

Spiritual Energies: In Search of Mystic Japan

By *Catrien Ross*

As a foreigner living and working in Japan I have been fortunate enough to wear the dual caps of entrepreneur and freelance writer. In my role as businesswoman I have struggled over contracts, befriended company executives, argued with bureaucrats, toured factories, and established my branch office. As a journalist I have homestayd with farmers, drunk saké in mountain villages, pulled floats in religious festivals and written often about the personal foundation that is so crucial to sustained interaction in this cocoon-like society.

So perhaps it is not surprising that along the way I have been sidetracked by a fascination with what seems to shimmer just below the surface of routine Japanese activities—the inner life, if you will. For some time now I have been researching an aspect that continues to intrigue: mystical Japan and the outward expression of spiritual energies.

Critics have observed that there are no spiritual values in modern Japan, there is only consumerism. Evidence of “shop till you drop” mentality is always easy to find here, although the current recession has severely dampened spending enthusiasm. But less obvious rituals can be equally revealing. More than one salaryman I know chants daily at a household altar. I have stood beside a company president praying for good fortune at a Shinto shrine. More recently I joined a 35-member purification pilgrimage that required sutra chanting at 10 temples in the seaside town of Kamakura. My former landlady has logged miles visiting sacred sites throughout the country and an annex to her home is built specifically for family Buddhism studies. The elderly parents of a good friend devote their days to one of Japan’s newest religious sects.

Something spiritual is clearly going on. Beneath the glitter of economic prosperity is stirring an individual search for deeper meaning. Increasing numbers of Japanese seem to be asking what life is all about. One physician I

know undergoes secret training in mysticism; another has become famous teaching people about expanding human potential. I am impressed by a physicist who endures 15-day fasts in the hope of reaching new levels of insight and admire a sushi chef who spends from four to eight each morning as a lay monk at his local temple. Meantime, a well-known Japanese salaryman turned psychic healer has just had his life story made into a movie. Mediums and shamans give televised interviews. There is a boom in courses such as Chinese chi kung, T'ai chi and yoga.

It all sounds very New Age. And I believe it is connected with the bursting of the so-called bubble economy that deluded Japan into becoming the big spender of the global marketplace. Now the funds have dried up and the sobering question is, where do we go to from here? Reevaluation of spiritual energies may be one way to find an answer.

MITI and the paranormal

A pragmatic approach, characteristic of the Japanese, is already underway. One surprising discovery, for example, was research into the paranormal by the Ministry of International Trade & Industry (MITI). It is not easy to imagine Japan’s hard-headed trade officials being interested in supernatural powers yet it was at the MITI-affiliated Agency of Industrial Science and Technology that I first met Uri Geller, the controversial Israeli psychic best known for his spoon-bending feats. I still have the teaspoon Geller bent during that meeting, which was arranged by Hashimoto Hisayoshi, then a director in MITI’s Industrial Location and Environmental Protection Bureau. A tall bear of a man with a consuming interest in the paranormal, Hashimoto has been instrumental in organizing informal research groups within MITI that every month receive some sort of supernatural demonstration or lecture. Japan, for instance, has its own Uri Geller in



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Kiyota Masuaki, with his faculty for metal-bending and thoughtography (now called nengraphy).

MITI officially undertook a preliminary look into the paranormal in a “sensitivity study” report begun in October 1992 and completed in May 1993. The conclusion at this early stage is that Japan must begin to integrate existing knowledge from diverse fields to create a fusion of information that will shape future research. The long-term objective, of course, is to better understand such phenomena as the “sixth sense,” telepathy, psychic powers, and even the mystical experience. Hashimoto believes that rational scientific methods can be used to explain what is currently viewed as irrational and unexplainable. Combining high technology and spiritual energies should eventually create a new model for perceiving both the phenomenal and supernatural worlds.

Investigation of the paranormal is not new in Japan. An early pioneer was Fukurai Tomokichi (1871 - 1952), whose psychic research experiments led to his resignation from what is now known as the University of Tokyo. He then undertook mystic training on Mount Koya and later became a professor at the Buddhist Koyasan University. In 1945 he moved to Sendai where he established the Tohoku Psychic Science Research Group. Fukurai carried out experiments on several Japanese psychics, including the clairvoyant Obuna

Chizuko and Mita Koichi, who in 1931 and 1933 projected images of the dark side of the moon onto photographic dry plates. The remarkable accuracy of these images has been confirmed against photographs from the Apollo moon mission by Dr. Goto Motoki, who served as president of the Agency of Industrial Science and Technology from 1960 to 1961.

The Japan Psychic Science Association was founded in 1946 by scientists and mediums and since then the paranormal has become a recognized area of research at a number of Japanese universities.

