An Interpretation of Japanese Philosophy and Thought—Part 1

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Abstract

This paper is an outline of Japanese philosophy and thought compared with other thoughts.

Chapter 1 deals with the thoughts of the people and influential thinkers of the ancient age. Chapter 2 covers the period from the middle ages until the Middle of the 19th century. Chapter 3 is covered with the modern era and is included in Part 2.

Prologue

The location of the lands and the life-style

The Japanese lands are located in the temperate zones, making them good for fishing and agriculture. The northeast land belongs to the semitropical zone and the southeast islands belong to the semitropics. Both cold and warm currents flow around the islands. The fish come near the islands. The fish in the cold waters grow fat from their eggs. The people living in cold lands need to catch them to stay healthy.

The people must cooperate to catch whales or schools of big fish. There is an old saying in the provinces that “A whale benefits seven villages.” Their lives depend on fish. The people need to work together to catch them during the season when they are available.

The islands are almost entirely covered with mountains. There are few big plains. Less than 30 percent of the lands are plains. People in the ancient age had to subsist by hunting animals in the mountains and fishing in the sea.

The Japanese islands are located in a monsoon area. It rains or snows much of the year. Many typhoons are born offshore of the Philippine islands and grow much bigger as they approach the Japanese islands. Typhoons gather the water from the wet air above the sea as they pass over the warm ocean and then deposit much rain on the lands.

Much rain water is retained by the trees in the mountains, so many rivers flow in the mountains year-round.

Rivers sometimes flood after heavy rain and damage houses and fields. The people must therefore control the rivers. Irrigation systems have always been very important for farmers and other inhabitants.

Rice-planting probably began in the islands some thousand years ago. Rice-planting might have made life safer and more stable than fishing. People might have concentrated their energies on clearing the limited fields to be able to grow rice in paddies. The ancient people called the country “the land of waterear”. There is plenty of water. But rivers flood sometimes. So flood control and irrigation are very important, large scale endeavors. They require the energy and cooperation of the people. People must work together to control the rivers. People need to work together to plant and harvest rice.

These cooperative efforts produce fellowship and community consciousness.

*1. The main lands extend from 25 to 45 degrees north latitude.
*2. Salmon or herring in cold waters and skipjack in warm waters.

*1. It amounts to 3000 mm. in the South & snows over 10 meters in the Middle Japan on average. over 15 typhoons come to the islands a year.
Chapter 1

Section 1

The ancient thoughts Animism and “Shintoism”

The primitive religion of the people was an animism. Their lives depended on nature. Nature was the object of their thanks, wonder, fear and prayer. They believed that there existed animas in everything. They enshrined them and prayed to ask their protections. The ancient people believed anything to be God that had power. They made them the objects of prayer. These Gods were called “eight million Gods”.¹ This idea has been succeeded by the people until now. We can see not only the Shintoism shrines but also sometimes local shrines in provinces.

On one hand Shintoism² had been promoted by Emperor Court all over the countries. It was made as the national religion by Court until modern times. The original ancestor of Emperors³ Amaterasu Omikami⁴ had been enshrined as God of the nation. He was explained as a original creator of the nation in the official texts.⁵ Emperors were deified in the ancient ages. The national ceremonies and policies had been conducted by Emperor Court. The basic morals of the nation also were sometimes shown by Emperors.⁶ This Shintoism had also built the religious lives of the people. People visit the shrine in each village on available occasions. Most People have also family alters. Many Ceremonies and festivals have been held in Shintoism styles in each province.

We can see the thoughts of the ancient Japanese in the old regend “Kojiki”.⁷ “A rowdy destroyed the irrigation system supplying a rice

terrace. He was accordingly banished from the village by its members. He was sent to the hell. It was a dirty world, and the village remained a pure and clean world.” We find the conception of “evil” in this story. Irrigation was a very important part of their lives. Destruction of the irrigation systems was much more worse than any other types of violence. It involved breaking out of the systems of the society and making life unsafe. The evil intention to break the systems of the community was what was called an “unclean, dirty, impure heart”.⁸ The people praised the light and pure heart to work together. They felt happy to get their gains. They thanked nature and anything else that brought them the goods.

