of buddha-nature and of the precepts, the Buddhism of Shinran shows the marked influence of the two types of Buddhism just discussed in (1) and (2) above; while it is a forerunner of the styles of Buddhism discussed in (3) and (4). Indeed, it may well be Pure Land Buddhism, with its emphasis on rites associated with death, which is ultimately responsible for the way in which Buddhism came to replace Shinto as the religion of funerals. Considered in that light, the trend mentioned in (4) above might be described as the "Pure-Land-ization" (*jōdoshūka*) of all of Japanese Buddhism, and the trend mentioned in (5) as the "Shinranization" (*jōdoshinshūka*) of, likewise, all of Japanese Buddhism.

### **The Lineage of Japanese Buddhism**

I think it is fair to say that the Shin Pure Land sect of Shinran is at the heart of Japanese Buddhism. And if this is so, then a careful examination of Shinran's Buddhism will reveal as clearly as possible the special features of Japanese Buddhism in general and even of Japanese religion as a whole.

Please refer to Fig. 6. It is a genealogical table of Japanese thought.

Japanese Buddhism begins with Prince Shōtoku, whose Buddhism was that of the Lotus Sutra. Prince Shōtoku was a layman, not a monk; in fact, in his time he was the Crown Prince. This tradition of Lotus Sutra Buddhism, or of lay Buddhism, runs through all of Japanese Buddhism.

It was Saichō who inherited the Buddhism of Prince Shōtoku and who used it to build the foundations of Japanese Buddhism. Inheriting Prince Shōtoku's Buddhism, Saichō also imported the Tendai (Ch. T'ien-t'ai) Buddhism of the sixth-century scholar-monk Chigi (Ch. Chih-i) and founded the Japanese Tendai sect. The doctrine of this sect is centered on the Lotus Sutra, and the heart of its philosophy is concerned with its conception of

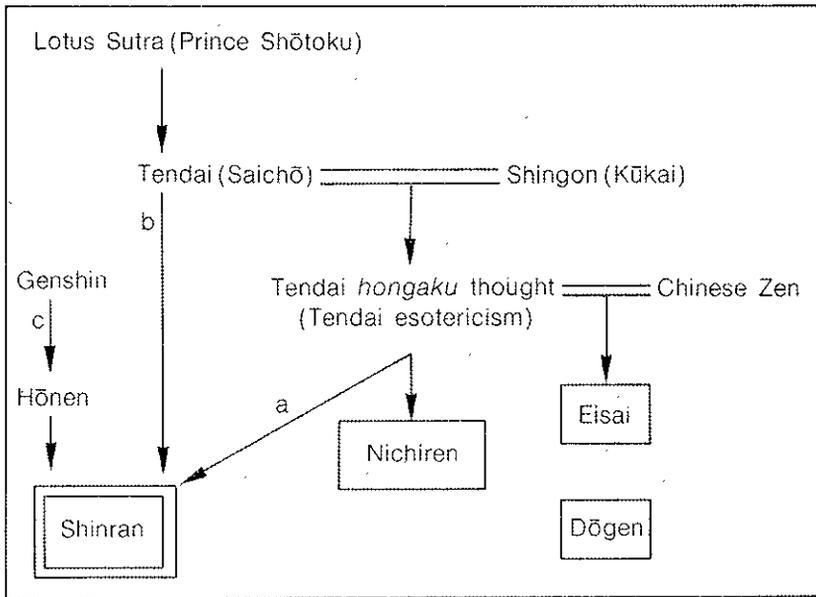


Fig.6. Genealogical table of Japanese thought.

buddha-nature and of the precepts.

These two areas of concern are central to Japanese Buddhism as a whole, and the Buddhism of Shinran develops in both areas the position taken by Saichō. Perhaps even more essential than these two areas, when discussing the Buddhism of Shinran, is the Pure Land faith which in the Japanese Tendai tradition began with Ennin and was clearly systematized by Genshin. This Pure Land faith was then revolutionized by Hōnen, and Shinran succeeded to it in Hōnen's revolutionized form. The three issues to examine when discussing Shinran's thought are therefore (a) his conception of buddha-nature, (b) his conception of the precepts and (c) his conception of the Pure Land. I will treat each in turn:

**a. The question of buddha-nature.** The issue of buddha-nature concerns the question of what kinds of beings can attain buddhahood. Can only a limited, specially chosen number of human beings become buddhas, or can all humans do so? Can a limited number of living beings other than humans achieve buddhahood, or can all living beings do so without exception? (See Fig. 7.)

According to Nara Buddhism, only certain human beings could attain buddhahood. There were human beings for whom buddhahood was impossible and others for whom it was doubtful. This attitude was probably continuous with that of Shakyamuni himself and of Indian Buddhism in general. Saichō, in contrast, upheld Ekayana ("one-vehicle") Buddhism, the Buddhism of the Lotus Sutra which stresses that all human beings are equal. He held that all human beings can become buddhas and quarreled on that issue with Tokuitsu, a representative of Nara Buddhism.

This conception of buddha-nature was central to Tendai thought even after Saichō, and the range of beings it embraced constantly widened. That is because Tendai Buddhism adopted the principles of Shingon esotericism. The central buddha of Kūkai's Shingon

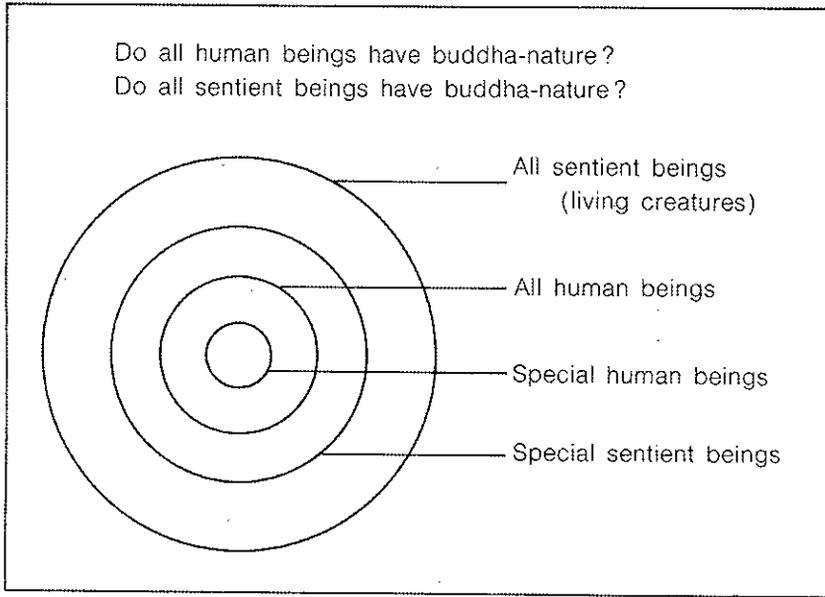


Fig.7. Views of buddha-nature.

