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Japanese Spiritual Resources and their Contemporary Relevance

No other major tradition in the world has manifested attitudinal ambiguity, pluralistic diversity, and ideological complexity as much as the Japanese tradition. First, as far as attitudinal ambiguity is concerned, Japan's religious population always far exceeds its actual population. For example, in the *Religious Year Book for* 1966 published by Japan's Ministry of Education, the total religious population was 139,607,789; if the religious group not officially recongnized and counted by the Ministry were also included, the number should reach 155,905,502, which seems logically impossible, considering the fact that the entire actual population of Japan in 1966 was just about one hundred million. The explanation for this seemingly impossible statistics is that it is customary for Japanese believers to be associated with more than one religion. One may belong to both Shinto ("The Way of *kami* or gods") and a particular sect of Japanese Buddhism; one may be associated with a newly founded religion, which is yet to be officially recognized, in addition to one's Shinto and Buddhist beliefs: one may also loosely belong to several religions without being fully aware of any apparent doctrinal conflicts. If Japanese Confucianism, which constitutes the basic pattern of individual behaviour and social decorum in Japan, is also regarded as a religion, as most Western observers do, then Japan's religious population will have to be even higher than the number officially given. Thus, in general, the majority of the Japanese simply do not have a particular and clearly defined religion of their own, and their ambiguous or nondiscriminating attitude toward religious belief often leads them to an extremely pragmatic or utilitarian conclusion that because all religious beliefs are somehow beneficial to man in one way or another, they are equally good and welcome. As the title of Professor H. Neill McFarland's book *The Rush Hour of Gods* (1967), subtitled *A Study of New Religious Movements in Japan*, suggests, a new god can be created each day to satisfy

the religious needs of the ordinary Japanese—certainly a most interesting religious situation from the standpoint of monotheistic believers.

The title of McFarland's book *The Rush Hour of Gods* also illustrates well the pluralistic diversity of Japanese religions. (Remember that I am speaking of Japanese religions, for there is no Japanese religion in a singular form.) In contrast to the expression "religion in a pluralistic society," which we often use to characterize the American religious situation, the expression "pluralistic diversity of religions in a homogeneous society" seems most appropriate to describe the Japanese religious scene, for Japan is a relatively homogeneous nation symbolized by the lasting imperial system and containing hundreds of religions, the number of which may increase from year to year. Only in Japan we can see a kind of "museum of all the religions that today exist in the world," according to the well-known Japanese scholar Kishimoto Hideo (I might add that Hinduism is the only major religion that is nonexistent in Japan.) Shinto seems to represent the original spirit of the Japanese tradition; but it never has a system of dogmas, and can be classified in various ways, such as Primitive Shinto, Shrine Shinto, National Shinto, and Secretarian Shinto. Japanese Buddhism is equally pluralistically diversified. Its major sects include the Shingon sect founded by Kukai, the Nichiren sect (which is the only Japanese Buddhist sect named after its founder), the pure Land sect of Honen, the Shin sect of Shinran, the Ji sect of Ippen, Japanese Zen divided into three major sub-sects, Rinzai, Soto, and, Obaku, and so on and so forth. And, of course, there are Japanese Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. Japanese Christianity, Japanese Islam, not to mention hundreds of New Religions, the names of most of which even the Japanese themselves can hardly remember. It is, indeed, no exaggeration to say that there exists a blossoming of conflicting beliefs from all of the world's principal religions. Here we can also find another—the third-idiosyncrasy of Japanese religions: ideological or doctrinal complexity.

In most cases, Japanese religions not only co-exist with one another without involving any serious confrontation, but often mutually influence and assimilate each other to form a syncretic religious ideology at the expense of the original purity and integrity of each religious tradition. Examples are many, such as the syncretic approach taken by most of Japan's New Religions from the late Tokugawa era to the postwar period today, the Christian elements of Hirata Shinto in the

