

The Civilizational Culture of Buddhism meets Japan's Particular Cultural Identity

Based on *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*
Hajime Nakamura
(University of Hawaii Press, 1964)

中村元「東洋人の思惟方法」
インド・中国・日本・チベット 第1-4巻
(春秋社)

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Religious Matrix #1: Faith or Practice?

Which is more important: what you believe OR how you live?

- Ortho-doctic 正教 - based on doctrine & belief; may be intellectual or faith oriented; proper understanding; Christianity (esp. Protestant), Japanese True Pure Land Jodo Shin, Japanese Nichiren/Lotus Sutra schools
- Ortho-practic 正行 - based on practice and ritual; proper performance of religious acts; Islam, orthodox Judaism, Brahmanism, most Japanese religion & “Funeral Buddhism”

The Buddha taught “right livelihood” (virtue 戒) based on “right understanding” (wisdom 慧) and “right awareness” (mindfulness 定)

Japanese Thought #1: Faith & Intuition

- The ethical logic and psychological focus on meditation in early Indian Buddhism gave way to more faith oriented and mystical practice in East Asian Mahayana Buddhism
- Japanese Buddhist thought is similarly “mystical” (e.g. the unspeakable truth of Zen, the “mantra” of the *Lotus Sutra*) in contrast to Indian and Greek thought which explores all logical propositions.
- Japan’s largest Buddhist groups are centered around faith: Jodo Shin (16 million), Jodo (6 m), Nichiren (3.5 m), Soka Gakkai (8 m), Rissho Koseikai (3 m) as opposed to Zen (4 m), Shingon (4 m), Tendai (1.3 m)

Religious Matrix #1:

Beyond or Within the World?

What should we be more concerned about: what happens after death/heaven/salvation OR how you find happiness and lead a good life today?

- Transcendentalism views the world as impure and sees the solution in “transcending” the world, usually through achieving heaven after death. Tendency towards social passivity and escapism. Indian religion
- Immanentism sees the world as either inherently good or as the only world, so that spiritual solutions are sought for in practical action and daily life. East Asian religion

The Buddha taught the “Middle Way” emphasized that happiness is leading a good life now, which will lead onward, refusing to discuss the afterlife.

Japanese Thought #1: Immanent, Intuitive, This Worldly

- “The Japanese are willing to accept the phenomenal world as Absolute because of their disposition to lay a greater emphasis upon intuitive sensible concrete events, rather than universals.” (Nakamura p.350)
- Logic, as based on a universal or ultimate form of principles, is not emphasized in Japanese language or thought, where intuition and emotion is primary.
- Vagueness (in gender, number, lack of personal subjects, etc.) is a hallmark of Japanese language and communication, which creates aesthetic beauty (e.g. haiku) through imprecise, open expression.

Japanese Thought #1: Immanent & This Worldly

- Ancient Japanese believed spirits (神 *kami*) reside in all kinds of things like mountains, rivers, forests, trees or stones → Shinto
- In mainstream Buddhism, enlightenment came to mean a transcendental state beyond the world. In Japanese Buddhism, especially Tendai, it refers to understanding things in the phenomenal world. *Honkaku Homon* 本覚法門 appearances of things in the phenomenal world are aspects of the Buddha. 本覚 = “innate enlightenment”, always present, sudden realization
- Dogen, founder of Japanese Soto Zen: “A single stalk of grass and a single tree are both the mind and body of us and the buddhas.”
- Nichiren felt the *Lotus Sutra* 法華經 was superior because of its recognition of the eligibility of the grass and trees to become buddhas.
- ❖ There is no sense that the natural world is cursed or gruesome as the Indians do in *dukkha* and *samsara* or the Abrahamic religions do in sin.

Japanese Thought #1: Immanental & This Worldly

- The Indian emphasis on the transcendental rejection of the world is seen in the value of the religious sage who is a beggar not involved in productive work. In East Asia and especially in Japan, work is seen as sacred.
- Zen monks traditionally grew their own food and built and repaired their own temples. The great Chinese Chan/Zen master Baizhang Huaihai 百丈懷海 said, "A day without work is a day without food" 一日不做一日不食
- Today, it is common that Japanese priests take typical secular jobs to earn income to support their families and livelihoods. Such salaried employment for monks is generally forbidden in all other Buddhist countries.

Religious Matrix #2: Impurity or Sin?

When someone breaks a moral or ethical code, we should be done? Is it essential for the person to confess, repent, and accept punishment? What is the best form of deterrent/ what is the most fearful result?: ostracization from the community OR going to hell in the afterlife?