esotericism is Dainichi Nyorai (Skt. Mahāvairocana Tathāgata) who is not a deity with a human personality at all, but a nature deity. In Shingon, therefore, buddha-nature has never been limited only to humans. All of nature as a manifestation of Dainichi Nyorai and Dainichi Nyorai exists in the center of each of us. Through religious practice we can become one with Dainichi Nyorai and realize buddhahood in our own flesh: this is the cardinal principle of the Shingon esotericism of Kūkai.

Tendai Buddhism after Saichō was influenced by Shingon, and a “Tendai esotericism” (*taimitsu*) developed as a counterpart to “Shingon esotericism” (*tōmitsu*). Thanks to this trend, the range of buddha-nature spread beyond human beings to include all sentient beings (*shujō*), that is, all living creatures in general. In the end, it became commonly recognized in Japanese Buddhism that “mountains, rivers, plants and trees all achieve buddhahood.” This saying expresses the idea that mountains, rivers, plants, trees and all other living creatures are manifestations of Dainichi Nyorai, and hence are in their own essence buddhas.

I think it is fair to say that all of Kamakura Buddhism comes from this original-enlightenment doctrine of Tendai Buddhism (*Tendai hongaku ron*). All human beings are endowed with buddha-nature and can become buddhas. How, then, is it possible for them actually to do so? Entering the Age of the Latter Days of the Law (*mappō*), the Buddhist founders of the Kamakura period posed the question very seriously. Hōnen discovered the answer in the Nembutsu (the voiced calling of the name of Amida [Skt. Amitābha] Buddha); Nichiren in the Daimoku (calling the title of the Lotus Sutra); and Eisai in Zen meditation (*zazen*). Each advocated a different way of achieving buddhahood, but their fundamental understanding of buddha-nature was more or less the same.

Moreover, all three took the position that not only human beings, but all sentient beings too can achieve buddhahood. This tendency in all three new Kamakura-period sects (Pure Land, Nichiren and Zen) is stronger in the more creative founder than in the founder who imported his Buddhism directly from China. In other words, with respect to Pure Land it is stronger in Shinran than in Hōnen; with respect to Zen it is stronger in Dōgen than in Eisai; and it is particularly strong in the case of Nichiren himself.

**b. The question of the precepts.** On the surface, Saichō was a scrupulously faithful disciple of Chigi. He himself described his Buddhism as having been transmitted from the period of the Three Kingdoms, when Buddhism was first introduced into China. Like most other Buddhist leaders, he did not admit to advocating any idea peculiar to himself. Some of Saichō's ideas, however, cannot be found anywhere in Indian or Chinese Buddhism, and these had a decisive influence on the Buddhism of Japan.

Saichō promoted the establishment of an ordination platform exclusively for the administering of the Mahayana precepts, and his ambition was realized shortly after his death when such a platform was established on Mt. Hiei. This was an epoch-making event in the history of Japanese Buddhism. Why? Because no such ordination platform as the one planned by Saichō actually existed in India or China. In those countries, the existence of such a platform was only a theoretical ideal, not an actuality. Saichō himself believed that such ideal platforms did exist in India and China, and that is why he felt that Japan must have one too. Thanks to the strength of his vision, Japan came to possess an ordination platform exclusively for the administering of the Mahayana precepts, which had no counterpart in India or China.

Saichō's approach is clear. There are two main divisions or phases of Buddhism: Hinayana (the "Lesser Vehicle") and Mahayana (the "Greater Vehicle"). In Mahayana, as in Hinayana Buddhism, monks are obliged to keep 250 restrictive precepts, while nuns are obliged to keep 350. Now, it is curious that Mahayana Buddhism, which emphasizes the free, beneficent activity of the bodhisattva, should simply adopt the Hinayana precepts wholesale. Are there no *Mahayana* precepts in Mahayana Buddhism? Saichō, for his part, stressed the simplification and the internalization of the precepts. Give up all these restrictive forms! he said. Keep the precepts simple but realize them within yourself! Saichō's precepts, unlike the fussy, restrictive precepts of the past, were simple, but he strictly enjoined that they should be carried out in practice. And in this connection he laid stress on heartfelt confession (*zange*). Moreover, he did not require a large gathering of monks for an ordination ceremony. He called for the presence only of the ordination master. To the disciple about to be ordained, he advised only that one should make the Buddha himself fully present at the event and address one's vows directly to him. He remarked with disapproval that few monks at present were actually keeping the precepts, and he held that observance of the precepts was really to be vowed to the true Buddha within one's own heart. For myself, I am sorely tempted to compare Saichō's understanding of the precepts to the understanding of the counterpart vows in Christianity. Christianity rejected as formalistic the religious rule of Judaism. It simplified the precepts, internalized them and then stressed confession. In Saichō's writings there are many passages which recall the New Testament.

The establishment, thanks to Saichō, of an ordination platform exclusively for the

administering of the Mahayana precepts exercised a decisive influence on Japanese Buddhism. From then on, Japanese Buddhism followed more and more clearly Saichō's lead toward simplification and internalization of the precepts. With Hōnen, the trend became decisive.

Hōnen held that anyone at all, even a person who had committed one of the Five Heinous Crimes (as traditionally defined in Buddhism), could achieve rebirth in the Pure Land if he simply chanted the Nembutsu, and that from there he could attain final buddhahood. Shinran put this teaching of Hōnen's into full practice by proclaiming publicly the principle that a priest such as himself should eat meat and marry. Naturally, even before Shinran many priests were secretly married. However Shinran, for his part, called them hypocrites. Pushing Hōnen's teaching to its limit, he created a new form of Buddhism which at first glance seems to dispense with the precepts altogether.

