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# The Japanese Trinity: Japanese Interactions with Buddhism

For a curious observer, a trip through Tokyo, the world's most populous and ostensibly secular metropolis, can reveal many subtle sights. A bowl of fruit and some coins at a miniature shrine on an alley curb. A procession of dancers leading huge shrines carried by festive crowds. Bad fortunes, recently purchased, tied up to posts at a temple. Or hopes and prayers written on papers and tied to a tree. On the subway home you may encounter a man who mournfully recounts the loss of Japanese religion. Or a young man who laughs that nobody cares about religion anymore. But Japan is not a nation without a religion, as many observers, Japanese and otherwise, may claim; rather, it is a nation so tightly bound to religion that the religion itself has become invisible.

It is difficult to understand the Japanese relationship with religion from a Western perspective. According to some figures, around 100 million Japanese believe in Buddhism, and 100 million believe in Shinto.[1] Yet the population of Japan is only about 120 million. The implication that there is room in the Japanese spirit for more than one belief system challenges the notion, familiar to those steeped in monotheistic traditions, that religious belief must be exclusive. In fact, the nature of Buddhism and Shinto allow for this multiplicity of belief, as we shall see. But the picture is actually even more complicated than that.

The statistic measuring "believers" is really just a count of Shinto shrine and Buddhist temple membership, and membership is just a count of the people who use their services. The

[1] Kreiner, "Modern" 418

number does not necessarily represent those who are "true believers" of the respective faiths. Other polls of religious commitment show that 63% of the population has no real religious commitment.[2] However, although they may not be "committed," roughly 70% of the population "feels a connection" with Shinto and Buddhism.[3] Josef Kreiner posits that attitudes toward religion change with age. In their youth, Japanese feel apathetic toward religion, but grow interested in Buddhism as they grow older, with Shinto remaining on the fringes of belief.[4] But this does not reconcile the low commitment numbers of Shinto (roughly 2%) and Buddhism (peaking at 27%) with the large membership numbers.

Despite the high participation at religious sites, Japan seems, as G. Cameron Hurst points out, "a nation without a religion".[5] Religion has no apparent place in public life, and society appears to be becoming more and more secularized. But a more complete picture comes with an in-depth look at the interplay of the major ideologies of Japan, which shows what has been called the "irreligious religiosity" of Japan.[6]

In reality, religion and society have become tightly interwoven. Religious practice is not necessarily religious belief, but rather a part of common social practice.[7] Although these cultural rituals have a religious origin, they are not understood by the population to be "religious," but simply social norms. Japanese culture and Japanese religion combine to form one whole, which is then passed down through generations through acculturation. One affects the development of the other; it is artificial to try to separate the two, although the West has continually (and

[2] Kreiner, "Modern" 420
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Hurst 301
[6] Ibid.
[7] Reader & Tanabe 256

understandably) tried to do so. In fact, the Japanese word for religion, *shūkyō*, is a relatively modern invention, coming about only in the 19th century as a way of defining Japanese religion to a Western audience.[8] By the time this term was defined, the mixture of ideologies that comprise the Japanese religion had been blending for centuries; separating them is a difficult task.

As Fumie Kumagai notes, "Religion becomes a part of multi-religious cultural orientation in Japanese society where multiple numbers of religions and ideologies coexist simultaneously in people's minds".[9] It is a mixture of religions, in which the individual takes the useful aspects of each system. Reader and Tanabe refer to this as a "folk religion," as the focus is on practicality and assisting the life of the common person.[10] Influential religious thinkers such as Ninomiya helped to define the ways in which the religions could be combined. Ninomiya's goal was to combine Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism into a unified whole that would act as a system of guiding principles for the Japanese people. His metaphor, which echoes those medicinal images used by the Buddha, was the pill: when medicines are combined correctly, it is impossible to separate them, as "In a real pill all the ingredients are thoroughly blended so as to be indistinguishable".[11]

Nevertheless, the medicines are combined in different proportions: "One spoon of Shinto, and a half-spoon each of Confucianism and Buddhism," according to Ninomiya.[12] Shinto is regarded as the leading ingredient of Japanese religion. Kumagai believes Shinto "probably lays

[8] Reader 13
[9] Kumagai
[10] Reader & Tanabe 261
[11] Earhart 125
[12] Earhart 125

the greatest claim to the mind of the Japanese people",[13] and Kreiner points out that because Shinto was controlled by the state, it transcended religion and became the "fundament of life of the Japanese people".[14] Confucianism forms another ideological guide, although it is not an actual religion, per se. Despite not being an active ideology today, it has still had a lasting effect on the Japanese worldview: it is responsible for the Japanese notions of filial piety and hierarchy.[15] Buddhism makes up the third part of Ninomiya's religious pill; Kreiner calls it the "religion of the people," exerting a "formative influence on Japanese folklore and culture".[16] Its full functions and effects on society will be seen later.