Tokugawa era, the mixture of Buddhism and Shinto in terms of what is called *shinbutsu shugo* ("mutual assimilation of Shinto gods and buddhas"), the Shinto elements of Japanese Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, and so forth. The ideological complexity and syncretic flexibility of Japanese religions reflects the uniqueness of Japanese mentality, which generally prefers sentimental harmony to intellectual analysis, emotive suggestiveness to rigorous thinking, expressional elusiveness to clear assertion—in short, heart (Jap. *kokoro*) precedes and overwhelms the mind or brain. The Japanese language can be said to illustrate most appropriately the non-rational, sentimental elusiveness of Japanese mentality and expression. In an idiomatic Japanese sentence, a grammatical subject is often lacking, interrogation often means assertion, and a clear-cut distinction between "yes" and "no" is almost a linguistic taboo. The emotive overtones of the Japanese language and syncretic elusiveness of Japanese mentality not only helps to explain the ideological complexity, sometimes even confusion, of Japanese religions, but also account for the basically aesthetic-transformative nature rather than the philosophical or rationalistic nature of almost all Japanese thoughts, in contrast to the Indian and Chinese traditions. Generally speaking, the Japanese tradition is relatively weak in philosophical thinking, though extremely profound in religious aestheticism. Some Japanese scholars have even suggested that, unlike the Indian, Chinese, or Western traditions, Japan has never produced any genuine philosophical thinker—with the exception of Zen master Dogen (1200-1253) of the Kamakura period—prior to the appearance of Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945), the first creative philosopher in modern Japan who was said to express Japanese Zen in rigorous Western philosophical terms.

There have been very few exceptions to the ideological syncretism in the history of Japanese philosophy and religion, perhaps no more than four or five: Original Shinto as purified by Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) in the Tokuragawa era, the Zen philosophy of Dogen, founder of the Soto Zen school, the Pure Land thought of Honen (1133-1212), the Jodoshinshu ("True Doctrine of Pure Land") of Shinran (1173-1262), and possibly the Ji ("Time") thought of Ippen (1239-1289). In particular, Dogen, Honen, and Shinran were what the historian Arnold Toynbee calls "creative minorities" whose respective contributions to the formation of Kamakura Buddhism, the zenith of Japanese Buddhism, are immeasurable, and their respective influences on the development of Japanese spirituality have been indelibly enor-

mous. Despite the present-day popular appeal of Japan's New Religions, such as Sokagakkai (Value Creation Society) and some other Japanese religions claiming a large number of believers, there is no doubt that Japanese spiritual resources are best represented by Original Shinto, Japanese Zen (especially Dogen Zen), and Pure Land Buddhism (especially that of Shinran called Shin ("True") Buddhism). Many Japanese scholars would also mention Nichiren as one of the representatives—even the best representative—of Japanese spiritual resources; but I do not wish to add Nichiren to the list, for the simple reason that Nichiren's ethno-centric or over-nationalistic approach to Japanese Buddhism tends to hurt rather than promote the quality of Japanese spiritual resources. In the following I would like to speak briefly of the spiritual resources of Original Shinto, Pure Land Buddhism, and Dogen Zen and of the contemporary-relevance of Japanese spiritual resources as a whole.

Primitive Shinto, or, better, Original Shinto, originated in ancient Japanese animism, shamanistic practice, ancestor worship, and other primitive religious elements. Some scholars have suggested that Japanese Shinto has its root in Chinese-Korean folk religions in the pre-Confucian period. But, since we are still in the dark as to the origin of the relatively homogeneous Japanese race, it is difficult to see to what extent the Chinese-Korean elements have contributed to the formation of Primitive Shinto. Original Shinto itself has no established doctrines or dogmas of its own; it was in ancient Japan no more than a primitive way of life before the importation of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism from China via Korea. Ideologically, Original Shinto is almost a *tabla rasa*, containing no more than the mythological account of the Japanese islands—giving no account of the rest of the worlds—and the origin of the Japanese nation and its history under the succeeding legendary emperors, descendents of the sun-goddess *Amaterasu-o-mi-kami* ("the great heaven-illuminating *kami*"). The sacred records of Original Shinto consists of *Nihonshoki* ("Chronicles of Japan") and *Kojiki* ("Records of Ancient Matters"), both of which were written partly in order to give a political and ideological justification of the imperial system; this system has since the 8th century become the unifying symbol of the entire Japanese race and nation. It can be said that no other religious tradition is as ethnocentrically and nationalistically oriented as Japanese Shinto. Since the Meiji Restoration Shinto had been gradually transformed into a state cult

called *kokka shinto* ("National Shinto") until the end of World War II. It is interesting to note that during the Meiji Restoration Shinto was put forth as the non-religious Japanese way above all other religious traditions; this political manoeuvering allowed the central government to promote Shinto as the only prestigious tradition, giving the highest guiding principle for the orientation of the Japanese educational system. On the other hand, that Shinto was officially interpreted as a non-religious national cult helped the Japanese government, in the making of the constitution, favour no particular religion but guarantee religious freedom for all.