Actually mystic Japan has always existed. Belief in the supernatural pervades traditional religious thought and folklore. Shintoism, with its roots in animism and shamanism, is closely tied to nature and a feeling for supernatural attributes. Meditation and rituals of austerity have long been used by Japanese mystics seeking to develop spiritually and many Westerners are familiar with Zen and the concept of enlightenment. Modern-day mystics include the reclusive Mikkyo Buddhist sect. The yamabushi are trainees in Shinto mysticism. Early Buddhist influences can be traced to China from about the sixth century onward. Zen Buddhism originated during the latter part of the 12th century, and Hindu yoga philosophy was imported from India by way of Buddhism in the 12th and 14th centuries.

Japan has a long history of mystical practices and this tendency is reflected in the frequency with which new religions in Japan are constantly being founded. Among the newer arrivals are the Omoto sect, with its links to the martial art aikido and originated in the late 1800's by a farm woman and mystic, Deguchi Nao. Soka Gakkai, a lay Buddhist organization established in the 1930s, today boasts membership of an estimated 8 million families (Japan's total population is over 123 million). Kofuku no Kagaku, or the Science of Happiness, was created in 1986 and now claims some 5 million believers.

Most Japanese are quick to describe themselves as not especially religious and to the Western eye, there is nothing

overtly spiritual about Japan, the thousands of temples and shrines notwithstanding. What's more, Japan's post-World War II economic drive has all but obscured any mystical leanings. The typical image of Japan overseas is that of a materialistic, aggressive nation bent on dominating world markets rather than exploring the deeper reaches of the psyche. Meditating monks may be plentiful, but it is the picture of the performance-driven corporation man that more readily comes to mind. Yet a resurgence in mystical awareness may well be a step in both individual and national development as Japan mulls which way to go next.

The power of ki

One enjoyable result of my research so far was an invitation to join MITI's weekly class in kiko (chi kung, or qi gong, in Chinese). Every Tuesday morning I breathe, bend and twist in a gentle effort dedicated to "training my ki."

No discussion of spiritual energies in Japan is possible without mentioning ki, the ancient metaphysical principle integral to Oriental philosophy. Never clearly defined, even in Asia, the concept of ki is difficult to translate directly but can be understood as the fundamental creative energy which permeates all things. There is the ki of the universe as well as individual ki, usually manifested in breath power. Ki practitioners believe that at the core of every human being lies this world-forming energy waiting to be actualized. Ki has more than 4,000 years of history in China, where it is also expressed in the form of yin-yang dualism. From this arose the Five Elements Theory and the Book of Changes, probably the first book to teach the Chinese people about the variations of ki in nature and humans. Today training in so-called internal kiko is concerned with personal health improvement, while external kiko can be used as a form of psychic healing for others. Kiko can also be an effective martial art.

Worldwide there are now more than 1 million students of aikido, the Japanese martial art which means the Way (do) of Harmony (ai) with ki. In China a large

portion of knowledge about ki or chi training was kept secret until the last 20 years but instructors are now flocking to Japan to meet a burgeoning interest in such ki-related arts as T'ai chi chuan and chi kung exercises.

Physical measurement of ki is a main focus of Dr. Nomura Harehiko, senior researcher in the superconductor application lab of MITI's electrotechnical laboratory at Tsukuba Science City. A physicist and inventor who has studied at America's MIT, Nomura describes himself as a "professional of ki," and as such conducts numerous experiments into the physical nature of ki. He has, for example, designed a receiver which picks up the electromagnetic field transmitted by meditating Zen Buddhist monks as they enter into a kiko or chi kung state, which can be likened to a state of altered consciousness.

Ki emissions have been studied at Tohoku Technology University, where kiko practitioners were found able to control their movement of ki, including emitting light from the center of the forehead, the same area marked by a crystal in ancient statues of Buddha. Tokyo Denki is another university where ki measurement has become an acceptable thesis theme.

An exciting display of physical ki power is routinely staged by Nishino Kozo, founder of the Nishino Ballet Group. Now 67 years old, former dancer Nishino was 50 before he started studying aikido and kempo. He rapidly developed a breathing technique meant to circulate and harness internal ki. In my interview with him Nishino claimed the power to change the color of diamonds. Although I never saw this demonstrated I did watch as several hundred students were one by one tossed or somersaulted about the room by Nishino's seemingly effortless emission of ki.