Ninomiya summed up his prescription in this way: "Shinto is the way which provides the foundation of the country; Confucianism is the Way which provides for governing the country; and Buddhism is the Way which provides for governing one's mind".[17] Each serves a different role in the complete Japanese life. In this way they are connected; the shogun Hideyoshi recognized them as different aspects of one religion, stating, "to know Shinto is to know Buddhism as well as Confucianism".[18] They are linked by a common abstract divinity.

On a more practical level, the Japanese, apart from those few devoted to a particular religious association, draw on Buddhism and Shinto for different purposes at different points in life. The popular saying is "born Shinto... die Buddhist." Recently, Christian marriage can be added to the phrase. Shinto tends to be associated with birth and development; Buddhism, with

[13] Kumagai
[14] Kreiner, "Modern" 422
[15] Kumagai
[16] Kreiner, "Impact" 71
[17] Earhart 125
[18] Ibid 123

death and ancestor worship.[19] Christian weddings are chosen mostly for the style, and do not imply any Christian religious faith. Even supposedly exclusive sects, such as Nichiren and Pure Land, commonly have followers who approach religion as an amalgamation.[20] Reader concludes: "Religious belonging and the practice of religion are not primarily conditioned by notions of belief".[21]

The tendency of the Japanese to pick and choose the religion that suits their pressing needs explains how the figures can show multiple professed belief systems. But it does not reconcile the low commitment numbers. This is instead explained by the unconscious nature of Japanese religiousness.

According to Hurst, Japanese generally claim not to be religious.[22] Yet, as the data suggests, temple and shrine membership is high, donations continue to pour in, and festivals are popular affairs. People even actively participate in the New Religions, more recent offshoots of Shinto and Buddhism. As previously noted, religious practice, publicly at temples and shrines as well as privately in the home, plays a large role in contemporary life. Yet this practice is performed mainly by "nonbelievers." Hurst concludes that "Japanese attitudes toward religion are highly pragmatic," but their "metaphysical speculation is weak".[23] They do not have a convincing factual command of their religions; they may not know what sect their temple adheres to. Ian Reader also relates an anecdote in which a colleague states he does not even

[19] Hurst 303
[20] Reader 8
[21] Ibid. 9
[22] Hurst 302
[23] Hurst 302

know what temple he belongs to, since no one in his family has died yet (and thus would not have required its services).[24]

Reader points out that these non-believing believers may even perform standard religious rituals incorrectly, having learned the incorrect behavior from their parents.[25] Children may learn the ritual without learning its meaning.[26] For example, worship at a Shinto shrine involves clapping one's hands to get the attention of the *kami*, or gods. This is not necessary at Buddhist temples, as the Buddha is always watching, yet it is often practiced, mistakenly.[27] This shows not only the tendency to fail to discriminate between the two religions, but also the acculturation of a common religion in practice. The real meaning behind the ritual is somewhat lost; it is the completion of the ritual as demanded by society that is important. And completion of ritual does not require any kind of special religious knowledge or professed belief in the religious figures being worshipped. In fact, the vast majority do not hold such beliefs: voluntary self-analyses of the membership profiles of some sects of Shinto and Buddhism indicate true belief – active engagement in religious study and professed belief – to be around 4% generally.[28]

Figures like that place legitimate religions below even pop superstition in terms of belief, especially among young people. Supernatural belief rose steeply after the 1970s, partly as a response to pop-culture phenomena such as *manga* depicting ghost stories. According to Kreiner, belief in *yakutoshi*, a year of bad luck determined by destiny, peaks at 72% for women in their 30s; 20% of women believe in fortune telling.[29] This is not to say that the conglomerate cultural

[24] Reader 4
[25] Ibid. 1
[26] Ibid. 13
[27] Ibid. 2
[28] Ibid. 9
[29] Kreiner, "Modern" 428

religion is in danger – its ingraining in culture is quite strong, as we will see (and if all else fails, Buddhism has a *manga*, too).

