

Roots of the Japanese Religious Spirit

By Takagai Shunsho

Some say there is no religion in Japan—that the Japanese are not a religious people. If religion is to be defined as Christianity, then they are certainly right.

Christianity came to Japan in the middle of the 1500s, four and a half centuries ago. Since that time, Christians have numbered no more than 200,000, less than 1% of Japan's population.

If one takes a Christian, or European, viewpoint, and applies that sense of justice and set of values universally to other countries, one may see the Japanese as non-religious. But if one takes a humble view of world thought and religion, one will notice that the Japanese have a different kind of religiousness.

An attitude of humility, in fact, lies at the heart of Japanese thought, trying to accept the truth present in any philosophy.

This attitude does not mean, however, that one's own convictions need be vague. Rather, it allows the honing of one's own ideas, which would be impossible if it simply denied other ways of thinking. Even if one concludes that another way of thought is in no way superior to one's own, unless that way of thought clearly exerts a harmful influence, should it not be left alone? I think there is some truth to the idea that, although Europeans and Americans emphasize individualism in politics and economics, individualism is almost never sanctioned in terms of morality and religion.

Originally, most Asians, including the Japanese, tended less toward individualism, which can lead to isolation and conflict, than toward a respect for a sense of solidarity. This in turn can lead to the avoidance of opposition or conflict in interpersonal relationships.

Greetings take many forms across the world. There are handshakes, hugs, and kisses, but Japanese have a custom of bowing their heads to one another.

Descriptions of contemporary

Japanese in the 3rd century Chinese historical record, *Account of the Three Kingdoms*, include references to "crouching and kneeling," and bowing. Bowing indicates a lack of hostility and shows respect.

European/American individualism is based on the independence of, or sometimes the conflict between, individuals; contracts between individuals, and proof that such contracts exist, are very important. Asians tend to place more value on mutual trust.

For this reason, the Japanese approach negotiations—on current interna-

tional problems as well as in hostile and antagonistic circumstances—with a presumption of trust, and react with confusion when other countries thrust difficulties on them. Trust in a relationship is perceived as necessarily mutual; Japan as a nation, I believe, takes the ideal of mutual trust to its extreme.

This mutual trust means both accepting the other side's way of thinking and listening carefully to what they have to say and, at the same time, affirming one's own values of existence.

Such mutual trust ultimately accepts the possibility that anything can be improved, expanded, and perfected. In terms of Western thought, this way of thinking would be seen as polytheistic or pantheistic.

To say that everything can be perfected is to say that nothing is perfect; imperfect things must help each other in order to exist. But we must also face the fact that the less perfect things or people are, the harder it



Sensoji Temple in Tokyo's Asakusa a familiar sight to commoners—the flow of visitors has yet to be disrupted.

is for them to help each other. While difficult, helping each other out is important; anticipation rises, and the joy of attainment is greater. In Japanese, the word used to acknowledge that joy is *arigato*.

I will begin my exploration of the Japanese sense of religion with the idea expressed in the word *arigato*. To show gratitude in English, one says "thank you." Japanese say "arigato." To capture the root sense of thank you in Japanese, however, the word *omoiyari* (consideration, kindness) is more appropriate, as in, "That is considerate/kind of you." *Omoiari*, used in the sense of sympathizing with the feelings or position of the other person, is much closer in meaning to thank you than is *arigato*. But *omoiyari* is not used as a greeting in Japanese.

By contrast, the original meaning of *arigato* rests on the idea that existence itself is difficult—the word expresses joy at obtaining a rare and precious thing. The philosophy behind each word is thus very different. Just as it is an entirely different thing to interpret the posted speed limit of 100 in kilometers or in miles, it is necessary to point out the danger of ignoring fundamental differences in ways of thinking, and comparing or passing a value judgement on them.

There is no danger in saying "arigato" instead of "thank you," but problems arise if one attributes the meaning of *arigato* to the phrase thank you. Worse is the mistake of criticizing the word or thought with the meaning of only one side in mind. We must keep this in mind in terms of not only the differences between countries and peoples but also between people of different generations or customs.

The great literary critic and thinker Kamei Katsuichiro (1907–1966) once said, "Words are the mind's pulse." In the way a person uses words, then, lies the history and thought of that person and his or her people. Just as a sickness can be diagnosed from a disturbed pulse, a disturbance in the expression of words is a sign of the loss of the normal mental state.

Why, then, do Japanese say "ariga-

to?" The word *katajikenai*, used to mean the same as *arigato*, expresses happiness at receiving what one sees as more than one's share of favors, goodwill or kindness. Another synonym is *okagesama*. *Kage*, with its original meaning of shadow, implies being cut off from both light and storms, and indicates an unacknowledged place hidden from human eyes. *Okagesama*, which adds an honorific and deferential *o* and *sama* to the root word *kage*, is therefore used to acknowledge the influence and action of people, environments, society and other agents that support one's existence without one's awareness.

Another way of expressing gratitude is *osoreirimasu*. *Osore* originally means scary, and the phrase indicates a fearsome gratitude for what one is afraid is altogether more goodwill than should be accepted by another person.