Ki potential is also taught by Kurita Masahiro, a former Buddhist priest who is now a physician in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Tokyo. The author of more than 17 books, Kurita regularly appears on television to showcase his ki-related finger rotation exercises and super reading system

skills. Kurita, who undertook mystic training for more than nine years, believes that ki is a type of information connecting body and mind that can change our lives. If I can hear music, Kurita assured me, then I can also learn to hear the vibration in everything, including plants and even the sun, moon and stars.

For earnest practitioners the ultimate goal of ki training is advanced spiritual development with supernatural physical ability considered a relatively unimportant by-product. But any mystical revelation is intensely personal and can be validated only through direct experience. I can tell you that my ki is moving and you can either regard me as a screwball or believe me simply because you have also encountered this. Delving into genuine mysticism requires a commitment that most Japanese have been too busy to make until now. As the population ages and available leisure time increases the number of would-be Japanese mystics may also grow.

Tapping mystical energy

Each July and September, people from all over Japan travel to Tohoku's Aomori Prefecture for a special festival at Mount Osore, regarded as one of the country's holiest spots. Here they consult with shamans, most of whom are blind, old women thought to be mediums able to communicate with spirits of the dead. A bleak desert of volcanic ash and sulfurous fumes, Mount Osore struck me as an ideal place for calling up other world spiritual energies.

Bustling, modern Japan still makes time for remembering the dead in an annual summer festival known as Obon, when ghostly guests are fêted before being sent back to family graves. This link with the spirit world is part of Japan's longstanding mystical connection. Auspicious grave energies are thought to play a role in fusui or geomancy (feng-shui in Chinese), a complex Oriental system of divination used to positively harness ki by living in harmony with the natural environment.

According to one Tokyo fusui expert, Japan's major shrines are located at key power points in terms of vital energy, or

ki, showing that ancient Japanese may have been extremely sensitive to natural, mystical feeling. Tapping mystical energy is not so metaphysical as it might seem. In the late 1970s, Ernst Hartmann, a German physician, discovered a grid of energy lines emanating from the Earth's surface and circumscribing the globe. The ancient Chinese more than 4,000 years ago also believed that they had found a vast, magnetic field enveloping the Earth, as well as subtle forces, both electromagnetic and psychic, traveling between the north and south poles.

The Hartmann Grid, as it is now called, shows energy lines oriented magnetically in north-south and east-west directions at regular intervals and which are measurable with a simple device. Resulting energy fields are termed Bio-Electro-Magnetic Fields (BEM) and the last two decades of research have shown that the Earth radiates at least 20 types of BEM or telluric, grids. Thousands of years ago Himalayan monasteries oriented cells and houses for monks so that they were completely contained within BEM grids. And 4,000 year-old megaliths like Stonehenge are located precisely at BEM nodes or intersections. Japanese shrine locations and placements display a similar awareness of the Earth's energies and a willingness to trust archaic mystical sense.

But tapping such energy is not limited to Japan's past. In Okayama, in Western Japan, I met with 78 year-old Masaki Kazumi, one of Japan's most famous and prolific inventors and an acknowledged mystic. Working out of his own laboratory in the Hayashibara Company, Masaki muses on his past lives, tests out new medical equipment, attempts to catch signals from outer space, and plays visitors a recording of a piano composition he wrote within 10 minutes as a result of what he says is channeling from a past energy (he never studied piano and normally cannot play). Later he presented me with a four-leaf clover which photos purport to show as grown in a bed of three-leaf clovers which Masaki transformed into four-leaf plants through willpower. I also have a

small device called a brain potential ability realizer which Masaki created to be a memory enhancer, especially for past lives. So far it has not worked for me at all.

Among Japanese young people, a pre-occupation with concepts like past lives is becoming fashionable. I recall the roomful of university students raptly attentive to an American speaker, a self-professed expert in astral projection and out-of-body experiences. Eagerness to learn his techniques was obvious, as was interest in knowing about "former selves," and the main purpose of their present lives.

In search of spiritual values

What is evident is a yearning for greater satisfaction than Japanese society is currently able to provide. Since World War II Japan has been dedicated to catching up with the West in terms of technology and material affluence. Now that this has been accomplished people are starting to think of pursuits other than producing goods and spending money. Many friends in their 40s, 50s and 60s acknowledge that friendship, family and hobbies are more and more appreciated. A few existential truths are hitting home. That life is short. That good health is precarious. That death is a certainty.

None of this is new, of course. But for Japan to break the potential deadlock of economic and social stagnation may mean taking spiritual values into account—even at the level of national policy if need be. Without this the true creation of a proposed industrial vision may be impossible. It is clear that a growing number of Japanese are rediscovering that the inner life matters. That the mystical is not lost, but accessible to anyone of sincere intent. When all is done and said Japan may finally be admitting that the search for spiritual energies really counts. ■

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