Japanese Buddhism features some elements that make it distinct from other flavors of Buddhism in the East. For one, monasteries tend to be run as family businesses. The state-imposed ban on clerical marriage was lifted at the end of the 19th century, and monks were encouraged to marry. At the present time, approximately 90% of the Buddhist clergy in Japan are married.[30] This is certainly quite a departure from the original teachings of the Buddha, and even a departure from Western monasteries. Inheritance of temple property goes down the male line of the father-abbot, although unrelated disciples can assume control through adoption practices.

Second, Japanese Buddhism is divided into a number of sects of varying size and importance. Different sects have different foci, and thus appeal to different people. According to Hurst, the traditional breakdown along old class lines is that Tendai and Shingon were for the nobility; Zen was for samurai; and Pure Land was for commoners.[31] Although the reality was more nuanced, these sects certainly had aspects that would appeal to the different classes.

The most important for consideration for cultural purposes is Zen. Daisetz Suzuki explains the origin of Zen as the result of the Chinese addition of practicality to Indian thought.[32] The Japanese inherited this practical Buddhism when it made the transition from China. Suzuki describes Zen as "discipline in enlightenment".[33] Zen practice is to avoid verbalization, even in teaching. One must come to enlightenment for oneself. What words are used tend to be cryptic;

[30] Jaffe 1
[31] Hurst 309
[32] Suzuki 3
[33] Ibid. 5

but the goal is not to unravel the meaning of the riddle. Part of the purpose is to remove the overactive intellect from action. Practice and mindfulness are essential, but puzzling over answers to unintelligible teachings only distracts. Zen even encourages not following the written words of the Buddha, but instead focusing on inner experience and "intuitive understanding".[34]

William Bodiford describes two commonly held views of Zen: first, that there is a spiritual connection between Zen and artistic expression.[35] The focus of Zen in this view is self-expression. The other view is more firmly rooted in Buddhist tradition, and contrasts the first somewhat. In this view, the goal of Zen is enlightenment, not expression, and monks meditate in a group setting in monasteries to achieve that goal.[36] But both types of Zen share a focus on discipline and difficult practice for self-achievement. Artistic products of Zen, such as the tea ceremony (*cha-no-yu*) and swordsmanship (*kendo*) require intensive study and diligence. But the soteriological practice of Zen is extremely rigorous as well: Bodiford quotes the Zen thinker Dogen's philosophy that "every action, from cooking to use of the toilet, must be performed as an expression of living enlightenment".[37] It was clearly no small thing to practice Zen. This also relegated enlightenment to the domain of monks only; laity would be hard pressed to achieve it. Reader explains this further, showing that since enlightenment is a condition, it must be sought not just through meditation but by all actions in life.[38] Every task, from cooking to cleaning to religious practice must be pursued with strict mindfulness. Discipline is critical as well –

[34] Ibid. 218
[35] Bodiford 147
[36] Ibid. 148
[37] Bodiford 149
[38] Reader 81

cleaning and chores must take place even if they do not appear necessary. As we will see later, this relates to common Japanese practices (cooking, e.g.) and attitudes about cleanliness.

This is a somewhat idealized view of Zen, whereas the reality is that most Zen monks do not spend the majority of their time in meditation. Buddhist practice in Japan now mostly revolves around funeral rituals and related practice. Reader explains the lack of meditation facilities as the Buddhist drive for compassion and helping others,[39] while Bodiford explains that the majority of temple funds are gained through funeral services.[40] Whatever the case, it is clear that in this pragmatic society, even monks are slave to practice.