- Impurity 汚れ is a breaking community standards and taboos, which may or may not be universally moral or ethical. Purification and ritual are required to re-establish purity. Ritual purity determines next life.
- Sin 罪 is a breaking of universal, transcendent truths and their moral and ethical norms 道徳. Confession 懺悔 and punishment or repentant acts 後悔 are then required. Change in individual attitude and conscience. Sin/Virtue determines fate in next life.

Religious Matrix #2: Impurity or Sin?

- “Universal” religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam) focus on sin and the maintenance of egalitarian ethics. “Tribal” religions (Brahmanism, Shinto) focus on purity and ritual acts to restore social order/community/“tribe”, which may be egalitarian or not.

The Buddha's Middle Way goes beyond both. He rejected the purity focused rituals of Brahmanism (early Hinduism). His teaching of karma as “intentional action” is similar to the sense of sin but rejects an external judgment by a creator God.

Japanese Thought #2: Emphasis on Impurity over Sin

- Shinto, like early Hinduism (Vedic Brahmanism), emphasizes impurity (of form) rather sin (of principle)
- However, as Indian thought and spirituality developed, purity became a metaphysical state of cleansing the soul (Upanishadic asceticism) or a psychological state of purifying the mind (Buddhist meditation & precepts) through disregarding form/the body (e.g. wearing rags, walking barefooted, begging for leftover food)
- Japanese spirituality has always held fast to physical cleanliness and purity (e.g. regular Buddhist spiritual practice of cleaning the temple 作務 *samu*) and aesthetic refinement (the fine arts of Zen, *ikebana*, *sado*, etc.).

Japanese Thought #2: This Worldly Salvation

- Early Shinto recognizes the intrinsic value of life in this world - the Japanese people as descendent of gods. Weak or vague sense of other world (あの世 *ano-yo*). There is little reflection on the transcendent possibility of the soul or spirit or on death or the afterlife, which seemed to not worry or cause fear in traditional Japanese. Death is a form of impurity.
- The classical six realms of Buddhist reincarnation are rarely recognized and even Amida's Pure Land becomes an ancestral realm. Karma as a metaphysical system of cause and effect and rewards and punishments is not an important belief. Buddhist funeral rituals are the means to a good afterlife.
- Japanese Buddhism does teach that the individual possesses transcendental or universal potentials, like nirvana or heaven or enlightenment, but many core Japanese Buddhist values -- like honesty, self-sacrifice 無私, harmony 和, repaying benefits to elders 報恩 – emphasize a collective social nexus. These values are rarely emphasized in Buddhism outside of Japan or East Asia

Japanese Thought #2: This Worldly Salvation

- In China, ancestor worship was tied to Taoism but in Japan it was tied to Buddhism, in part because Shinto's high regard for purity meant it did not want to be tied to death and funeral rites
- As “Funeral Buddhism” 葬式仏教 developed historically in Japan, the veneration of the Buddha, a universal or trans-national figure, and his relics (仏舍利) was replaced by veneration of one's own ancestors and their relics/ashes (遺骨)
- When a family member dies and receives a Buddhist funeral ceremony, they receive ordination as a monk/nun with a special name (戒名 kaimyo), are said to have attained Buddhahood (成仏 jobutsu), and become literally a Buddha (仏 hotoke) or ancestral spirit. The cause for “salvation” or a good afterlife is the proper performance of funeral ritual rather than the karmic merit of one's ethical actions.

Religious Matrix #3

Universal Civilization or Tribal Nationalism?

Is religion a failure or a problem as a means for legitimizing racism, sexism, and nationalism OR a way of bringing together people of many different backgrounds to be able to live with common morals and ethics?

- The great “axial” 軸性 religions “universalized” the religious insights of their forerunners to create “salvation” available to any person. Going beyond “salvation” 救 (or the control of salvation) for a privileged class, gender, or tribe/nation. Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Mo-Tzu 墨子
- *The Buddha taught in his first of five ethical precepts 五戒 “non-harming” towards ALL sentient life 衆生, not just human life. He ordained as monks member of the low class and out-castes (untouchables) who became leaders in the community. He also eventually ordained women as nuns, creating one of the first organized female religious orders in history.*