A grateful heart was also a Japanese traditional ethic. It comes from Japanese worship of ancestor and from Japanese interpretation of Buddhism.⁹ Any benefit does not happen accidentally and good results do not come only from one’s own efforts but also from many other relations.

We see here their light and optimistic view of life located in the rich nature, if they were diligent and worked well together.

Section 2

The Spread of Buddhism

Buddhism and Confucianism came down to Japan from China via Korea around the 6th century. Many Japanese studied Buddhism enthusiastically. Energetic students were sent to Chinese temples to learn the real Buddhism.³ Japanese had not previously a deep philosophy, only Shintoism. The Emperor and the government adopted Buddhism after disputes among their respective supporters.

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¹. "Clean and pure heart (清明心)" was asked for the ancient people as the best moral. It meant “no bad intentions or heartiness to others or community.”
². The theory of “Engi (根起)”. Everything that happens is a result of one’s previous relations.
³. They learned Buddhism and brought back scriptures as well as the priests.
The top political minister Shotoku Taishi*1 governed the provinces according to Buddhism principles and morals. He made public the "Constitution of 17 Articles."*2 The articles say, "Make peace. Do not revolt." *Respect Buddha, the law and priests." "It is a good, traditional rule to punish the wicked and promote good." "Control your anger and behavior." "Do not be angry over disagreements with others." We can see here Buddhist theories and Japanese traditional morals. We understand this constitution as moral teachings for the provincial governors. The central Temple Todaiji and a great statue of Buddha were built in the 8th century. Buddhist temples have been built in every province. The priests have taught people Buddhism and conducted certain types ceremonies. People have kept a family Buddhist altar. But traditional Shinto shrines have also been kept everywhere. And people have kept a family Shinto altar at home.

People pray for luck and success in life to the Shinto altar and mourn for the dead to the Buddhist altar. This is considered to be a contradiction. People respect the ancient Shinto gods and worship Buddha.

Section 3
Japanese Interpretations of Buddhism in the ancient age

It may not have been so well for the ancient people to understand Buddhist philosophy. They seem to concentrate their energies on building temples and statues in the ancient age until the 11th century. But we find three kinds of interpretations and practical applications of Buddhism.

1. Monks and nuns that had hard experiences and gave up normal life were absorbed in studying and training to attain higher perception staying at temples in the mountains. They copied the scriptures, had discussions, sat in contemplation, ate only vegetarian diets, walked many days through the mountains and bathed under waterfalls. This ascetic life was isolated from conventional life.

2. "The theory of causality Engi" was applied to a moral theory for the people. It says "Those who commit crimes must go to hell or be incarnated as an animal or insect in the next life. And so man must live a life of good deeds."

3. The ancient people understood the Buddha's heart as "love for peoples".*2 It was embodied in the statue of "Bosatsu." "Bosatsus" are incarnates of Buddha. The people made Bosatsu women or woman god*3 and embodied Buddha's heart and generous motherly love for children. The statue of the gracious mother of Bosatsu signified "Jihi".*4 The statue makes us feel peaceful and lovely, like maternal love. The woman god was symbolized as a presenter of happiness. These statues were dressed in Chinese dresses of that age.

Chapter 2
Section 1

Popularization of Buddhism in the Middle Ages

The old political and economic systems governed by the Emperors and aristocrats collapsed and Samurai gained power in the 12th century. There were many natural disasters and epidemics. So there was an increase of social malaise among people. They came to believe in the idea of the "end of the world", "Mappo Shiso".*5 Then many people came to believe

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*1. Refer to Chapter 1, Section 1.
*2. Buddhist priest Gyoki (行基) practiced this thought. He built bridges and roads in the 8th century.
*3. Jibo Kan-non (慈母観音) or Kichijoten zo (吉祥天像)
*4. Jihi (慈悲). Love that takes the pain out of man and gives him pleasure.
*5. "the thought of Mappo (末法思想)". A Buddhist theory of history. In this age the theory is only preached but does not involve training and attaining higher perception.
in the "teachings of the clean world, Jodokyo." The Buddhist priest Genshin preached "Refuse to stay in this dirty world and pray to enter the paradise Gokuraku".*¹ He also taught very simple way to achieve it, by saying the words "Namuamidabutsu".*² The teaching had many popular elements, so the teaching was accepted by many poor people.