Other important sects of Buddhism include Nichiren Buddhism and the offspring it spawned (notably *sōka gakkai*) and Pure Land Buddhism. Nichiren Buddhism, based on the teachings of Nichiren, reduce much soteriological practice to chanting of a mantra. Nichiren was fairly unique in his denunciation of other sects of Buddhism as heretical. Pure Land Buddhism arose as a response to many natural disasters, including fires and famines. Common people were able to use faith in Amida Buddha as a comfort. The goal was to be reborn in the Pure Land – a western paradise – and thus saved from the violent nature of Japan.[41]

A brief look at Japanese history will illustrate how Buddhism and religion in general came to be so tightly integrated with culture. Buddhism has a long tradition in Japan, first arriving in the middle of the 6th century CE. It was initially sponsored by the nobility, who saw its potential to strengthen the state. Plus, its soteriology was clearly in the favor of nobility. While the Mahayana taught that anyone could follow the bodhisattva path, this was really only

[39] Ibid. 83
[40] Bodiford 150
[41] Hurst 308

realistic and attainable for nobility. To strengthen the state, priests were chosen from aristocracy. But the court also integrated Buddhism in to itself, modeling court rituals on a Buddhist basis.[42] Buddhism was actually well-suited to attachment to government. In addition to the extensive mythology of the Buddha advising kings, the Lotus Sutra united government and religion.[43] So Buddhism very quickly upon its arrival in Japan became linked to secular society

Additional ties to government came with the introduction of Christianity. In order to combat the spread of this new foreign religion, the state used Buddhist temples to track people by requiring all families to register with them.[44] In this way religion and government combined, each having an influence on the other. This also instituted the marriage between Shinto and Buddhism officially and cemented the importance of Buddhism in the lives of the Japanese people.

However, the recent history of Buddhism shows a religion separating from government and facing new challenges. The restructuring after World War II removed state and military control over Buddhism.[45] Individuals gained a new freedom to choose religious practice and commitment. Buddhism too was free from the bindings of the state, but this freedom did not prove immediately beneficial, as it faced new difficulties. Much of the bombing Japan suffered over the course of the war focused on urban and populous areas; many temples were destroyed. Additionally, land reform instituted by the post-war occupation decreased Buddhist holdings and removed much of the economic base from Buddhist temples.[46] According to Kreiner, this

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid. 309
[45] Kreiner, "Modern" 417
[46] Ibid. 421

exposed the "weak points within its tradition, e.g., the inheritance of temples within families".[47] A former strength in the structure of Buddhism became a debilitating weakness. The soteriology of Buddhism proved an obstacle as well: the scope of the disaster that beset Japan could only be attributed to the accumulation of severely negative *karma*. The situation seemed hopeless; traditional Buddhism, unable to meet the spiritual needs of people, declined and was thought dead.[48]

Buddhism's initial attempts to stay alive and relevant proved ineffective. There was an attempt to consolidate the disparate sects, but unity proved elusive.[49] Buddhism did not respond well to the dire straits it was put in, and the result was its increasing societal irrelevance in post-World War II Japan. New Religions began to fill the role traditional Buddhism once served. But Buddhism was ultimately saved by some shifts in thought and practice. A new era of criticism led to a demythologization of Buddhism. However, far from being crushed under the callous heel of secular culture, Buddhism gained strength from this new analysis. Myths of the Mahayana were already accepted as such. Acceptance of this mythical status allowed metaphorical interpretation – the Pure Land, for example, may not be an actual land, but an "awakening of the spirit," which "has a character of land".[50] And far from detaching entirely from spirituality, those who rationalized could still take comfort in the mystical aspects of the religion.[51] The effect was to reconcile secular science with spiritual religion, forming a unified foundation for a Japanese worldview. Buddhism also exhibited new flexibility in practice: attractive Christian traditions,

[47] Kreiner, "Impact" 71
[48] Ibid.
[49] Kreiner, "Modern" 421
[50] Kreiner, "Impact" 76
[51] Ibid. 75

such as hymns and Sunday worship, incorporated in to some Buddhist practice.[52] Buddhism's new ecumenical attitude opened communication with other religions and fostered compatibility. Finally, engagement in social services, such as hospice care, along with the prevalence of Buddhist funerals helped Buddhism to stay in the lives of the Japanese people.