All this, however, simply advanced the effort toward simplification and internalization of the precepts which had been started by Saichō. Sure enough, Shinran stressed confession even more than Saichō. In that sense, I believe it is fair to say that Shinran succeeded still more fully to the Buddhism of Saichō than did Nichiren, even though Nichiren championed a revival of Lotus Sutra faith and a return to the Buddhism of Saichō. The fact that Shinran, unlike Hōnen, revered Prince Shōtoku as the founder of Buddhism in Japan, is also linked with his understanding of the precepts. Denying precepts meant that the distinction between monks and laymen would vanish, with the result that Buddhism could only take the form of lay Buddhism. No doubt that was the sort of reason why Shinran so revered Prince Shōtoku. The emergence of Shinran turned Japanese Buddhism decisively toward the denial of the precepts and toward lay Buddhism.

**c. Shinran's understanding of the Pure Land.** Let us now turn to Shinran's understanding of the Pure Land. This understanding naturally inherits the Pure Land tradition of Genshin and Hōnen. What, then, was the Pure Land faith of Genshin and Hōnen?

Please look at Fig. 8. It is a schematic representation of Genshin's Pure Land teaching. The region to the right of the Fig. 8 shows the six realms of transmigration: Hell, Starving

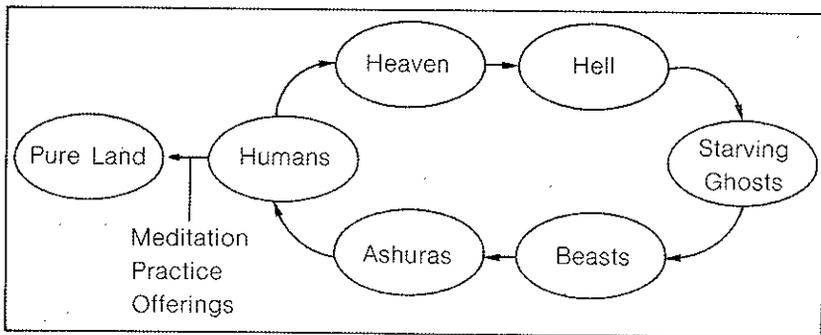


Fig.8. Genshin's Pure Land (*The Essentials of Salvation*).

Ghosts, Beasts, Ashuras (Warring Demons, or Titans), Humans and Heavenly Beings. To a greater or lesser degree, these are all realms of suffering. All living beings circulate among

these six realms in accordance with their karma: this is called "the cycle of rebirth among the six realms" (*rokudō rinne*). Involving as they do nothing but foulness and suffering, these six realms are also called the Foul Land (*edo*).

However, not all worlds are Foul Lands. There are also Pure Lands where Buddhas dwell. Far away to the west, in particular, there lies the best Pure Land of all, known as the Pure Land of Bliss (*gokuraku jōdo*). There dwells the Buddha Amida, the lord of boundless light and of infinite life. A person can go to that Pure Land when he dies. Genshin said, "Shun the Foul Land and seek the Pure Land."

What should one do to be reborn in the Pure Land of Bliss? One should of course invoke Amida by reciting the Nembutsu. In the case of Genshin, "Nembutsu" does not mean, as with Hōnen, the voiced recitation of the syllables *na-mu-a-mi-da-bu-tsu* ("Hail Amida Buddha"). Instead, it means the method described in the *Kanmuryōju-kyō* (Skt. *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra*): always to keep one's thoughts upon Amida's Pure Land so that in the end the Pure Land becomes fully real before one's eyes. Genshin's Nembutsu is one of contemplation. If the practitioner devotes himself to the practice of such a Nembutsu, then at death he will see Amida and Amida's Bodhisattvas coming to welcome him into the Pure Land. Emphasizing this Nembutsu above all, and treating other practices and offerings as secondary, Genshin taught that one can thus achieve Rebirth in the Pure Land.

Genshin's *Ojōyōshū* ("The Essentials of Salvation") was widely read and helped Pure Land thought to spread in Japan. However, with such a teaching only relatively few people could go to the Pure Land—certainly not a great many. Why? Because those able to perform such contemplation, practice and offerings were monks with special capabilities or powerful persons with wealth. For most people, the longing to be reborn into the Pure Land of Bliss could only remain unrealized.

However, I think Genshin's approach was close to that of Shakyamuni. The teaching of Shakyamuni, too, seeks to liberate from the round of birth and death those people whose karma does not allow them to escape from it on their own. In teaching the Four Noble Truths and the Twelffold Chain of Causation, Shakyamuni defined the cause of the round of birth and death as desire, and sought to liberate human beings from this eternal round

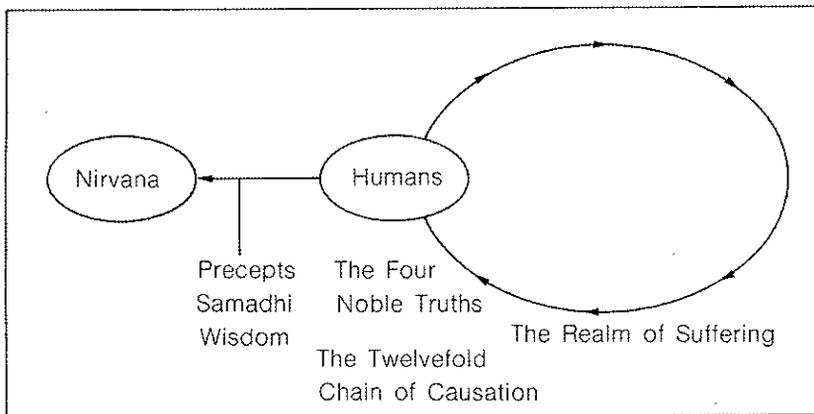


Fig.9. The World According to Shakyamuni.

by cutting off the root of desire. The method for cutting off this root was keeping the precepts, achieving right *sāmadhi*, or meditation and achieving right wisdom. Only a few persons, however, could actually do so in this way. Only these few could attain enlightenment and enter nirvana. The vast majority of people could only enjoy blessings conferred on them by these successful practitioners.