This religion was later succeeded by the Buddhist Honen and Shinran.*³ Shinran dared to break the religious commandments of Buddhism. He loved a nun and married her. And he also preached that not only a good but also a bad man could gain salvation. "Only a wronged man regrets his own weakness deeply and depends on other power, Buddha. It is a very good chance for salvation."*⁴

This religion had been largely accepted by poor farmers as well as Samurais. They sometimes tried to build a paradise on earth free from a strict government wielding political and military power. They had their own autonomous area for a hundred years from the 15th to 16th century in Kaga.*⁵

The first Samurais government "Kamakura Bakufu"*⁶ was established in the 13th century. The governor and the guard were Samurais. Each had to always control his mind to deal with sudden dangers. The governor had to worry about all the people in his territory. He had to be wise and keep a noble personality to get the trust of the people. This thought came from the Chinese thinker Confucius.

Confucius idealized a policy based on his

morals. He preached, "Governors must be Kunshi*¹ who shows "love for the people, Jin" and "consciousness to keep order and a good behavior, Rei.*² Samurais must cultivate their minds and be Kunshi. So they adopted the Buddhist training called "Zazen."*³ In Zazen, the person sits in the Buddhist style and control his mind. He tries to keep a state of having no conscious thought what ever. He then may attain a higher perception in accordance with the law of the cosmos. In this state of mind he can free from worldly desires and live reasonably. This training was an ideal way for Samurais to control his mind. A phrase comes down to us to express the spirit of the Samurais. It is, "Samurais must keep a toothpick in his mouth ostentatiously, even if he might be hungry." These thoughts and training regimens of Zen are still alive in Japanese society.

"Nichiren"*⁴ was an active and passionate Buddhist. He preached to people not only how to rescue their souls but also how to improve the nation and society. He criticized the policy of the government. Just then Mongolian fleets attacked Japan. So his prophecy came true. But he was often obliged to make religious sacrifices.

His teaching was also widely supported by people on an account of his passion and actions and the simple way of training Buddhism to say only a few words.

This popularization and specialization of Buddhism established in Japan unique methods and conceptions. And these ideas have endured to the present day.

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*¹ "Kunshi (君子)" A true gentleman or a man of noble character.
*² "Jin (仁) and Rei (礼)" are basic morals preached by Confucius.
*³ "Zazen (坐禅), Buddhist Yosai (栄西) learned it in China and brought it to Japan. His pupil "Dogen (道元) established a Zen sect of Buddhism.
*⁴ Nichiren (日蓮) believed that "Hokke scripture (法華経)" said the true teachings of Buddha. There were already many kinds of scriptures in China.
Section 2

Spreading of Confucianism in the Middle Ages

Confucianism was also adopted widely to people as main principles of morality and education since the Middle age. It has functioned as a basic moral to make order of all the relationships among rulers and followers, upper classes and lower classes, elder and younger families or persons. These moral functions still exist in the modern society. Japanese always care deeply relationships with members of their in-group. They make much of peace and harmony with others.

Confucianism was introduced to Japan in the 5th or 6th century.

Traditional Japanese thoughts might have been almost same as those of Confucius. The conceptions of morality might also have been the same. These ideas were some later expressed in Japanese letters that were changed from the original Chinese characters.\(^1\)

The earlier government of emperor “Yamato Chōtei” had already adopted Buddhism and also Confucianism willingly. The government noticed Confucius had made an issue of the ideology of policy. It aimed for an ideal government of the nation and a relationship based on the morals “Rei” and “Jin”.\(^2\) The main politician in the government Shotoku Taishi adopted Confucian morals in the Constitution and other laws. Later, the government made them the main principles for laws and rules of the constitutional monarchy.