Buddhism's historical ties to Japanese culture have produced an ingrained practice that the majority of the population follows, whether conscious of its religious nature or not. Carrying over from the days of state-controlled Buddhism, Japanese families associate themselves with a particular temple, and not with a sect.[53] Japanese in fact may not be aware of the sect to which their temple belongs, and thus tend to be ignorant of the sects and the differences between them. Families commonly contain two foci of worship in the house: a Shinto *kamidana* shelf, and a Buddhist altar, called a *butsudan*, used for ancestor worship (typically of the male line).[54] Nathan describes a typical *butsudan* in a rural home as housing candles, food offerings and photographs of ancestors.[55] The prevalence of *butsudan* is no longer as great as it once was; with the migration to urban areas in the 1920s *butsudan* tended to stay in a families rural homeland, where family tombs reside as well.[56] Thus the incidence of *butsudan* in metropolitan areas falls around 40% of households, with that figure in rural areas rising as high as 75%.[57]

Ancestor worship thus helps maintain connections between urban and rural areas even in modern society. Many Japanese return to their homelands, particularly on holidays, to visit ancestral graves and reaffirm those connections. Of particular note is New Years, during which

[52] Ibid. 73
[53] Hurst 303
[54] Kreiner, "Modern" 426
[55] Nathan 49
[56] Ibid.
[57] Kreiner, "Modern" 427

families may desert their urban homes for their hometowns. New Years is a time of overt religious celebration, with many visiting temples where 108 bell tolls ring out.[58] According to Kreiner, 56% of Japanese visit sacred places on holidays such as New Years.[59] The analog of New Years in the summer is *obon*, and it serves much the same purpose, with 81% of the population visit family graves during the festival to make offerings.[60] Known as the "festival of souls," *obon* is the primary holiday of ancestor worship, with families making food offerings and remembering their forbears.[61]

Japanese may regularly visit temples and shrines outside of holidays as well. To make a small donation and prayer is a quick way to accumulate some good karma. Reader and Tanabe describe temple usage as a cultural habit, with Japanese turning to religion in times of need, for convenience, and to meet obligation.[62] Additionally, they describe in detail the ways in which Buddhism is used as a tool for pursuing desire for worldly benefits. They relate a story in which a woman, having failed to find a husband through other societal means and reaching the unmarriageable age of thirty, turns to a Shinto shrine for recourse.[63] By making a small donation to the temple, and making some semi-ascetic sacrifices to show proper devotion, the woman and her family were able to continue their search for a husband with the implicit blessing of the *kami*.

This entirely practical use of religion for one's own benefit raises some immediate questions. Does this not go against the Buddhist ideal of renouncing worldly desires? In answer, Reader and Tanabe point out that desire is not necessarily contrary to Buddhist teaching. Sutra

[58] Nathan 59
[59] Kreiner, "Modern" 428
[60] Ibid.
[61] Kumagai
[62] Reader & Tanabe 256
[63] Ibid. 178

Buddhism in general has a conspicuous focus on personal benefit, promising immediate gain upon the performance of the prescribed worship. Japanese Buddhism certainly already has an established tradition of promising worldly benefits, ranging from the mystical to the practical, often for very simple actions: the *kozen gokukuron*, for example states, "whoever chants [a White Parasol] spell cannot be burned by fire and cannot be drowned in water."[64] Others promise karmic retribution in this life: the *nihon ryōi ki* tells a story of a monk who unknowingly kills an animal and is then punished by his own accidental death at the hands of the same animal after its rebirth.[65] Another story from the same collection shows a compassionate monk being saved from drowning by turtles he has previously freed.[66] These monks have benefited or suffered as a result of actions they performed in this life; they did not need to wait for a new birth to see the effects of karma.

But this is not a uniquely Japanese phenomenon. The notion of benefits in this world actually goes back quite some time. A selection from the Great Pile of Jewels sutra collection, composed around the 1st century CE, describes the fortunate effects of learning the *bodhisattva* way and seeing the *tathagata*. By seeing the *tathagata*, one gains ten purities of bodily action, ten purities of vocal action, and ten purities of mental action.[67] These benefits range from "melodious speech" worthy of the Buddha, to even temperament, to no longer needing to void urine or excrement. These are simple extensions of the original tenets of Buddhism – right action, right speech, right thoughts, etc. – but the progression is already becoming clear. The

[64] Lopez 322
[65] Ibid. 26
[66] Ibid. 28
[67] Lopez 359

methods have become the goals, with additional bodily benefits. Then these simple bodily benefits expand and extend outside the body to material gain, culminating in the legitimacy of worldly desire in a Buddhist setting.