One can therefore say that Genshin's understanding of the Pure Land was close to the teaching of Shakyamuni. Hōnen's understanding, however, was entirely different. Hōnen studied diligently the writings of the Chinese Pure Land patriarch Zendō (Ch. Shan-tao). He boldly concluded that the three Pure Land Sutras and all other canonical writings on the Pure Land recommend, as the best method for attaining rebirth in the Pure Land, the voiced recitation of the Nembutsu. Thus, his interpretation of the Nembutsu was wholly unlike Genshin's. Hōnen held that the contemplative Nembutsu described in the *kanmuryōju-kyō* was simply an "expedient device" (*hōben*), and that all patriarchs from Shakyamuni himself down through Ryūju (Skt. Nāgārjuna), Seshin (Skt. Vasubandhu) and Donran (Ch. T'an-luan) had actually recommended the voiced Nembutsu. With respect to the issues of buddha-nature and the precepts, Hōnen's bold position clearly holds, in line with the Japanese tradition I have already explained, that all humans are endowed with buddha-nature and all may achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. Hōnen claimed that his teaching came entirely from Zendō, and that Zendō taught nothing but the voiced Nembutsu. I myself, however, note that Zendō actually understood the Nembutsu in several different ways. Hōnen selected out a single one of them and by so doing founded a new stream of Buddhism. Whether or not his interpretation was correct is debatable. What cannot be doubted, however, is that it resolved the complex dilemma from which the common people had been suffering in their relation to the Pure Land of Bliss. Hōnen's teaching quickly spread. Around it arose controversy and conflict unprecedented in the history of Japanese Buddhism.

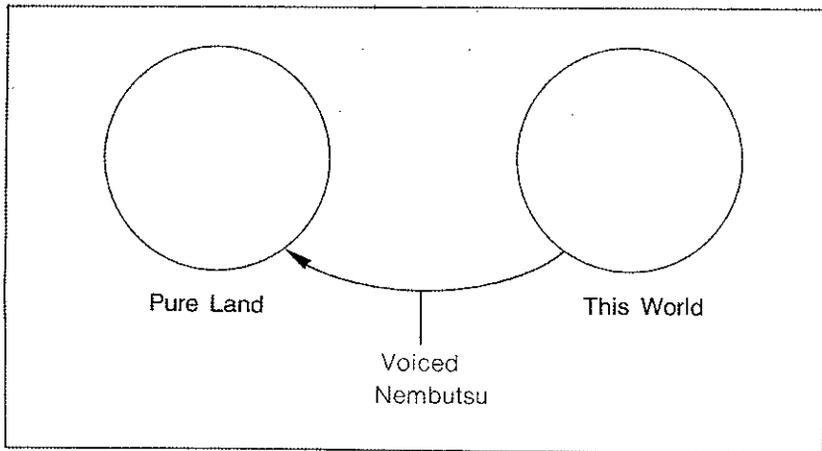


Fig.10. Hōnen's Pure Land (*Senchakushū*).

### The Pure Land according to Hōnen and Shinran

Hōnen's understanding of the Pure Land can be represented schematically as in Fig. 10. Here, all people can go to the other world thanks to the voiced recitation of the Nembutsu. The idea that all sentient beings can do so, however, is only weakly present.

Shinran consciously inherited Hōnen's Pure Land teaching and had no desire to put forward any idea of his own. He wrote in his *Tannishō* ("Lament on Error") that if his master Hōnen had led him astray, then he himself was quite content to go to hell. Yet despite Shinran's protestations that he was no more than a loyal disciple of Hōnen, a comparison of his major work *Kyōgyōshinshō* ("Teaching, Practice, Faith and Enlightenment") with Hōnen's major work *Senchakushū* ("A Choice of Passages on Pure Land Faith") reveals a great difference in thinking between the two men.

Where does the difference lie? For myself, I believe it is in Shinran's concept of the "two types of dedication on merit" (*nishu ekō*), Shinran wrote at the beginning of his chapter *Oshie no maki* ("On the Teaching").

"Respectful reflection on the Shin Pure Land Teaching will show that there are two kinds of dedication of merit." The first is "dedication of merit toward rebirth [in the Pure Land]" (*ōsō*) while the second is "dedication of merit toward return [from the Pure Land]" (*gensō*). It is in the dedication of merit toward rebirth, that there is true teaching, practice, faith and enlightenment.

In other words, Shinran himself stated that these two kinds of dedication of merit are central to Shin Pure Land sect thought. The two are *ōsō ekō* and *gensō ekō*.

Shinran here uses the term *ekō* ("dedication of merit") in a special sense. *Ekō* means literally "to turn [something] toward." Ordinarily, it refers to turning (or dedicating) the merit of one's own good actions toward the salvation of oneself and of others. In Shinran's thought, however, the starting-point of this "turning toward" is not the individual practitioner but the Buddha Amida. Amida "turns" or "dedicates" his own merit so that all living beings can be reborn in his Pure Land and become buddhas. This is *ōsō ekō*. Then he "turns" his merit so that those reborn in this way can return to this world and work for the benefit others. This is *gensō ekō*.

The most outstanding difference between the thinking of Hōnen and that of Shinran lies in this matter of "dedication of merit toward return (from the Pure Land)" (*gensō ekō*). Citing many texts, Hōnen demonstrated in *Senchakushū* that anyone, no matter how great an evildoer, can surely be reborn in the Pure Land if only he will call the name of Amida.

Shinran too, in *Kyōgyōshinshō*, cited many texts to prove that the person who recites the Nembutsu will surely be reborn in Amida's Pure Land. However, if on one side (so to speak) *Kyōgyōshinshō* proves the validity of *ōsō ekō*, on the other side it proves the validity of *gensō ekō*. I believe, therefore, that the center of *Kyōgyōshinshō* is the *Oshie no maki* chapter just cited. There Shinran, quoting Donran's *Jōdoron chū* (Ch. *Chingtu-lun-chu*; "Commentary to the 'Treatise on the Pure Land'"), seeks to demonstrate that once a Nembutsu practitioner has been reborn after death into the Pure Land and become a buddha, that practitioner is absolutely required to return to this world and act for the benefit and instruction of others.