The original and authentic Japanese approach to life and the world show certain definite traits that are of particular relevance with regard to the impact of religions on the worldly concerns of man. First of all, as far as the question of particularity and universality is concerned, National Shinto represents the particularity while Original Shinto as what Motoori Nobunaga called *kami nagara no michi* ("the Way of the *kami* as it originally is") can be said to reflect the universal aspect of Shinto in terms of (1) universal divinity, (2) spontaneous naturalness, (3) primitive simplicity, (4) creative vitality and productivity, (5) infinite all-embracingness, and (6) aesthetic purity. First, the entire universe is conceived as full of *kami* or gods; the heavenly sphere of the universe alone is believed to have as many as eight million of gods. You are *kami*, and I am *kami*, particularly after we die. Even animals are *kami* in a manner very close to some Hindu notions in the same line. Shinto and Hinduism are very similar in respect of their popular appeal. Second, the Way of the *kami* is from the beginning spontaneously natural, with not the slightest human intervention; here Shinto comes close to Taoism, which can be characterized as the natural way. Third, Shinto's emphasis on primitive simplicity as its original "root" can be seen from the fact that the Ise Shrine, which is the oldest and supposedly most sacred Shinto shrine, has to be rebuilt every twenty years in the most primitive fashion, according to an age-old Japanese custom. The Japanese are very nostalgic about that primitive simplicity, the Way or the Root. In this respect it may be quite similar to Taoism. Fourth, Shinto mythology is full of gods whose names and activities often involve birth production, one good example being the Sun-goddess and her brother competing with each other in the show of their divine power by way of producing sons and daughters from the various parts of their bodies

This Shinto-oriented passion for creative vitality and productivity deep-rooted in Japanese mentality is, perhaps, reflected in the enormous output of Japanese companies like Honda and Toyota. Fifth, that Shinto originally is an ideological *tabla rasa* and involves no dogmas of its own implies its infinite all-embracingness. That is to say, Shinto has an enormous capacity to assimilate or integrate foreign religions or ideologies for its own development. Historically, this has been the case, for all ideology comes from Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity etc.; hence the formation of Buddhist Shinto, Confucian Shinto, Christian Shinto, and so on. Finally, in the primitive simplicity and spontaneous naturalness of Original Shinto is strongly reflected Japanese aesthetic purity. The authentic aesthetic-transformative nature of the Japanese tradition can be traced back to its root, Original Shinto, which has undoubtedly exerted a tremendous influence on the making of Japanese aesthetic consciousness as well as on Japanese artistic creativity. One typical example is Shinto's influence on Zen in relation to the fine arts. The delicate aesthetic taste of the Japanese can be found not only in Shinto and Zen, but also in Shingon Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, and many other Japanese religions.

I shall make only a passing reference to Japanese Buddhism in this context. One of its significant expressions is Dogen Zen which places the emphasis on self-effort, sitting in meditation (*zazen*), a kind of universal posture in Zen. For Dogen sitting in meditation is not a mere personal means or effort in order to attain *satori* (enlightenment); it is rather an outward manifestation of enlightenment itself. Dogen's unique view is that every moment we spend in meditation is itself liberation. Long before Heidegger, already in the 13th century Dogen spoke about being and Time. In fact, one chapter of his masterpiece *Shōbōgenzō* (The Eye-treasury of the True Dharma) is entitled *Uji*, meaning "Being-Time": Being is Time, and Time is Being. Dogen says: "What is called *uji* means that Time is already Being and Being is already Time." Dogen stresses that each and every moment is the *nirvāṇic* moment of the ever-presencing of Buddha Nature. He says thus: "'If and when the moment comes' means 'the moment has already come.'" Dogen also stresses that impermanence or transiency of life is itself Buddha Nature, or that life-and-death (*saṁsāra*) is itself Nirvāṇa. One of Dogen's well-known expressions is: "To learn the Buddha Way is to learn one's self; to learn one's self is to forget one's self; to forget one's self is to be confirmed by all *dharmas*. To be confirmed by all *dharmas* is to effect the casting off