So desire, while possibly contrary to the original teachings of the Buddha, does not actually oppose Buddhist doctrine as it has since been established. Yet another level of justification exists as well, in the explanation of how donated money transmutes to karma for the donator. The temple or shrine to which a person donates money does not bestow the blessing; rather the resident deity (*kami* or Buddha) does, as a reward for the piety shown.[68] The divinity is petitioned to grant their wishes; as Reader and Tanabe explain, "To satisfy one's own desire is greed; to have a Buddha satisfy one's own desire is a blessing".[69] And once this blessing is received, in the form of an amulet or talisman, it can be displayed publicly without shame or guilt.[70]

In this way the Japanese use temples for personal fulfillment. But the other great purpose Buddhism serves is service to the dead. Funerals in Japan are predominantly Buddhist, and performing these rituals has become the main function of the sangha. Bodiford explains that Zen monks generally stop the ostensible main practice of Zen – meditation – as soon as they leave their training temples and focus instead on "lay-oriented ceremonies".[71] The main ceremony they perform for the laity is the funeral ritual, and this has become the primary source of income for

[68] Reader & Tanabe 183
[69] Reader and Tanabe 81
[70] Ibid. 181
[71] Bodiford 149

Buddhist temples.[72] So ironically, the main function of Zen Buddhist monks, which they depend on for continued existence, has taken them away from the main Zen practice of meditation.

This is not to say that Zen is dead in Japan, however. Japan and Zen have had centuries to intermingle, and a touch of Zen can be seen wherever one looks. As Suzuki points out, "Zen has entered internally into every phase of the cultural life of the people".[73] Its touch is most evident in the realm of high culture. Tamura Yoshiro shows that Buddhist influence (specifically the notion of the impermanence and emptiness of life) on poetry as early as 700 CE.[74] Suzuki shows how the Zen-inspired "thrifty brush" technique in painting evokes peace, contentment and submission to nature by only using as many brush strokes as are absolutely necessary to represent the subject.[75] Reader points to such definitive Japanese cultural products as calligraphy, martial arts, and tea ceremony as Zen progeny.[76]

An examination of the tea ceremony shows how Japanese culture, and thus the Japanese people, adopted Zen principles. The ritual, which may appear complex to the untrained observer, actually reflects the core Zen principle of simplicity. Earhart explains: "The elimination of the unnecessary is achieved by Zen in its intuitive grasp of final reality; by the art of tea, in the way of living typified by serving tea in the tearoom".[77] The goal is the elimination of anything extraneous, becoming closer to nature; therefore every detail must be approached with concentrated mindfulness. Even minute details, such as the design and construction of the room,

[72] Ibid. 150
[73] Suzuki 21
[74] Tamura 50
[75] Suzuki 22
[76] Reader 80
[77] Earhart 198

are important. It is about "stripping off all the artificial wrappings humanity has devised".[78] Everything in the ceremony is connected with nature, with the purpose of sublime appreciation, respect and enjoyment. Likewise, the individuals performing in the ceremony must take on these tones as well, respecting themselves and the other participants, and enjoying the company as well as the setting in nature.[79] While the ritual may appear complicated, it is simply a sequence of exact actions. Once the actions are mastered, they are just tools of focus for Zen-like mindfulness.

At least, this is the goal. Earhart notes that *cha-no-yu* has turned in to something of an elitist occasion, with the atmosphere of competition over who can demonstrate furthest mastery of the art.[80] But despite its transfiguring by modern society, the tea ceremony still shows remarkably close ties to Buddhist thought. And modern society is not necessarily moving along an anti-Buddhist trend. Timothy Craig shows how *manga*, Japanese comics (which are read by all ages), can actually exhibit Buddhist values. Popular stories show heroes gaining magical powers not by some preordained destiny, but by extensive training and dedication.[81] A hero's spiritual strength is the basis for his success. This not only closely parallels the Zen philosophy of diligent focus, but also contains an interesting connection to the esoteric goal of gaining superhuman skills. Furthermore, at least one *manga* has been created that explicitly connects with Buddhism – Tezuka Osamu's *Budda*, which tells the story of the Buddha (with a few liberties taken) in a style unique to Japanese pop culture. Just the existence of the *manga* reveals