This position is consonant with the central principle of Mahayana Buddhism itself. Mahayana Buddhism is the Buddhism of the bodhisattva. The practice of the bodhisattva

is to perform beneficial actions for the sake of others (*jiri rita*). Therefore Amida's Pure Land, where the Nembutsu practitioner is assured of rebirth, is a land of bodhisattvas who perform beneficial actions for the sake of others. The bodhisattva, once reborn into the Pure Land, cannot simply absorb himself in aesthetic enjoyment of it. Without the practice of *jiri rita*, the bodhisattva is not a bodhisattva at all. Consequently, the bodhisattva cannot simply linger forever among the pleasures of the Pure Land. He must be born back again into this world and work there to benefit and instruct all sentient beings.

The bodhisattva is therefore charged by the Buddha Amida with repeating forever the cycle of rebirth between this world and the other. Such are Amida's compassion and his unfathomable spiritual power. Shinran praised far more passionately than Hōnen the mystery of Amida's original vow to save all beings, no doubt because he felt Amida's power more keenly than Hōnen.

According to Hōnen, Amida has the mystical power to lead even the worst of sinners to the Pure Land, thanks to the might of the Nembutsu. For Shinran, however, Amida has the power not only to do that, but the doubly efficacious power to send the practitioner, once reborn into the Pure Land, back again to this world.

Shinran took this idea especially from Donran's *Jōdoron chū*. To me, however, it seems a little forced to extract this message from Donran's work. Instead, the idea really comes from Shinran's own deep reflection on the matter and represents Shinran's own understanding of the Pure Land.

This understanding can be represented schematically by figure 11. Shinran held much more positively than Hōnen that by the power of the Nembutsu all sentient beings can go to the other world; and unlike Hōnen, he affirmed clearly that beings once reborn into that other world return to this world again.

Considering this schematic diagram of Shinran's Pure Land thought, I notice something extraordinary: it corresponds to the view of the other world which I set forth above, and which the Japanese have no doubt held continuously since Jōmon times. As understanding of the Pure Land evolved from Genshin to Hōnen and from Hōnen to Shinran, this understanding came closer and closer to the original Japanese view of the other world.

Let us consider Shinran's Pure Land thought in relation to the four phases (described above) of the Japanese view of the other world. In terms of phase (2), thanks to the development of Pure Land faith from Genshin to Hōnen, it became possible for all human beings to go to the other world. Then, in terms of phase (3), the Tendai doctrine on original enlightenment recognized the possibility not only for humans but for all sentient beings to attain buddhahood. Shinran, under the strong influence of this teaching, held that all sentient beings can be reborn in the Pure Land. In terms of phase (4), as Pure Land thought passed from Hōnen to Shinran, it acknowledged that thanks to *gensō ekō* there is a way back from the other world to this world.

With Shinran, therefore, Pure Land thought came closely to resemble the view of the other world which the Japanese had held continuously since the most ancient times. What does this mean? Is the resemblance fortuitous, or is there some connection between these two analogous views of the other world?

These two views of the other world are of course different in nature. The original Japanese view, which I analyzed above, assumes the family as its basic unit. When someone

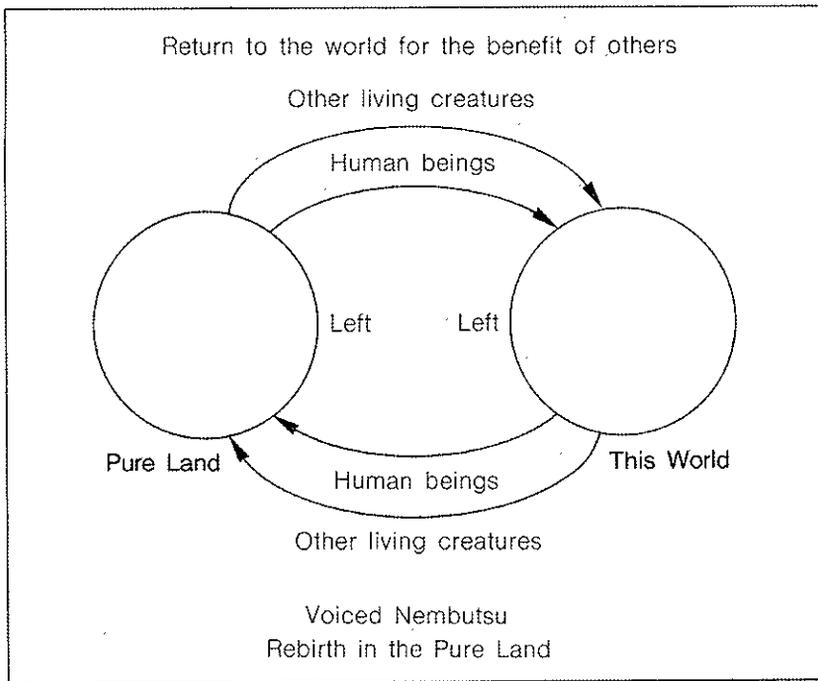


Fig.11. Shinran's Pure Land (*Kyōgyōshinshō*).

dies, that person's soul goes to the other world where it is welcomed by the ancestors. It remains there a while, then is born again as one of the deceased person's own descendants.

Shinran's idea of birth again into this world, on the other hand, assumes that this birth is the sublime fruit of bodhisattva practice. Someone who accepts Pure Land faith immediately experiences the joy of this faith and attains a position equal to that of the Bodhisattva Miroku (Skt. Maitreya) himself; for Miroku is destined at last to be reborn as the Future Buddha, the successor to Shakyamuni. Thus the Nembutsu practitioner becomes a bodhisattva, goes inevitably after death to the Pure Land, and then returns to this world as a bodhisattva must in order to work for the salvation of all other sentient beings. This understanding of the other world has nothing to do with the family. It is unclear what sort of social organization may exist in the other world, but at any rate, Nembutsu practitioners gather there and then are born again, as such, into this world once more. So at least it seems. In this case, therefore, ties of religious faith carry far greater weight than ties of blood, in a manner appropriate for a world religion like Buddhism. Yet the cycle of going and return between this world and the next is the same in both.