Confucianism was studied among Buddhist priests who came from China to the temples. The outside world was at war for long time. But their life was separated from other worldly affairs. They could enjoy literature and various arts. These became classical Japanese arts that have endured to the present day. For example, singing Chinese poems in Japanese order “Shigin”\(^1\) or “Way of Tea” “Sado.” Sado is in stills one with a peaceful feeling through preparing and drinking Japanese green tea in a small room.\(^2\) Classical arts were also enjoyed by Samurai governors and rich merchants.

Confucianism of this time embraced the new theory of “Shushi”.\(^3\) His theory of the “dualism” of “Ri and Ki”\(^4\) had already helped to form the basic of Chinese Feudalism of that time. It explained the cosmos as a order from heaven to the earth and humans, and that there was an order among men.

The Tokunaga government adopted a school of Shushi for samurai’s education. The government wanted to keep the feudal system. So it was a necessary policy for them to have a philosophy to control the thought of the samurai class. They noticed the theory of Shushigaku that explained the world as consisting of order and that relationships among men also had order originally.\(^5\) Hayashi Razan\(^6\) interpreted this theory as a personal moral. He preached that we ought to understand the reason running through the cosmos and suppress our desires and to always keep self-control of our mind. In this way we can live with our minds in accordance with reason.\(^7\) We see here a theory influenced by the Buddhist views and

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\(^1\) Japanese letters Kana (仮名) were simple modified Chinese characters developed from the 9th to 10th century.

\(^2\) “Rei (礼)”: A moral to respect the upper class and maintain order of relationships. “Jin (仁)”: Love and thought for others.

\(^3\) “Shushi (詩之)” Samuraj sang Chinese poems when they went fighting and danced. The poems were those of departure or scenes of life.

\(^4\) “Sado (茶道)” was established by Sen-no Rikyu (千の利休) in the 16th century.

\(^5\) “Shushi (朱子):” A new Confucian thinker in the 12th century.

\(^6\) “Ri (理)”: Reason or law of the cosmos. “Ki (気)”: Spirit or element of matter.

\(^7\) The theory of separation between upper and under class (Joge teibun no ri 上下定分の理)

\(^8\) Hayashi Razan (林羅山) was employed as a teacher by the government.

\(^9\) Keeping self-control (居敬) and mastering the reason (窮理).
thoughts of "Shinsen". A thinker Nakae Toju criticized the thoughts of Shushi and agreed to the practical ideas of Yomei. He preached that knowledge must be in accordance with conduct. And Toju emphasized love "Ko" as a basis of relationship. Later Yamaga Soko established a moral code called the "way of Samurai", "Bushido". He said that a Bushi must be the leader of other classes and be wise, sincere and of noble character. He must control his desires and be courteous. Later, Bushido was also interpreted to mean that a Bushi must devote his life to his monarch and state to reward the favors that he received from them.

The Tokugawa government continued about 270 years from the 17th to 19th century. This longevity was due in large part to the government’s able leaders and their wise policies. One of the policies was to reduce the power of governors in province. The provincial governments were put under close observation and often severely punished for the slightest errors. They could never disobey the central authorities.

Tokugawa government quickly closed the country in order to concentrate on internal affairs. Some powerful leaders, Daimyos had already had some contacts with Christian missionaries. But the leaders realized that the missionaries had ambitions to control people. Some people and also a Daimyo converted to Christ.

—1. Thought of "Shinsen (神仙)". A Chinese religion to pray long life derived from Taoist legends of Lao-tzu (老子) and Kotei (黄帝王).—
—2. Chinese O Yomei (王陽明)’s theory in the 16th century. Toju (中江藤春) supported it.—
—3. Ko (孝). Love and respect between not only parents and children but also master and servant, husband and wife, brothers and fellows.—
—4. For example, restriction of the amount of rice terrace or requiring them to visit the general (Shogun) in Edo (Tokyo). They had to spend much money for it.—
—5. Nobunaga (織田信長) and Hideyoshi (豊臣秀吉) liked foreign culture except religion.

ianity. They did not obey their orders to fight. Some people in the provinces built an autonomous area and resisted the central government. After the country was closed, only the Nagasaki port was opened to the outside until the Middle of 19th century, when four fleets of iron ships visited the islands and forced open the gate.