[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid. 200
[80] Earhart 199
[81] Craig 15

much about Japan's relationship with religion. It was not a taboo subject, showing the uncontroversial nature of Japanese Buddhism. It was not created by a zealot, but rather by a legend in the *manga* field, which shows the implicit acceptance of the religion. And the injections of new characters, plot elements and humorous anachronisms show the malleability of the legends in Japanese minds.[82] Such a reaction is unthinkable in a society dominated by one of the great monotheistic religions. The translation of the Buddha's story in to pop culture language makes sense; Buddhism is a living culture and should accept a modern interpretation. Additionally, *manga* is extensively read in Japan, and would thus make a great vehicle for showing the essential Buddhist message. Mark Wheeler MacWilliams suggests Tezuka must have felt the need to promote the ideals of compassion to an "increasingly atomized, competitive, and materialistic society".[83] It can be seen, however, that in many other ways Japanese character has not strayed very far from its origins in Buddhism.

According to Suzuki, "It is impossible to speak of Japanese culture apart from Buddhism, for in every phase of its development we recognize the presence of Buddhist feeling in one way or another".[84] Moreover, the Japanese are not even conscious of it. These cultural values are passed down generations through family and society itself, which transmits character through strict cultural norms. Nomura Naoki shows how values are instilled in school, giving the example of *minna nakayoku* – "everyone in harmony" – which is emphasized in elementary schools.[85] *Minna nakayoku* encourages working together and putting the wellbeing of others

[82] MacWilliams 112
[83] MacWilliams 136
[84] Suzuki 217
[85] Nomura

before your own, two essentially Buddhist values. The group cleaning of schools by students seems a direct carryover from Zen monasteries. This is a kind of institutionalized values training, and it reflects principally Buddhist ideals.

But how did these principles arrive in society? We have already seen how the ties to the state helped to bring Buddhism in to prominence in society. However, there are more subtle factors at work. Suzuki points out the connection between Zen and the *samurai*, a seemingly unlikely pairing that proved quite influential. The *samurai* adopted certain Zen principles: first, to not look behind once a course is embarked on, and second, to treat life and death indifferently.[86] Zen discipline was certainly also appealing; both *samurai* and *sangha* engaged in diligent, intensive training. And Zen is legendary in its application to martial arts, especially the swordsmanship practiced by the Japanese warriors. The *samurai* are certainly impressive and influential figures in the history of Japan, and undoubtedly served as inspiration through the generations even past their extinction.

High culture also influences character, and Suzuki focuses on this connection extensively. He attributes most Buddhist influence on character and culture to Zen, and argues that other forms of Buddhism have mostly been relegated to the spiritual sphere.[87] Character is linked to culture, so a nation's character will be defined in part by the culture in which it is steeped. So a religion that fosters the arts has an indirect effect on the culture's character. Nichiren and Shin, argues Suzuki, produced no artwork and so had little cultural effect in this way; Tendai and Shingon produced artwork and were thus culturally accessible; but Zen by far

[86] Suzuki 62
[87] Suzuki 21

had the biggest impact due to its active fostering of the arts.[88] Monks were artists and scholars, and not only produced artwork but also sought it out from foreign cultures; at one point, Zen monasteries were "exclusive repositories of learning and art".[89] Apart from the cultural trickle transmitted through art, Buddhism spread from monk to aristocrat, as nobles hungry for artwork willingly submitted to Zen discipline.[90] Thus through artwork also Zen exerted influence on Japanese character.

Suzuki outlines some of his interpretations of Zen-inspired character. In addition to the utter simplicity of the brushwork already described, Japanese art features asymmetry and imbalance. The lack of perfection is actually perfection. Suzuki explains, "this has been one of the favorite tricks of Japanese artists – to embody beauty in a form of imperfection or even of ugliness".[91] Suzuki goes on to theorize that Japanese are not thought to be intellectual, because the accepted intellectual tendency is toward balance, whereas Japanese "incline strongly towards imbalance".[92]

The most obvious character of traditional Japanese art is its connection to nature, and here we can see the cultural connections immediately. As discussed previously, the Zen connection with nature is expressed through simple brushwork and natural scenes. Typical scenes show man framed in harmony with a powerful and domineering nature. In *haiku*, a form of Japanese poetry, nature is a required ingredient. The effect is to situate the scene described in the context of sublime nature. This has resulted in a reverence and love for nature, and modern