one's own body and mind and the body and mind of others as well." In Dogen Zen, single-minded sitting in meditation (*shikantaza*). casting off both body and mind (*shinjin datsuraku*), subitaneous manifestation of enlightenment (*genjōkōan*) are all the same, disclosing the ultimate identity of cultivational practice and *nirvāṇic* liberation. Or in other words, the mind of initial aspiration for enlightenment, the attainment of enlightenment, and the path leading toward enlightenment are all the selfsame Way of the Buddha; they are ontologically and soteriologically identical. But the key factor which makes it possible is the Zen mind itself. Dogen says: "All *dharmas* are none other than the One Mind of Equanimity." He says further: "The practising Buddha loves no original enlightenment nor does he love initial enlightenment; he is neither nonawakened nor awakened." In short, Dogen's emphasis on the belonging-together of being and Time, on man's subitaneous realization of enlightenment right within the context of our everyday world, on the identity of life-and-death and *nirvāṇa*, on sitting in meditation as an outward manifestation of *satori* on the identity of practice and enlightenment, and on the equanimity of the mind are, religiously and philosophically, still very significant in our modern world. It is not difficult for us to see Dogen's contemporary relevance for not only the Japanese but all those who take a profound interest in Zen as well.

While Dogen Zen takes a *jiriki* ("self-power" or "self-effort") approach, Pure Land Buddhism, especially the Shin ("True") version of Shinran, is strictly a *tariki* ("other-power") religion, and represents another important aspect of Japanese spiritual resources. Pure Land Buddhism is very close to Christianity in many respects: it identifies Nirvana with Pure Land; it is rooted in the legend that Buddha Amida, who once made 48 Original Vows to save all karma-stricken beings from the ocean of suffering, can always bestow a divine grace upon those believers who recite "*Amidabutsu*" (Homage to Buddha Amida); and so on. Pure Land thought culminated in Shinran's Shin Buddhism in many ways. According to Shinran, the moment one recites Amida's sacred name one is already saved; he sometimes says that even the open recitation is not necessary, for all that is required is one's sincere faith in Amida's saving grace. Further, one's faith itself is a gift from Amida, not through one's own effort; all that the Pure Land believer can and shall do is to express his sincere gratitude to Amida's grace when he recites Amida's name. Shinran says, "For

the devotee the calling of Amida's name is not a religious observance because it is not done by his own design. It is not a moral deed since it is none of his own doing. As it springs wholly from the Other Power and surpasses all self-effort, I say that for the devotee the calling is neither religious observance nor moral worthiness." Based on the justification by faith alone, Shinran declares that all those who accept Amida's grace can be saved, including a wicked man. He says thus: " 'Even a virtuous man can attain rebirth in the Pure Land, how much more easily a wicked man!' But ordinary people usually say: 'Even a wicked man can attain rebirth in the Pure Land, how much more easily a virtuous man.' At first sight, this view may appear more reasonable, but it really goes quite contrary to the intention of the Other Power of the Original Vow. The reason is that since a man who does deeds of merit by his own effort lacks total reliance on the Other Power, he is self-excluded from Amida's Original Vow. But as soon as his attitude of self-effort is redirected and he dedicates himself exclusively to the Other Power, his rebirth in the True Land of Reward is at once assured." Since one's sincere faith alone justifies one's rebirth, one does not have to worry about what the Pure Land is—the moment the Pure Land faith is secured, that is the very moment of salvation! In spite of the essential difference between Shinran's Pure Land thought and Dogen Zen in terms of the *jiriki/tariki* distinction, they both seem to share a meeting point in terms of the believing mind (as faith or the mind of enlightenment), the identity of Nirvāṇa with the believing mind here and now in this very life, and the universal attainability of Nirvāṇa.

The Japanese spiritual resources as we have found in Shinto, Zen, and Pure Land Buddhism disclose to us a unique Japanese religious mentality which is apparent even today when the Japanse engage in interfaith dialogue or in social work or even in ordinary business enterprises. The creative vitality, infinite all-embracing capacity, and aesthetic purity of Original Shinto, the emphasis on sitting in meditation as the presencing of *saroti*, the identity of Being and Time as well as of life-and-death and Nirvana in Dogen Zen, and the emphasis on faith alone as Amida's gift, the identity of the moment of securing the faith and ultimate deliverance, as well as the emphasis on salvation for all without any self-effort or self-calculation—all these spiritual elements still have much contemporary significance for Japan and for the world today.