Yet another expression is *mottainai* (how wasteful). This expression of gratitude implies the receipt of something so wonderful that its wonderfulness is bound to be wasted on the recipient's unworthy self.

There is also a theory that the Japanese word *arigatai* comes from a sutra that says, "It is difficult to live the present in a body that should die."¹

What all these expressions of gratitude have in common is their assumption that whatever one receives, it is not something deserved, or to which one is entitled, but is an unmerited gift above and beyond what is necessary.

This way of thinking is how one perceives what is given, and is not to be forced on the other person. In similar fashion, love and service and kindness are acts that one gives to another, but cannot be demanded of other people.

At the core of the Japanese way of thinking is that everything that exists in this world—not only humans—has influence over one another, supports one another and helps one another.

These interconnections are distinct from the one-way kind of grace that God bestows on man, or that a person in good circumstances gives to one in lesser circumstances. We share what we have, however little, among people of any condition, even between people of

the same lesser circumstances. We call this "sharing scarce resources," or "I'll carry your burden, and someone will carry mine."²

"Carrying and being carried" indicates a mutual relationship of support; but this is distinct from focusing on one's influence over another person. To the contrary, your awareness of the strength you receive from another person creates a feeling of gratitude that requires no less than your best efforts to do whatever you can for that person.

Of course, this does not mean always waiting for the other person to act first. Even if you try to be first there will always be some earlier act from which you have benefitted, and you will come to the realization that you always receive more than you give. This also does not mean comparing favors and demanding that the other person do something for you. This would simply be self-interest. It is also not true that once you have returned the same amount of favors that you have received that the transaction is complete. This would simply be a debtor/creditor relationship. Besides, Japanese do not believe that kindness and goodwill are measurable items. Any of these options leads not to sharing³ but to contending for items, which creates not gratitude but conflict and fights.

Competition and contention are two different things. When people compete within society, their mutual competition should lead to mutual improvement. If winning is achieved by tripping each other up, by finding the other's weak points and rubbing salt in those wounds, the victory is anything but admirable.

The mutuality of "carrying one another's burdens" exists outside of human relationships as well. For instance, in Europe and America, when you climb a tall mountain you can say you are "attacking" it; when you reach the top you can say you have "conquered" it. Japanese call the same process "being embraced in the bosom of the mountain."

Denkyo Daishi Saicho, the founder of the influential Tendai Sect of Buddhism and of Hieizan Enryakuji Temple, says in *Tendai hokkeshu nembun gakusho*

shiki, "To light up a corner is to be a treasure of the state." While not denying that people who can work like the sun lighting up the whole earth are great to start out with, this sentence acknowledges that a person who does his best to carry others' burdens, and gives happiness to the people around him, however few, is yet another valued existence, a treasure for society.

"Carrying one another's burdens" derives from the Buddhist concept of karma (or omens).⁴

I once explained to a visiting U.S. lady that two things differentiate Buddha from the Christian God, notwithstanding their similarities in terms of feeling and devotion on the part of believers. First, it is the aim of Buddhists to become Buddha; that possibility imparts meaning to their religion. It would never occur to Christians to try to become God; for them, religion has meaning precisely because of the unattainability of the ideal represented by God. Second (and this is really a corollary of the first distinction), Christians believe that God is the creator of the universe; Buddha is not. The American lady then asked me who made the universe, and when. This question can be answered only with an explanation of the Buddhist concept of karma.

The correct word for karma (*innen*) in Buddhism is *inenka*, the set of conditional rules by which the order of the existence of all things is kept. In other words, karma means that existent things and events not only depend on a direct cause (*in*) but cannot have any effect (*ka*) until they come in touch with indirect, secondary destiny (*en*). It is difficult to predict exactly which secondary cause or destiny of the endless possibilities will be operative. Without cause there can be no effect; the fact of an effect indicates the fulfillment of direct cause (*in*) and indirect, secondary destiny (*en*).

Thus Buddhists do not believe that the creation of the universe is the result of a single cause, whether that cause be God or Buddha. While humans may not know the real agents of cause and destiny, Buddhists reject the notion that an

effect can exist accidentally, independent of either.

Destiny—or secondary causes—can include acts and feelings that result from human effort. In this way, destiny in Buddhism is free of fatalistic overtones.