[88] Ibid. 29
[89] Ibid. 28
[90] Ibid. 28
[91] Suzuki 24
[92] Ibid. 27

Japanese society still reflects this. A favorite activity in spring is viewing cherry blossoms, which bloom only briefly then fall off the tree and die, a perfect illustration of the Buddhist notion of impermanence. The Japanese love and awe of nature is perfectly inline with Zen; perhaps both can be seen as a means of coping with a nature that is beyond all human control. Japan, as an island, has its boundaries defined by the ineluctable sea. It has suffered from earthquakes, fires, tsunami, and other severe natural disasters. And in the modern era Japan has experienced manmade disasters – atomic bombings, fire bombings, etc. – that are nature-size in scope. For Japan, nature is inescapable, and Zen and the national character reflect this.

Of course, many dispute Suzuki's idealized view of Zen as the center of the Japanese cultural universe. Robert Sharf dismisses almost entirely Suzuki's argument as a tool of "Japanese apologists".[93] Far from being the root from which all Japanese culture grows, Zen is rather a justification for that culture. Suzuki was writing at a time of intense Japanese imperialism; Sharf argues that his championing of Zen was simply an explanation for those who would elevate Japanese culture above all others for their own means.[94] This glorification of Zen and "Japaneseness" was useful to Buddhist temples as well, which experienced oppression under the Meiji Restoration quite unlike the promotion they enjoyed with the Tokugawa. The notion that Zen was critical in the development and maintenance of the character of Japan was an important defense against its threatened destruction.[95] Moreover, Sharf argues that Zen had little to do with the cultural development of Japan, citing, for example, the modern invention of the

[93] Sharf 3
[94] Ibid. 20
[95] Ibid. 3

term *bushido* in conjunction with the rise of Zen proselytization.[96] In the artistic realm, Sharf suggests that Chinese culture is the primary influence, and Zen monasteries acted merely as a conduit for its entrance in to Japan.[97] As such, the ultimate source of such cultural phenomena as *cha-no-yu* and brushwork must lie in the Mahayana and Confucianism.

But as we have already seen, picking apart the ties between Buddhism, Confucianism, Shinto and Taoism is quite difficult; they have had thousands of years to intertwine. The task of discerning exactly what was primarily a Buddhist invention and what was Confucian may be impossible, and is most possibly irrelevant here. Once Ninomiya's pill is in the stomach, determining the origin of the effects becomes difficult. We have already seen many aspects in which Japanese culture and the idealistic view of Zen agree; it may be the case that one influence overshadows the other, but it certainly could not be the case that one had no effect at all. The answer to the question of origins is likely somewhere in between Suzuki's shameless Zen advocacy and Sharf's admonitions. It is unlikely that Zen has had no cultural impact on Japan. Likewise, bearing in mind Sharf's warnings, we cannot assume that Zen is the basis of everything Japanese. But the irrepressible fact is that Buddhism, Confucianism, Shinto and secular society have coexisted for centuries. Their medicines have been finely ground and mixed, and the resulting pill is one that modern Japanese still take today.

In its quest for modernization Japan has certainly undergone many radical changes; but Buddhism's ties to Japanese character seem fixed, for the time being at least. Kreiner notes that Japan strives to maintain its cultural heritage at the same time it presses for furious

[96] Ibid. 6
[97] Ibid. 32

modernization under western influence.[98] Reader and Tanabe remark on the curious sight of Shinto shrines on the roofs of business buildings, showing Japan's active mixture of the modern and traditional.[99] Passing through Tokyo one can find, nestled between two skyscrapers, well-maintained traditional shrines that are actively used. As far as the future of faith, Kreiner is inclined to conclude that "Japan is the most secularized country in Asia. Its religious position does not allow any optimistic future prognosis".[100] However, Japanese religious practice remains high, and it is clear that religious-based values are still propagated through the culture, whether the average Japanese believes in the Buddha or not. The prognosis of doom is a popular one, with many Japanese lamenting the extinction of Japanese religion.[101] But the religion they are nostalgic for may not have existed in the first place, and certainly not within recent memory. And while the western notion of religion points to a void in Japan, it is likely that even as Japan continues its rush to secularize and adopt western values, the Japanese trinity of Buddhism, Confucianism and Shinto will remain silently at its core.

[98] Kreiner, "Impact" 71
[99] Reader & Tanabe 203
[100] Kreiner, "Impact" 83
[101] Reader 5

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