Shinran said that when he died he wanted no tomb built for him; he said that his bones should simply be scattered in the Kamo River, in Kyoto. No doubt he meant that since he would surely go to the Pure Land, the corpse he left behind him would be meaningless. His attitude was astonishingly close to the original Japanese idea that being merely the cast-off husk of the soul, the corpse has no meaning at all.

### The rites of death and rebirth

Perhaps the most reasonable explanation is that the native Japanese conception of the other world naturally extended its influence to Buddhism and to Pure Land thought, to the point where someone like Shinran could develop a Pure Land doctrine unknown either in India or in China. At least, this is a plausible hypothesis. When a country accepts a new culture from abroad, it inevitably does so on the basis of its own, indigenous culture. That is, it accepts those elements of the new culture which are consonant with its native culture and rejects those which are not. Moreover, the new elements which have been accepted are often soon transformed into something quite different from the original.

Perhaps the Buddhism I have been discussing is a case in point. Not only did Pure Land faith, which never was central in India or China, become central to Buddhism in Japan, but a man like Shinran could propose a unique Pure Land faith in which a soul circulates constantly between this world and the other. Moreover, even the other kinds of Japanese Buddhism (beyond than Pure Land) became linked to the Japanese people through the rites of death. Surely this is because indigenous attitudes strongly influenced this great world religion which had come to Japan from abroad.

I have a particular reason for suggesting this hypothesis. As I said a moment ago, Japanese Buddhism is closely interconnected with Japanese Shinto. Each influenced each other, adopted elements from the other, and even came to believe that these elements had always belonged to it.

In the Heian period, the fusion of the two was particularly obvious. Both Saichō and Kūkai revered Shinto, and held that Shinto and Buddhism should coexist in harmony. Their ideas developed into the *honji-suijaku* interpretation of Shinto and Buddhism, according to which both religions share a common root. According to *honji-suijaku* thinking, the Shinto deities are simply local manifestations (*suijaku*) of the universal Buddhist deities (*honji*). Thus Shinto was buddhicized and Buddhism was shintoized. This shintoization of Buddhism was of course a process of transformation of Buddhism by indigenous Japanese religion.

The Pure Land faith which I am presently discussing arose on mountains like Mt. Hiei and Mt. Kōya. Mountains have always been the dwelling-place of the dead. Thus, Pure Land faith naturally became bound up with the indigenous religion. The best illustration of this proposition is the *Yamagoshi no Amida* ("Amida crossing the mountains") said to have been painted by Genshin. Pure Land faith is closely connected with the worship of mountains where the dead are believed to dwell. In Genshin's time, the place most devoutly revered as Amida's Pure Land was Kumano Hongū (one of the three Kumano Shrines on the Kii peninsula), situated in the mountains at the confluence of two rivers. Now, the confluence of two rivers, like the mountains themselves, had always been seen in Japan as a gathering-spot for the spirits of the dead. The people of the time venerated Kumano so deeply that they flocked there in an endless procession of pilgrims which was often compared to a procession of ants. The starting point for the pilgrimage was Tennōji (now in modern Osaka), a sacred spot which since long before Buddhism had been connected with worship of the setting sun.

The Pure Land teaching of Hōnen was an effort to restore to its pure Buddhist form a Pure Land faith which had become inextricably fused with the native religion. However,

when Buddhism, having fused for a time with native religion, returned at last to itself, it did so by unconsciously assimilating this native religion into itself. Such, at least, is my own understanding. It was Pure Land priests who adopted into Buddhism the funeral ceremonies which originally had been performed by the native religion; and perhaps native religious thinking crept undetected into Shinran's own style of Buddhism. As far as I can see, once Buddhism and Shinto had fused with the indigenous religion, then in the process of separating again they switched roles.

Because this sort of Pure Land faith became the mainstream of Japanese Buddhism, rites for sending off human souls to the other world, as well as funeral and memorial rites, came under Buddhist sway. However, even after having been robbed of the rites of death by Buddhism, the native religion which survived in the form of Shinto kept as its own special preserve the rites of rebirth. That is why most present-day Japanese leave the rites of death to Buddhism and the rites of rebirth to Shinto. Funerals and memorial services are jobs for Buddhist priests, while weddings, births, and the growing-up ceremonies for children three, five and seven years old (*shichi-go-san*) are jobs for Shinto priests. Thus the modern Japanese unconsciously leave death and life to Buddhism and Shinto respectively. Here again appears the pattern which I cited above in connection with the original Japanese conception of the other world and with the Pure Land faith of Shinran. Please see Fig. 12.

It was the great ethnologist Yanagita Kunio who had the sharpest insight into this

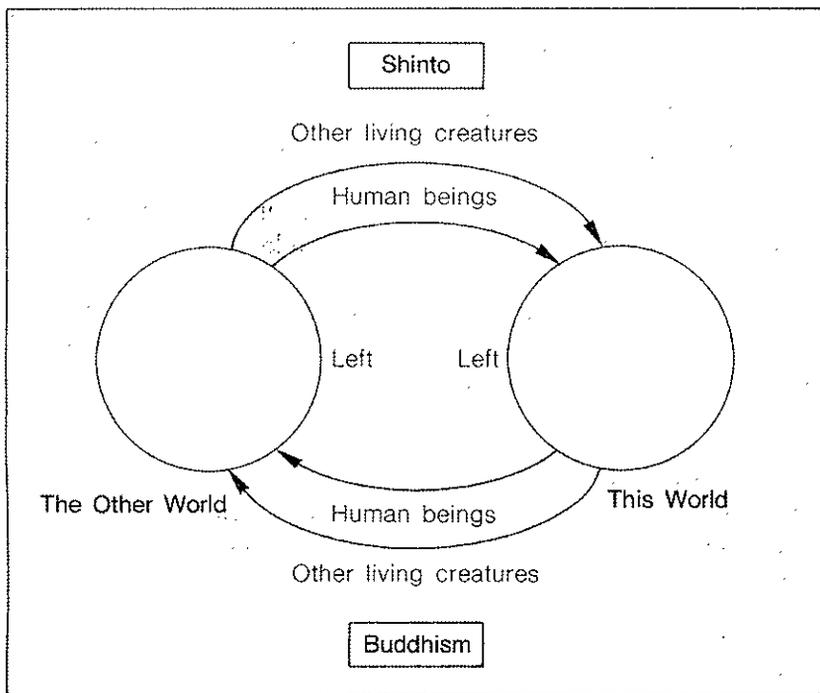


Fig.12. The Everyday Religious View of the Japanese People.