Section 3

People’s thoughts in the Middle age

Let us consider to the unique practical thinkers that influenced many people in this age. Ishida Baigan taught a philosophy for merchants.

Merchants were placed in the lowest class in the feudal system.

The first class was warriors, the second farmers, the third craftsmen and the fourth merchants. Thus, the social status of commerce tended to be low. But Baigan took a cheerful view of commerce. He said that the profits of merchants were the same as salary of samurai. He affirmed that making of profits was a good deed that was reasonable. He also criticized that profiting by dishonest means was only egoism. He also preached that "honesty, economy and diligence were important qualities of a merchant, that diligence meant not only saving things but also controlling greed and doing one’s best, that the spirit of diligence was that of stoicism and it included loving people, and that diligence also helped people regain their original honesty.

This idea was explained in simple words and many townspeople were attracted to it. Rich

—1. Takayama Ukon (高山右近) ran away from Japan and lived on Luzon island.—
—2. Resistance of Amakusa Shiro (天草四郎) in Nagasaki in 1608.—
—3. American ships fired in front of Shimoda port in 1853.—
—4. Ishida Baigan (石田梅岩) worked in Kyoto in the end of 17th century.—
—5. "Tohi mondo (問ひ問答)"
merchants also appeared which developed transportation networks.*1

Literature was also flourished among townspeople in the end of 17th century.

A popular writer named Ihara Saikaku*2 took a cheerful view of the world and the commerce of townspeople to pursue riches and pleasure. He expressed his views in a light and witty style and popularized the morals of townspeople as "diligence, honesty and economy".

Chikamatsu Monzaemon*3 was Japanese puppet show author.*4 He wrote tragic dramas about people who suffered conflicts between duty*5 and human nature.

Motoori Norinaga*6 discovered "sincerity"*7 and aesthetic sentiment "Mono no aware"*8 to be a Japanese original emotion by studying classical books and literature. These are natural sense of appreciation of beauty. He affirmed these as positive aspect of basic human nature. He criticized foreign Buddhism and Confucianism that were too logical and suppressed the wide range of natural human feeling. He vowed to go on the Japanese way to live with a natural heart and feelings. It transcends ethical good or evil.

Japanese did not originally like difficult theory. Neither did they understand Christian ethical conceptions such as "original sin".

Western philosophy could therefore hardly take root even though it has been taught by academics for over a hundred years.

A practical thinker Ninomiya Sontoku*1 made efforts to reconstruct farm villages and develop marshy fields. He thought that agriculture should be a combination of natural and human ways. He said that the important points of human way were economy and handing over the rest to others*2 and to keep a reasonable life plan corresponding to one's own economic strength.*3 He affirmed that agriculture was the basis of all other work. He appealed to farmers to be proud of themselves. He was symbolized as a hard working student. His statues reading a book and carrying woods on the back were put in every primary school garden.

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*1. Kinokuniya (紀の国屋文左衛門) got much money to sell oranges in Edo.
*2. Ihara Saikaku (井原西鶴)
*3. Chikamatsu Monzaemon (近松門左衛門)
*4. Ningyo Joruri (人形浄瑠璃)
*5. Duty derived from feudal relationships "Giri (義理)"
*6. Norinaga (本居宣長) established "The learning of Japanese classical texts" "Kokugaku (国学)."
*7. "Magokoro (真心)" in Kojiki. Refer to Chap.1 Sec.1
*8. "Mono no aware (もののあわれ)" in "Genji monogatari (源氏物語)") written by Murasaki Shikibu (紫式部) in the 11th century.

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*1. Ninomiya Sontoku (二宮尊德) gained good results in the 19th century.
*2. *3. Suijo (有條) and Bundo (分度)