Japanese Thought #3: Community/Tribal vs. Civilizational/Universal Ethics

- Morals and social ethics are not bound to a set of universal principles like the 10 Commandments or the 5 Precepts of Buddhism (*pancasila*) but to a complete and willing dedication of self to others in a specific human collective (“tribe”).
- In Japan, this “tribe” was originally the clan 氏 system but then became extended to family (Neo-Confucianism), lord (Feudalism), and emperor (State Shinto).
- Devotion and sacrifice to an ideal or a universal value is unusual. e.g. Buddhism (Pure Land/Lotus Sutra rebellions of Warring States period) or Christianity (Martyrs of Japan 日本の殉教者 of Edo period).
- This helps to explain the high number of Buddhist sub-sects: 105 official traditional sects and some 60 or more new sects in which devotion to teacher and community is emphasized over common teaching (ref. Buddhist sects in Sri Lanka 4, Thailand 2, Myanmar 4).
- Ultimately, the specific teaching of each group is less important as all traditional groups practice the basic form of ancestor worship through funerals and memorial services.

Japanese Thought #3: Community/Tribal vs. Civilizational/Universal Ethics

- Japanese are moral and ethical but as determined by their group, not by a set of universal ideals. Japan is not ethically Buddhist
- “Although Buddhism has been the flesh and blood of Japanese culture for more than the past ten centuries, the people by and large still regard it as ‘an imported system of thought’. In this respect, our attitude differs from those of Western nations in regard to Christianity and from those of southern Asiatic nations in regard to Buddhism. As for those nations, universal world religions are conceived to be such integral parts of their own culture that they are linked to the formation of respective norms themselves. But for the Japanese, in contrast, such a conception is totally absent.” (p.489)

Japanese Thought #3: Concepts of Public and Nation

- In Europe, monarchs were emanations of God and ruled by His Will, while in China, emperors ruled through “the mandate of heaven”. But in Japan, the emperor was seen as a god, the God, himself with all Japanese being blood descendants.
- To rule immorally in Europe or China allowed the basis for overthrowing the monarch (i.e. to lose the basis of rule by divine mandate), but doing so in Japan would amount to patricide, the killing of one’s own father. Hence, Japan has an unbroken lineage of emperors with no dynastic changes.
- This helped form the basis of nationalism during the 19th and 20th centuries when the idea of being against the state was as much as a religious betrayal or sin as an unpatriotic action.
- In the modern era, since the Meiji, veneration of the emperor in State Shinto was fused with an obedience to authority through a circumscribed form of Neo-Confucianism that pushed people to focus on their immediate social relationships and disregard the well-being of those unrelated to themselves. This Shinto/Neo-Confucian fusion became the basis for “public morals”, while Buddhism, Christianity, and other religions were forced into the realm of “private belief”.

The Potential of Buddhism for Japan

- Violence not for ideological reasons or universal principles but to preserve community. War does not persist for ideological reasons. “Holy War” is not to preserve religion but clan/nation, nor to wipe out “evil” but to restore “harmony”.
- Allegiance to leaders and norms of community, not universal ethics or reason → sudden change in community leads to sudden change in ethics.
- Nakamura, “Those who observed the moral confusion in Japan immediately after World War II may be led to doubt the proposition that the Japanese in the past were moralistically inclined ... Little difference seems to discoverable between traditional and recent Japanese morality. The difference seems to lie rather in the fact that what was considered to be morally tenable in Japan’s ‘closed-door’ past became untenable under rapidly changing worldwide social and economic conditions to which Japan is adapting itself. The traditional concepts of honesty as loyalty to the clan and Emperor is applicable only to the conduct of man as a member of the particular and limited human nexus to which he belongs; it is not applicable to the conduct of man as a member of human society as a whole.” (p.521)

The Potential of Buddhism for Japan

- Can Socially Engaged Buddhism provide Japanese Buddhism a means for transforming modern social ethics focused on closed-ethical nexus and veneration of authority to one concerned with the well-being of “all sentient beings” 衆生 while reviving its own traditions and roles in society?
- From this basis, could Socially Engaged Buddhism provide the kind of universal ethic for Japan to overcome lingering resentment within Asia and better integrate into the global system, while still preserving many of its indigenous values?

India at the time of the Buddha: “Positive Disintegration”

“positive disintegration”: a growth in 1) diversification and differentiation (social classes and spiritual movements) as well as 2) integration and consolidation (economic expansion and administrative and political consolidation).

Reciprocal exchange: in economic trade and in the Buddha’s vision a civilizational movement based on combining individual cultivation with social ethics based on non-violent communication.

both differentiating and integrating: 1) the religious and the secular, 2) the personal and the social

Monks forbidden to be involved in political or economic affairs BUT Established systems of Buddhist ethics for both 1) monarchies and republics; 2) merchants and capitalists.