Japanese understanding of the other world. He pointed out that this understanding embraces two conflicting views. The first of these is the Buddhist view of the other world, according to which human beings go after death to Amida's Pure Land of Bliss, countless billions of leagues away to the west. The other view is that of the indigenous religion, which holds that human beings return after death to the sky. Yanagita suggested that although superficially the Japanese believe the former, in reality they believe the latter. The Japanese themselves do not seek to resolve this contradiction, but simply allow the two views to coexist in parallel.

Moreover, Orikuchi Shinobu showed clearly in his unusual novel *Shisha no sho* ("The book of the dead") that worship of the sun setting between two mountains (a symbol of death in Japan long before Buddhism) became the foundation for Japanese Pure Land faith.

If it was the indigenous Japanese religion which thus caused Buddhism, a world religion, to change, and which produced a Buddhism of the sort espoused by Shinran, then how should we appraise this phenomenon? Buddhism, like Christianity, is a world religion, and in that sense can be called universal. Native Japanese religion, on the other hand, can be called thoroughly particular. If so, might one not say that Japan nativized the universal religion of Buddhism, particularized it, and in that sense turned it into something inapplicable to anywhere else in the world?

#### THE MEANING OF THIS CONCEPTION OF THE OTHER WORLD IN MODERN TIMES

Before coming to this conclusion, however, we must ask one more question. What sort of position does this conception of the other world occupy in world religion at large, and what significance does it have?

To answer this question properly, one should compare in detail the ways in which the other world is conceived by all the other religions worldwide: Buddhism for example, Christianity, Islam, the religions of ancient Sumer or ancient Egypt, the religions of the peoples of Southeast Asia or of the American Indians, and many others. What we need in fact is to study these religions as meticulously as possible, to define clearly the points on which they resemble each other and the points on which they differ, to ponder deeply their relationship to one another, and so accurately to place the Japanese conception such as I have explained it in its proper world context.

A project like that would no doubt require the concerted labor of many scholars, not only philosophers like myself and scholars of religion but ethnologists, cultural anthropologists, archaeologists, historians and linguists—scholars from many different countries and academic fields who could work in common toward this single goal.

Were such a project possible, it could reveal the development of human religious consciousness without the slightest prejudice in favor of one religion or another, and thus make a tremendous contribution to human culture. It might even help to resolve the many troubles which religious conflict has caused in the past of mankind and which such conflict still causes today.

The International Research Center for Japanese Studies plans such a study of Japanese culture in a worldwide context, with special attention to comparisons and the relationships between cultures. For myself, I mean to take up comparative research on the Japanese conception of the other world as the theme of one of the group study seminars at the Center. However, the Center has only just been started. It will be several years at least before any results emerge from such an effort. All I can do for the moment is to propose a theory of my own.

This is my theory. The Japanese view of the other world, of which I have spoken, is a primordial one, formed probably in prehistoric times. It seems to me that the stage at which mankind first conceived the existence of the other world represents intellectually, a great leap forward; and that a fairly precise conception of the other world had already come into being several tens of thousands of years ago. I believe, moreover, that for a long time this conception of the other world was common to all mankind.

I see the Japanese conception of the other world as being the primordial conception of the human race. Why? Because it differs from the conception of the other world proper to the religion which developed after the rise of urban civilization—something which itself has been called a world religion—in that it lacks any distinction between heaven and hell, any notion of judgment after death, and any notion of karma or retribution. Surely the other world such as I have described it came into being first. Then the ambitions and desires of living human beings were projected onto it, ideas of the judgment of souls and of karmic retribution built up in their turn, and only in the end did there arise the distinction between heaven and hell.

If so, then the original Japanese conception of the other world arose in the old stone age and still survives as a conception which may well have been once shared by all mankind.

There is still room for debate over whether this conception, which had a decisive influence on Japanese religion, really is a vigorous survival of mankind's primordial conception of the other world, one which apparently existed already in prehistoric times. However, the proposition that it is such a survival agrees with the existence among primitive peoples, according to Eliade, of the myth of eternal return; and with the statement by Professor Lévi-Strauss a moment ago that the aesthetic sensibility of the Japanese has its roots in the Jōmon period or in the old stone age. In other words, the theory that the original Japanese conception of the other world has existed since prehistoric times actually is fairly well confirmed.

If this is so, then the original Japanese conception of the other world is not just Japanese at all, but once was universal. However, it was lost with the appearance of agricultural and pastoral civilization, and with the ensuing rise of urban civilization. Now it chances to survive only in Japan which long preserved its hunting and gathering culture, in the teeth of the overall trend of history, and in fact kept this culture intact at a deep level even after adopting rice paddy field culture.

Even if all this is true, however, what significance does this excessively primitive conception have for present-day civilization and society? Might it be no more than a wholly backward, unscientific superstition, and therefore without any value whatever for modern times?

That is at present the opinion of many educated people. "I'll die, go to the other world

and then come back again to this one?" they say. "Why, that's impossible!" Even I, with my modern education, felt that way a long time. But by now my opinion has changed a little.

I feel the need to take a double view of civilization. Often I have pondered the significance in the history of western, indeed world thought, of a thinker like Claude Lévi-Strauss and the principles of structuralism. And I have concluded that the value of structuralism may well lie in the way it allows us to take a comprehensive view of human civilizations. The West itself has had such thinkers in the past, for example Schopenhauer or Nietzsche. Their ability to take a double view of civilization was then taken over—despite undoubted differences between them—by Spengler, Toynbee and Jaspers.

The discovery made by Claude Lévi-Strauss, however, is that the culture of people hitherto despised as backward or primitive contains hidden within itself a cognitive structure which is just as intricate and just as detailed as that of the advanced civilizations. He has found, I believe, the eyes with which to take a comprehensive view of civilization. That is to say, he considers history both from the standpoint of the present and from the standpoint, so far distant in the past, of prehistoric times; and thus he acquires the eyes to see civilization from both points of view. If the first eyes I spoke of can be said to allow a comprehensive view of space, those second eyes can be said to allow a comprehensive view of time.