In Buddhist thought, everything is supported by countless conditions—and is also limited by them. Thus arises the unity and continuity of existence. To base an answer to the preceding question on these ideas, then, the universe was created not by God, but is the effect of interactions among countless causes from the beginning of time.⁵

According to this concept, all things on earth exist independently, but not in isolation: they are all interrelated. It is this idea that informed my discussion of "carrying one another's burden" and *okagesama* above. Also relevant to this discussion is the word *go-on*—obligation/indebtedness. This word is important in Confucianism, and is also regarded as a feudalistic term because it describes the ethic that undergirds the hierarchical relationships of the feudal period. The word is used in Buddhist thought to describe relationships with Buddha, teachers, and parents, but also to describe our indebtedness, "go-on" or "okage," to the indispensable forces in human life: friends and companions, children and disciples, water and air. Becoming aware of and knowing about *go-on* encourages our independence of judgement, which in turn impels us to engage in the world. Conscious gratitude to various agents allows us to judge and act without being selfish, egocentric or antisocial. It also spurs our judgements and behavior to be true and rational. Thus this conscious gratitude includes a desire for self-improvement, which in turn impels us to listen to as many people's opinions as possible. One can, after all, see oneself better in three or more mirrors than in one. Multi-angle lights allow a better view than a single light—the more exposure you have to other people's opinions the better you can appreciate and develop your good points, and see what bad points need work.

Some may contend that modern

Japanese people no longer think this way. And in fact, it does seem to me that Japanese thought is changing dramatically.

Japan's long history has seen several periods of cultural and philosophical transformation. In each of these eras Japan came under the influence of foreign cultures; each time, after a certain period, Japan adopted and fused its own traditional culture with the foreign culture, keeping ties to the old as it created a new culture. The modern confusion of Japanese culture and thought will, after a time, resolve itself in a similar manner.

People differ in their opinions about which elements of foreign culture and which of Japanese culture will remain. Personally, I believe that the concepts of "arigato" and "carrying one another's burdens" will never fall by the wayside. The very fact that the Japanese accept foreign cultures that are seen as different is an example of their philosophy of not excluding other modes of thought, but finding their own sets of values.

It is often said that, compared to European languages, Japanese is ambiguous. The "carry one another's burdens" philosophy accounts for some of that ambiguity. Some think that ambiguity obscures the self and hinders the development of the individual. But to the Japanese, solidarity and harmony cannot be obscured by anything. This is because they understand the idea of "carrying one another's burdens": that others cannot exist without "me," and "I" cannot exist without the help of others.

When Japanese see someone they haven't seen in a long time, they usually start the conversation by asking about each other's health and making sure the other is all right. If someone asks "Ogenki desu ka" (Are you well?) or "Okawari arimasen ka" (Has anything changed?) to inquire about your health, your response would usually be "Okagesamade," meaning, in this case, "Yes, I am fine. Thank you for your kindness." This *Okagesamade* expresses appreciation for the other person's concern over your health, but also acknowledges an array of external conditions



Visitors to Yahiko Shrine (Niigata), revered for its patron God of Industry, are welcomed by a giant iron Torii gateway.



that have acted on you not only since your birth but long before it; and to the powers which allow you to go on living, powers that stem not only from historical, "real" people but also from natural environment. The phrase expresses appreciation to the countless "okage" that act on you without your ever even being aware. It does not matter how the person who asks about your health is involved in the forces that have and still act on you. It is relevant to say "Okagesamade" to that person, because you cannot know when, where and how that person will influence you. To reply to "Okagesamade" by protesting that you have never done anything for that person's health, you do not understand the Japanese language.

Still another example is *Itadakimasu*, said with palms flat against each other before eating, and *Gochisosama*, said

when finished. "Itadaku" means to be given. From whom are you receiving? Should it be understood that children are receiving from their father, because it is his income that puts the food on the table? Or from their mother, who cooks it? If that were so, the mother and father wouldn't have to join in. But they

do—everyone in the family does. This is because both expressions acknowledge the favor of everything.

The importance of life should be insisted upon, but no creature can live without taking another life. How contradictory, and how sad. For every creature, its own life is essential to its being. No creature exists for the sake of humans. And so, as I eat and reflect on the lives that were sacrificed for, and the chain of events that led to, the appearance of food on my plate, I cannot help but feel appreciation.

What should never happen—the taking of life—happens in order that I might live. And so I feel I must do whatever I can; this realization is the wellspring of power that fuels human activity. This concept is at the heart of the word "arigato." This, then, is the true Japanese heart and religious mind. Seen in terms of Western ideas, is this pantheism? Without distance from a monotheistic view of the world, my point may well be lost. 211

Dammapada—182. Iwanami Bunko "Shinri no Kotoba (Words of Truth)," p36. Hokukyo, Taisho Shinshu Daizo Kyo "All living things must die. And one does not know when, why, or how that death will take place. So being able to live now is thought of as a happiness that cannot be attained even if wished for, and one must therefore live life preciously."

"Sharing scarce resources" as a philosophy is not unique to Japan. See for instance the poetry in prose of Futari no Kanemochi (Two Landowners) by Ivan Turgenev in Iwanami Bunko, p82.

"Sharing is first a standpoint of thinking of both one's own rights and those of others on the same level. Contending means claiming one's own rights over those of others. In this construction, if you get what you want it doesn't matter what the other thinks, and the result is that you think you are right and good.

"An important disciple of Buddha, Sakya-muni, Sariputta explained the common fate of karma with the phrase, "Two stand leaning against each other in the Samyutta-nikaya."

"The beginning of time," however, does not mean "since God created the universe"; the "beginning" does not exist even if we look infinitely back into the past.

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