I believe that we need now to take a comprehensive view of civilization. What I mean is that now, when human civilization is in grave danger, it will be impossible to live through this danger with only a single, "one-eyed" view of the world.

Perhaps I ought not to talk about my own philosophy here. Yet surely even those who sing the praises of modern civilization cannot fail to acknowledge the following points.

The conception of the other world which I have been describing contains two essential ideas.

The first is the idea that all living creatures are fundamentally one, and that the communal relations between them are vitally important. As I have already explained, in the original Japanese conception of the other world, and also in the Japanese Buddhist idea that "mountains, rivers, plants and trees all achieve buddhahood", which no doubt sprang from it, there is an awareness that all living things are fundamentally one.

Hitherto, scholars of religion have called this way of thinking "animism" and have treated it as characteristic of the religion of primitive peoples. I wonder, however, whether their judgment is fair and accurate. Certainly, civilization has tended to deny this attitude any validity. In the first stage of urban civilization, in Sumer and ancient Egypt, there appeared many gods who were half man and half beast. Ancient Greece had the owl-goddess Athena and told of how Zeus had taken the form of a swan. Gradually, however, the gods became human. Then trans-human or super-human deities with human traits came to be worshipped both in the West and in the East. Thus, from the standpoint of the world religions which so stress the powers of man himself, the idea that plants, animals and humans are one naturally appears to be a childish superstition.

For myself, however, I suspect that this ancient conception contains in latent form the scientific principles revealed by modern biologists ever since the time of Darwin. Why? Because it is clear now that living creatures were not created one after another by God, as

the Old Testament claims, but were born from the great, advancing flow of life; and that life itself is born from the movement of the whole universe. At bottom, then, a scientifically correct view is inherent within animism, and the idea that "mountains, rivers, plants and trees all achieve buddhahood" agrees with the understanding of life arrived at by modern science.

Furthermore, there surely has never been a time when the idea of the community of all living beings—plants, animals and humans—was so vitally needed as today. This idea does not stress only, as most people assume, the peaceful coexistence of plants, animals and humans. Rather, it stresses the proposition that humans kill and eat many plants and animals, and that these plants and animals are killed to become human food. In order to live, humans must kill many plants and animals, and consume them as food. Since plants and animals must be killed and eaten by humans, it is right for them to be worshiped by humans as deities. Humans, plants and animals, while having this mutually antagonistic or contradictory relationship to one another, need also a deep community between them. Here resides the profound ecological wisdom of those people who have continuously preserved a hunting and gathering way of life.

Civilized people, on the other hand, have forgotten this ecological wisdom. They grasp only the antagonistic aspect of the relationship between mankind and nature, or between mankind, plants and animals. Their understanding has been that the progress of civilization requires the subjugation of nature by man. Agricultural and pastoral civilization, and the urban civilization that arose from them, are based precisely on that sort of principle—with the result that in areas where urban civilization has been long established, the forests have been destroyed and nature has become desperately impoverished. When modern scientific and technological civilization enters into such a relationship with nature, the level of destruction is inevitably multiplied tens and hundreds of times.

As far as I can see, this sort of evolution of civilization has reached its terminal point. The destruction of nature and the environment are a terrible historical fate, and if the process continues as it is going, then the fear that mankind faces extinction will cease to be what it has been in the past: a fear felt only by certain isolated thinkers.

Together with animism, the conception of the other world which I have been discussing contains an idea which is absolutely vital for our time. That is the idea of the continuity of life, or of life's eternal, cyclical return.

Living individuals inevitably die. But thanks to the death of the individual, the seed of life lives on. This much is obvious from any examination of the natural world. How does the parent produce the child, nurture the child and then die? Recent biology has much detailed knowledge to give us about how, despite the sacrifice of the individual plant or animal, the seed of the organism lives on.

Such is the teaching which this conception of the other world has for us. Although the individual dies, the soul lives on in another individual. One need only substitute the word "gene" for "soul" to talk about the laws of heredity. One might say that the child is the parent reborn. But since as long as the parent is alive this is not rebirth in a strict sense, one might instead lengthen the interval of rebirth and consider that genes are transmitted from grandparents to grandchildren, or from great-grandparents to great-grandchildren. Such a principle would then be simply an expression in somewhat mythical terms of the finest and

most recent results of modern science.

On the other hand, it is when notions of retribution and the judgment of the dead, or the distinction between heaven and hell are superadded to this conception of the other worlds that the resulting complex of religious ideas parts company with scientific truth and becomes impossible for those who have faith in science to believe in. For me, it is surely this high-class religion which has ended up divorcing the primordial conception of the other world from living reality.

I believe there is a need for us to accept the idea of life's eternal, cyclical return as the truth of life itself, and to see human beings too as belonging to that same stream of life. Such a world view does not see the world from the standpoint of man, but man from the standpoint of the world—in other words, from the standpoint of the movement of the cosmos itself. Mankind must reconsider the anthropocentric, egocentric position it has taken hitherto, and situate itself in the great movement of the cosmos, in the eternal cyclical movement of all life. To that extent, I believe that the primordial world view I have described may contribute a great deal to the future development of human thought. No doubt my talk of eternal cyclical movement will remind many people of Nietzsche's concept of eternal return.

Nietzsche's concept of eternal return certainly does resemble in some ways this conception of the other world. As Heidegger remarked, however, Nietzsche's eternal return is the conclusion, or culmination of the philosophy of the self first developed by Descartes. Perhaps one can say that Nietzsche needed the concept of eternal return in order to establish the present as eternal and the will as absolute. What I have been discussing is the reverse. It is a concept which has been proven by modern science and which apprehends man's existence within the ever-flowing stream of life. How this concept differs from Plato's concept of the thousand-year cycle, the Hindu concept of metempsychosis or the Confucian concept of "changes" as expounded in the *I-ching* ("Book of changes") is a subject I would be happy to pursue on another occasion. For the present—in this age of ours when, thanks to the progress of science, human history can be considered in a far wider perspective than before and when one can hardly be optimistic about the future of civilization—I will only repeat that a mode of thought which allows one to reconsider human civilization from the vantage point of its origins is surely of the greatest significance.